

Southeast Asia Union Mission

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Teresa Costello, born in the southwest United States, has served as a missionary in the Pacific under the Far Eastern Division and southeast Asia under the Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD) for more than 15 years. With bachelor of arts degrees in English and religion and a master's degree in curriculum and instruction, she served in the SSD Communication department from 2012-2017 and is currently (2020) the *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* editorial assistant for SSD. With a background in education, journalism, communication, and public speaking, she is a storyteller who enjoys gathering life experiences from those she meets during her travels with her family.

The Southeast Asia Union Mission (SAUM) is one of nine unions of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD)¹ SAUM, headquartered in Singapore, was organized in 1917 and reorganized in 1929² On November 5, 2019, it was divided into two new unions and an attached field with the transfer process to be completed in December 2021.³

Territory and Statistics

Its territory includes seven countries: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. It contains one conference, six missions, and one region. Respectively, they are Singapore Adventist Conference, Cambodia Adventist Mission, Peninsula Adventist Mission in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah Adventist Mission in Malaysia, Sarawak Adventist Mission in Malaysia, Thailand Adventist Mission, Vietnam Adventist Mission, and Laos Attached Region.⁴

Three Adventist hospitals operate in the region: Bangkok Adventist Hospital (Bangkok, Thailand), Phuket Adventist Hospital (Phuket, Thailand), and Penang Adventist Hospital (Penang, Malaysia)⁵

Eight elementary/secondary schools are located in the region: Adventist Ekamai School (Watana, Bangkok, Thailand), Cambodia Adventist School (Khan Sen Sok, Phnom Penh, Cambodia), Chiang Mai Adventist Academy (Maetaeng, Chiang Mai, Thailand), Ekamai International School (Sukhumvit 63, Bangkok, Thailand), Goshen Adventist Secondary School (Kota Marudu, Sabah, Malaysia), Sabah Adventist Secondary School (Tamparuli, Sabah, Malaysia), San Yu Adventist School (Singapore, Singapore), and Sunny Hill School (Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia).⁶

As of June 30, 2020, SAUM is home to 391 churches with 97,585 members out of a population of 224,501,000 people. As of that date, its headquarters are located at 798 Thomson Road; Singapore 298186; Republic of Singapore.

Organizational History

The earliest official missionaries, Griffith and Marion Jones and Robert Caldwell, arrived in the Malaysian Peninsula in October 1904. They established the Singapore Mission as part of the Australasia Union Conference, its second Mission in Southeast Asia after the previously established Sumatra Mission (present-day Indonesia).⁷ The Singapore Mission's location was listed as "Singapore, Malay Archipelago, Pacific Ocean" with Jones as the mission director and minister and Caldwell as the canvasser.⁸

Caldwell later continued on to the Philippines. There he helped establish the Philippine Islands Mission with a church of three members in 1906.⁹ James Lamar McElhany was the director and minister, and Caldwell was the canvasser. The mission was located at 53 Calle Concordia, Quiapo, Manila, Philippine Islands.

The mission work in the Malaysian peninsula continued to grow. By 1908, the membership of Singapore Mission's lone church was 42. The staff had increased to two ministers, a Sabbath School secretary, three canvassers, and three additional licensed missionaries. The headquarters' location was 12 Dhoby Ghaut, Singapore, Malay Archipelago, Pacific Ocean.

Significant Events in the History of the Organization of the Southeast Asia Union Mission

Because of its cultural and historical richness, SAUM has a vast number of significant events in its history. The following are merely highlights with additional discoveries of God's faithfulness in this region yet to be shared.

1910's

During the 1906 session of the Australasian Union Conference, the evangelistic work in the East Indies (Indonesia) and Singapore (Malaysia peninsula) was organized into the Malaysian Mission with headquarters in Singapore.¹⁰

In 1910, the Malaysian Mission was transferred to the Asiatic Division by the General Conference.¹¹

In 1912, the field was organized as the East Indies and Federated Malay States with F.A. Detamore as superintendent. It contained the Java Mission (Indonesia), Singapore Mission, and Sumatra Mission (Indonesia).¹²

The North Borneo Mission was organized in 1914 and added to the field. It was reorganized in 1956 and 1961. Today, it is known as Sabah Mission.¹³

In 1915, the field was organized as the East India Union Mission and included the Malaysian Mission (The Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States, British North Borneo, Siam, and the Dutch East Indies) and the Philippine Mission. The next year, the Central-Southern Luzon Union (Philippines) was added.¹⁴

As the Church expanded and gained more members, there was greater need for educational institutions to provide an Adventist education. As a result, the Singapore Training School was founded by East India Union Mission in 1915.¹⁵

The East India Union Mission became the Malaysian Union Mission in 1917 and thus began SAUM's official history. Malaysian Union Mission included Singapore Mission, Malay States Mission, Borneo Mission, East Java Mission, West Java Mission, South Sumatra Mission, and North Sumatra.¹⁶

