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Madagascar

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The Republic of Madagascar is the largest territory of the Indian Ocean Union Conference within the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

Statistics

In 2019, there were 1,036 organized churches with 176,809 members in Madagascar. Statistics for each conference were as follows: *Central Madagascar Conference*: 341 churches, 51,665 members; *East Malagasy Conference*: 144 churches, 23,352 members; *North Malagasy Conference*: 212 churches, 44,202 members; *North-West Malagasy Conference*: 157 churches, 24,737 members; *South East Malagasy Conference*: 135 churches, 22,315 members; *South West Malagasy Conference*: 47 churches, 10,538 members.

Overview

Madagascar is the fourth largest island in the world located in the Indian Ocean. With a land area of approximately 587,000 km² and 26.97 million inhabitants, the island of Madagascar, although rated to be one of the poorest countries in the world per capita, is known to possess considerable natural resources and has great developing potential.¹

Madagascar is situated in the southern hemisphere, east of the Mozambique Channel. Most hypotheses suggest that the ancestors of the Malagasy people came from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, with a strong Malayo-Indonesian origin.² This last group of people is known to have brought with them during the classical age (A.D. 400-600) the cultivation of irrigated rice and fishing with outrigger canoes together with the Austronesian language, unique among African languages.³ On the other hand, the African migrants are said to have brought slash-and-burn cultivation and a varieties of trees and animals (such as water buffalos), while the Arabs and Indians brought the Muslim religion, as well as an activity of trade in spices and medicinal plants.⁴

From the second half of the nineteenth century, France and England showed colonial interest toward Madagascar and, in 1883, the first Franco-Malagasy war broke out. In 1885 a peace treaty was signed, allowing a certain level of France's domination over Madagascar. In 1894, a second Franco-Malagasy war broke out, resulting in the signing of the protectorate treaty in 1895. After further attempts at rebellion, Madagascar officially became a French colony in 1896. Following dissenting movements' rebellion (the bloodiest of which began on March 29, 1947 and ended in the death of a hundred thousand Malagasy), the colonization of Madagascar ended on June 26, 1960, after the speech of General de Gaulle in Antananarivo, the capital city. Madagascar officially gained independence on October 14, 1960 and became officially known as the République de Madagascar or Repoblikan'i Madagasikara, using both French and Malagasy as official languages.⁵

Religious beliefs found in Madagascar were and are still anchored in Austronesian animist origins. The cult of *Zanahary* (supreme God) and the *Razana* (ancestors), and the uses of *Sampy* (talismans), go back to the origins of the Malagasy people.⁶ The first Christians must have settled in Madagascar during the thirteenth century with the expansion of the world trade. Madagascar started to welcome ships traveling from Asia to Europe, but the impact of Christianity did not leave tangible traces.⁷ Christianity became officially established in Madagascar through the works of the Jesuits in 1613. After a quick expansion of their first seminaries, the Roman Catholic Church faced many difficulties with pandemics and constant battles between countries engaged in the world trade (France, Great Britain, and Netherlands among others). The Catholic Church stopped running their mission stations from the end of the seventeenth century, leaving the few local Christians on their own.⁸ Christianity developed then through the Evangelical missions at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although disorganized, they reached different parts of the country without having a strong impact on the Malagasy culture due to persecutions. Christianity established its predominance through the work of the Lutheran Church at the end of the nineteenth century. Developing schools and seminaries, the Lutherans set a Christian tradition that was mixed with the local beliefs.⁹

Today, Christianity in Madagascar is still shaped by its history. Current statistics on Madagascar lack exactitude due to a reliance on old census (1992) statistics. It is generally recognized that the majority of the population still worship the ancestors (c. 50 percent) while Christianity follows (c. 45 percent) with a prominence of the Lutheran church. A lower portion of the population, mostly in the northern regions, is Muslim (c. 4 percent), while a remnant part of the Chinese immigration remains Buddhist (c. 1 percent).

Origin of the Adventist Work in Madagascar

Madagascar appeared in Adventist literature as early as in 1864.¹⁰ Often depicted with stereotypes such as the "poor Madagascar," the island seemed appealing to the readers for its possible missions.¹¹ Interestingly, wars and pandemics were mentioned in a few articles of the *Review*.¹² Madagascar appeared officially in the Adventist records

in 1885 with the first attempt to organize the postal service for the missions.¹³ Few years later, the publishing department of the General Conference organized a first attempt to reach the Scandinavian settlers in Madagascar.¹⁴ While the territory of Madagascar was attached to the Latin Union Mission, there is no record to show that the work in these communities was successful, as W. A. Spicer related in his secretarial report in 1909 that “Madagascar is untouched.”¹⁵ In a similar report of 1913, Spicer related that foreign ministers had finally been appointed for the work in Madagascar, but not yet sent.¹⁶ The settlement of the Mauritius-Madagascar Mission was discussed in 1913, and finally approved in 1914.¹⁷ Paul Badaut was sent to Mauritius where he settled in April 1914. However, due to the lack of human resources, Adventism only entered in Madagascar four years later and it became a mission on its own in 1926.¹⁸

Early Work and Pioneers

Interest in the Seventh-day Adventist faith sprang up in Madagascar in 1917. During that year, Antoine Tuyau, French citizen, immigrated in Madagascar from Mauritius where he had associated with Adventists. Among many things, Tuyau was selling Adventist literature that he had brought with him and caught the interest of André Rasamoelina, an inspector of Protestant schools.