The Malaysian Publishing House opened in 1917 in Singapore and was operated by the Malaysian Union Mission.¹⁷ Thailand Mission was organized in 1919 and included Thailand and Laos.¹⁸

In 1923, the Singapore Training School became Malaysian Union Seminary. In 1929, it became the Malayan Seminary of Seventh-day Adventists in response to the renaming of the Malaysian Union Mission to Malayan Union Mission.¹⁹

1930's

In 1932, the Singapore Mission merged with Malay States Mission with headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.²⁰

The Sarawak Mission was organized in 1937 and reorganized in 1956 and 1961. It included the state of Sarawak and Brunei.²¹

The Viet Nam Mission was organized in 1937.²²

1940's

After December 8, 1941, invasion²³ and subsequent occupation of Singapore by Japanese forces, the Malaysian Signs Press (formerly the Malaysian Publishing House and Malayan Signs Press) was taken over.²⁴ It was damaged during World War II,²⁵ but afterward, it was re-equipped and expanded.²⁶ It was later renamed the Southeast Asia Publishing House.²⁷

In early 1942 when Malaya and Singapore were invaded by Japanese forces, the Malay States Mission was divided into three missions (Central Malayan Mission, Northern Malayan Mission, and Southern Malayan Missions) since local workers and members would help the work there continue when the foreign missionaries had left or were captured by invading forces.²⁸ After the war, in early 1946, the three missions united as the Malayan Mission with temporary headquarters in Singapore.²⁹

In 1948, after the war's damage to the Malaysian Union Seminary was repaired, it reopened as the Malayan Union Seminary.³⁰

Also, the Youngberg Memorial Hospital opened in 1948 in Singapore, operating first out of two rooms of the Malayan Signs Press.³¹

1950's

In 1950, the Malayan Union Seminary was approved for junior college status by the General Conference as part of the Southeast Union Mission.³²

The Cambodia District joined SAUM in 1957 when the first Adventist church was organized there and led by Adventist missionary Ralph E. Neall as “director” (president).³³ This was after the missionaries had been expelled in the 1940's due to World War II and some had later returned.

In 1958, the Malayan Union Seminary was renamed the Southeast Asia Union College.³⁴

1960's

In 1965, missionaries would again be expelled from Cambodia, and Ralph E. Neall would serve as president from nearby Vietnam.³⁵ During the challenging years that followed, many dedicated local workers and members shared the Gospel and planted churches with support outside of Cambodia.³⁶

1970's to Present

In 1976, Southeast Asia Union College and Southeast Asia Union Seminary continued to provide quality Adventist education and educate many of today's leaders in Southeast Asia.³⁷

On January 1, 1988, the Singapore Mission was formed after separating from the West Malaysia and Singapore Mission (WMSM).³⁸

In 1991, the Adventist Church gained government approval to organize the Cambodia Adventist Mission.³⁹ It was reorganized in 2001 and renamed as Cambodia Mission in 2019.⁴⁰

The Youngberg Memorial Hospital ceased in-patient services in 1995 and transferred its focus to community health awareness and education via its Youngberg Wellness Centre. Today, the Youngberg Wellness Centre is part of the SAUM headquarters office.⁴¹

The Southeast Asia Union College ceased operations in 1998 due to the Singapore government's mass transit project that utilized the SAUC property.⁴² Certain elements of SAUC and some faculty/staff became part of SAUC's legacy as today's Asia-Pacific International University in Muak Lek, Thailand.⁴³

Over the years, the work in the Southeast Asia Union Mission had outgrown the framework of a sole administrative unit. Thus, SAUM and the Southern Asia-Pacific Division had periodically considered dividing SAUM into two unions. In 2016, a proposal detailing this was presented to the SSD Secretariat Committee and then the Administrative Committee.⁴⁴ It noted that the seven countries of SAUM were diverse and that the Adventist work in the countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam needed more focused nurturing.⁴⁵ As a result, a Feasibility Study Commission was appointed to “to visit and carefully analyze the territory of SAUM and to make recommendations to the SSD 2017 Mid-year Committee which will provide the best strategies for strengthening and building the mission and evangelism in this territory.”⁴⁶ Members included representatives from the General Conference, SSD, SAUM, the mission offices within SAUM, an educational institutions within SAUM and a health institution within SAUM.⁴⁷

During the SSD 2017 mid-year meetings in May, the Feasibility Study Committee gave its report and recommendation to the SSD Mid-year Committee (see below).⁴⁸ The primary focus at the time was the need to

relocate the SAUM headquarters for financial reasons, but the possibility of SAUM's bifurcation was also noted.