After developing an interest in the Adventist message, Rasamoelina wrote to Paul Badaut, the Seventh-day Adventist pastor of the newly organized Seventh-day Adventist mission in Mauritius.¹⁹ As Rasamoelina recalled, Badaut sent his name and address to the General Conference. The General Conference responded by sending a package of the *Present Truth* in 1918.²⁰ After further exchanges with the Home Missionary Department of the General Conference, Rasamoelina received *Steps to Christ* in 1920 which he translated into Malagasy that same year.²¹ Under the guidance of the newly appointed minister, Marius Raspal, of the Mauritius Mission, Rasamoelina received Bible studies between 1922 to 1924 during the occasional visits to Madagascar.²² The General Conference provided US \$300 to publish Rasamoelina’s translation of *Steps to Christ* in 1924.²³

In 1925, a small bookshop was opened in Antananarivo to handle the edition of 5,000 copies that was to be ready on June 22, 1925.²⁴ In February 1926, the Raspals moved from Mauritius to Madagascar as missionaries. With the organization of the Madagascar Mission, the first acquisition of the Villa Betania, the building of a school and the publication of the first Adventist tract called *Témoïn (Ny Vavolombelona)*, Adventism established its mark in Madagascar.²⁵

Development of the Adventist Message

The Adventist message grew gradually in Madagascar. The first church membership record appeared on March 1, 1926 with the apposition of Raspal and his wife on it.²⁶ On October 9, 1927, Raspal conducted the first baptismal ceremony for four candidates: Louisa Mason, Mary Mason, Clément M. Ramiakabola, and André Rasamoelina.²⁷ The same year, three Adventist chapels were built in Madagascar: Manjakaray (district of the capital city), Toamasina (on the east coast of Madagascar), and Tsararay (western region of the capital city).

After the replacement of Raspal by M. J. Bureaud, the Southern European Division (supervising division for all French colonial territories at the time) sent A. Long and E. Bénézéch in 1929 from France to support the work of Bureaud. That same year, the Southern European Division appointed the first mission officers: Bureaud as president and his wife as secretary and treasurer of the Mission.²⁸ The first statistical record of the Madagascar Mission in 1929, reported 102 church members from five churches, one ordained minister, and four licensed ministers, respectively M. J. Bureaud, E. Bénézéch, A. Long, C. M. Ramiakabola, and A. Rasamoelina.²⁹ By the time of the creation of the Indian Ocean Union Mission in 1936, the territory of Madagascar had 356 members in 8 churches.³⁰

In 1949, the Madagascar Mission was divided into five missions according to the five biggest cities of the country: Antsirabe Mission, Diego-Suarez Mission, Majunga Mission, Tamatave Mission, Tananarive Mission.³¹ In 1958, Majunga and Diego-Suarez Mission merged to become the Majunga-Diego-Suarez Mission.³² In 1960, the Antsirabe Mission (southern) was divided in two new missions: Fianarantsoa Mission and Tulear Mission. In 1966, the Majunga-Diego-Suarez Mission split again to form the original Missions.³³ In 1972, due to a strong reorganization following the departure of French missionaries, the missions merged into three: Central Malagasy, North Malagasy, South Malagasy.³⁴ In 2002-2003, the North Malagasy Mission divided into the North (Antsiranana) and North-West (Mahajanga) Missions.³⁵ In 2018, a last organization of the Union allowed its actual setting in 9 Conferences/Missions, among which the six conferences are those in Madagascar: Central, East, North, North West, South and South West Malagasy Conferences.³⁶

Institutions

Publishing House. Starting from the 1930s, the development of Adventist institutions became the main factor of Adventism’s growth in Madagascar. The first step toward the spread of the Adventist message was the translation and selling of Adventist literature.³⁷ Following this approach, the Madagascar Mission established a publishing house as early as 1930. André Rasamoelina and Julien Ramamonjisoa joined the team of the missionaries to support the vernacular work while Lydia Haran became the supervisor of the publishing house.³⁸ Initially, the publishing house was named “Fitarikandro” (Morning Star) until it took the name of “Imprimerie Adventiste” in 1950, when the publishing house expanded into a major printing plant. Since then, the publishing work has been a major promotional

machine for the Adventist missionary work in Madagascar. A particular attention must be given to the work of canvassers which along the way developed to become one of the largest groups of literature evangelists in the Adventist world with 598 literature evangelists in 2019.³⁹

Schools. Beside publishing, one of the early concerns in Madagascar was education. Adventist education officially started in 1933 with the launch of two schools: one in Antananarivo under the direction of Rasamoelina and B. Ranorohanta, and the other one in Andina under the direction of C. Ratovonary.⁴⁰ Shortly afterwards, several schools were established all over the country year after year. Despite the development of governmental educational programs after the country's independence in 1960, Adventists continued to develop church schools and till today, they are still actively interested in Adventist education development.⁴¹

Seminary. With the creation of the Union Mission in 1936, and with the increasing number of Adventist local workers, the need for providing advanced training resulted in the establishment of the Indian Ocean Union Training School in 1937. This school only offered a short Bible training course for those who wanted to work in the mission field.⁴² It offered also a primary and high school certificate education for all ages.⁴³ The school remained the main center for training Adventist workers until an official seminary was established in Phoenix, Mauritius, in 1975. The Phoenix Seminary offered a 2 years ministerial training, but with the merging of schools, the training of Malagasy pastors went to Rwanda, at the Adventist University of Central Africa, before the establishment of the Université Adventiste Zurcher in 1995, after the civil war in Rwanda. Since then, ministerial training continues to be offered in Madagascar for the whole Indian Ocean Union Conference.⁴⁴

Radio Broadcasting. Seventh-day Adventist radio work began in Madagascar on December 7, 1946, with broadcasts in French by Jean Zurcher introduced by the words "Voici notre émission adventiste" ("Here is our Adventist broadcast"). Within three years, Zurcher managed to broadcast 149 talks on various biblical topics.⁴⁵ On November 5, 1949, the Voice of Prophecy program was introduced, and also an educational program by Maurice Tièche.⁴⁶ In 1948, J. Rajoelison began a broadcast in Malagasy, which continued weekly for 10 years and then was continued by his brother, Rabarijoel.⁴⁷ The radio worked to essentially promote Bible studies.

In 1947, Zurcher organized a full Bible course in French and Malagasy by mail.⁴⁸ Thereafter, Berthe Ranorohanta continued the project for several years before it was discontinued after national independence. Radio broadcasts have continued to be produced on different channels until 2000, when the Central Malagasy Conference purchased its own radio station with frequency (106.4FM) and called it Radio Oasis (see article "Oasis Radio"). In addition to radio broadcasting, Adventist television broadcasting begun in 1993. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was granted access to the Malagasy national television broadcast on a regular basis to air religious programs.

Hospitals and dispensaries. The health message came to Madagascar through irregular medical missions during the 1940s and 1950s.⁴⁹ The first medical institution in Madagascar was built in 1969 at Ambatoharanana. The small dispensary, under the direction of Mildred Vel, from the Seychelles, grew quickly to become a dispensary with a 10-bed maternity ward.⁵⁰ In 1972, it was decided to build a hospital in the "beautiful, fertile Andapa Valley."⁵¹ Building work started in 1974, and the 55-bed facility was inaugurated in 1976. Since then, the medical work progressed well and several clinics and hospitals were built all over the country. In 2000, the Union Mission created the *Système Médicale Adventiste* (Adventist Health System of the Indian Ocean) which supervised the expansion of medical and dental institutions before the association merged them into the Union Health Ministries Department in 2019. Today, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Madagascar has 1 hospital and 6 clinics/dispensaries.⁵²

Church Administrative Units

The Adventist mission work became an organized entity in 1914 with the name of Madagascar-Mauritius Mission and in 1926 as Madagascar Mission. At that time, the Adventist work was under the supervision of the Southern European Division until the creation of the Indian Ocean Union Mission in 1936. The Union Mission reported to the Southern European Division until the reorganization of the territories in 1971 when the Euro-Africa Division was created. The Union Mission finally came under the Africa-Indian Ocean Division in 1980, and later joined the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division in 2003. Today the Indian-Ocean Union Conference has eight conferences and one mission, of which six of these conferences are found in Madagascar: Central Malagasy, East Malagasy, North Malagasy, North West Malagasy, South Malagasy and South West Malagasy Conferences.

Challenges to Mission

Adventism in Madagascar faces several challenges. The first challenge is due to the socio-economic situation of Madagascar. With a median salary of US \$1.2 per day, Adventist missions are mostly following the "arrears patterns" observed in developing countries.⁵³ Beside the socio-economic challenges, superstition and ancestral beliefs are practiced in rural regions and some new converts struggle with these old practices. For instance, some church members still attend the *Famadihana*, the Malagasy funerary tradition of "turning of the bones," conducted by local shamans. Another major challenge the church faces today is tradition. Many people in the villages have for decades lived the same way within their communities without developing their societies, and thus never registering children or marriages to the official authorities. The Adventist church faces a big challenge in how to deal with the legal status of the marriages of its members.

Despite challenges, the membership continues to grow. Seventh day Adventist church members represent 0.59 percent of Madagascar's population, making the ratio of 1 Adventist for 172 inhabitants. Though small in percentage,

the growth of the Adventist church has been exponential, starting with 2 members in 1926 and reaching a membership of 159,130 in 2019.

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