(Sec 2017-1) — Southeast Asia Union Mission Feasibility Commission Report and Recommendation

Whereas, substantial savings can be obtained from moving the headquarters of South-East Asia Union Mission (SAUM) to Thailand, and;

Whereas, there is a need to strengthen the work in the whole field, including the strengthening of leadership resources in Indo-China and creating a more focused emphasis on mission, sensitive to local cultures, it was;

VOTED,

Upon the recommendation of Southeast Asia Union Mission Feasibility Commission, to move the SAUM headquarters from Singapore to Thailand by 2020, with the following provisions:

1. To use some of the savings to create at least a couple of leadership positions to grow Indo-China leadership and give more emphasis to the needs in Buddhist-majority countries;
2. To use some of the savings and some of the assets to prepare for a possible future restructuring of the work taking into account the creation of a Malaysia Union and an Indo-China Union;
3. To keep the property of the Union located on Thomson Road in Singapore at all costs, with future use to be advised;
4. To intentionally develop the Union leadership team to facilitate mission in the 10/40 window;
5. To renew emphasis on urban mission in the cities throughout the union;
6. To create a full-time stewardship director position in SAUM and each conference/mission/ attached field;
7. For SSD to provide financial oversight to achieve greater degrees of self-support, liquidity, working capital, and payroll-over-tithe ratios;

Further, it is recommended:

1. That the SSD Executive Committee create a subcommittee to determine the exact location of SAUM headquarters in Thailand; and
2. That the SSD Executive Committee appoint a transition team to manage the relocation from Singapore to Thailand, effective January 1, 2018

On November 11, 2019, the SSD Executive Committee approved the formation of the following unions and reassignment of a conference during the 2019 SSD Year-end meetings:⁴⁹

The Southeastern Asia Union Mission with constituency from Cambodia Adventist Mission, Laos Region, Thailand Mission, and Vietnam Mission, with headquarters in Muak Lek, Thailand.

The Malaysia Union Mission with constituency from Peninsular Malaysia Mission, Sabah Mission, Sarawak Mission, and Brunei, with headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The Singapore Conference, with headquarters in Singapore, to be an attached field to the Southern Asia-Pacific Division.

In 2021, the SSD Administrative Committee voted the following nomenclature to clarify the various designations:⁵⁰

Exact Formal Name	Common Name	Initials
Southeastern Asia Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists	Southeastern Asia Union Mission	SEUM
Malaysia Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists	Malaysia Union Mission	MAUM
Singapore Conference of Seventh-day Adventists	Singapore Conference	SAC

An event commemorating the history of SAUM and the future embodied in these two new unions and attached field will take place in December 2021 in Singapore.⁵¹

Mission and Strategic Plans of the Southeast Asia Union Conference

From its ASI department to its Women’s Ministries department, SAUM has a strong history of community involvement and impact. Some of SAUM’s notable ministries and/milestones have included:

In 2014, SAUM’s Adventist Community Services received government recognition of Pay It Forward, SAUM’s health ministry program in Singapore.⁵²

The opening of the Vietnam Center of Influence in Hanoi, Vietnam on May 22, 2018. The seven floors of the building house a bookstore, health food store, an English language school, the Health and International Church, a Vietnamese church, the ADRA Vietnam office, and additional space for a future project.⁵³

The May 2019 inauguration of Hope Channel Southeast Asia in Muak Lek, Thailand on the campus of Asia-Pacific University.⁵⁴ Programming is offered in “English, Bahasa, Thai, Khmer, Mandarin, Tamil, Vietnamese and Lao” languages by local studios throughout SAUM’s territory.⁵⁵ 41 volunteers from each of the eight missions within SAUM were trained for this work at the “Broadcast the Message of Hope” Training in Sarawak, Malaysia on September 25-27, 2017. They produce content for Hope Channel Southeast Asia from local studios in their respective countries.⁵⁶

Executive Officers Chronology

Malaysian Mission: F. A. Detamore (1917).

Malaysian Union Conference: F. A. Detamore (1918-1919).

Malaysian Union Mission: F. A. Detamore (1920-22); L. V. Fister (1923-1928); J. G. Gjording (1929).

Malayan Union Mission: J. G. Gjording (1930-1936); E. A. Moon (1937-1942); K. O. Tan (Acting) (1943-1945); J. M. Nerness (1946-1955); H. Carl Gurrie (1956).

South East Asia Union: H. Carl Gurrie (1957-1958).

Southeast Asia Union: H. Carl Gurrie (1959); W. A. Hilliard (1960-1962); H. W. Bedwell (1963-1966); D. R. Guild (1967).

Southeast Asia Union Mission: D. R. Guild (1968-1969); R. S. Watts, Jr. (1970-1975); Wendell L. Wilcox (1976-1978); Robert I. Heisler (1979-1983); George C. Johnson (1984-1993); Robin D. Riches (1994-2002); Ronald W. Townend (2003-2010); Joshua Mok (2011-2015); Somchai Chuenjit (2016-).

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