



Kwazulu Natal-Free State Conference headquarters

Photo courtesy of Kwazulu Natal-Free State Conference.

# Kwazulu Natal-Free State Conference

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Kwazulu Natal-Free State Conference is a subsidiary church administrative unit of the Southern Africa Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

## Current Territory and Statistics

The Kwazulu Natal-Free State Conference covers the territory of the Free State and KwaZulu-Natal provinces of South Africa. Recent statistics (2019) showed that the conference had 19,488 members in 186 churches and 78 companies.<sup>1</sup>

The headquarters are currently located along 47 Gillitts Road, Pinetown, in the KwaZulu-Natal province. The communication department operates a recording studio from the headquarters. The purpose of the studio is to “keep all members ... within the territory of the Conference promptly apprised of all the developments and programmes of the Conference through multimedia platforms” and to “provide for the multimedia production of evangelistic, training, and nurture materials of resource for use by the directorate, pastorate, church leadership, and membership.”<sup>2</sup> The “website was setup to provide easier access to information and resources to members and churches with regard to personnel information, departmental schedules and programmes, departmental resources, letters (and) event updates.”<sup>3</sup>

The Kwazulu Natal-Free State Conference operates three primary schools, Keithleigh Primary School, Ulusda Christian Primary School, and Aurum Seventh-day Adventist Academy. Additional schools operated by church members in the conference territory include Thornhill Christian College, Maranatha Creche and Primary School, and Advent Hope and Edu-Farm School. The possibility of establishing a high school is being explored.

## Origin of Adventist Work in the Territory of the Conference

The work in this territory began with the selling and distribution of literature. William Hunt, an Adventist gold miner from Nevada, United States, brought literature with him when he came to work in the Cape Colony minefields at Kimberley in the 1870s. Those who accepted the Adventist faith in the Cape Colony took the message with them wherever they went. When Pieter Wessels accepted Adventism in 1885, he became a zealous witness for the cause and converted his brother-in-law, Gert Scholtz. Scholtz took the message back with him to the Orange Free State and shared with everyone who was willing to listen to him, including the State President.

American Adventist missionaries arrived in Cape Town in 1887. By 1890, colporteurs had worked as far as Natal. In 1902 the Natal Mission Society was organized, with G.W. Reaser as president and S.S. Barnard as secretary. Canvassing was the strongest form of evangelism used in this area, and by March 1903 it was reported that literature was being translated into local languages.<sup>4</sup> Soon the Tract Society purchased the Echo Office in Durban to support the determined canvassers in their line of work.

Another contributing factor to the success of the mission work in Natal was the health work. Hydrotherapy, health seminars, and health foods were promoted vigorously in Pietermaritzburg.<sup>5</sup> The Natal Health Institute was started in Pietermaritzburg in 1903, and was first run by Miss Amelia Webster. This institution began as a private venture of A.C. C. Beisner who received treatment in Germany. When he was cured, he studied the methods and wanted to offer the same treatment in Natal. He purchased a building which could accommodate 18 people. He invited Brother Schmidt, a young canvasser, to hold Bible studies for the patients. Beisner and one of his assistants converted to Adventism and used his treatment methods and treatment rooms to introduce people to the Adventist message.<sup>6</sup>

Amelia Webster took charge of the Natal Health Institute and pioneered taking hydrotherapy treatment to people's homes. The Natal Health Institute became the most prominent sanitarium among other smaller sanitariums, and continuously sought to provide healthful meals, as well as offering discounts or free treatment to persons whom they were hoping to introduce not only to healthful living, but to God's plan of salvation. Patients were often encouraged to subscribe to church literature. Among the literature the health institute sold were *Ministry of Healing*, *South African Signs*, *Life and Health*, and the best-selling book *Good Health*.<sup>7</sup>

The first camp meeting for the Natal-Transvaal Conference was held in Dundee, Natal, February 16-26, 1905. The location seemed to be ideal as it was situated halfway between Durban and Johannesburg, giving easy access to the outskirts of the conference territory. Camp meetings were also used to enter new areas and do aggressive reaping campaigns.<sup>8</sup>

The various efforts put forth by the earliest workers in the Natal Area were always followed up with tent meeting campaigns. Attendance was not always satisfactory, but there was always evidence that the Adventist message was reviving people's hearts.

The Adventist message spread to the Orange Free State by means of personal witnessing and church engagements. When believers moved to the Free State, they took literature with them. Brother B.C. Groenewald and his family were the first Adventists to relocate to Ficksburg, and they placed books in the homes of his neighbors.<sup>9</sup>

The work in the Orange Free State was carried along by both the Cape Colony Conference and the Natal-Transvaal Conference. The Cape Colony Conference also started to hold their camp meetings in Bloemfontein, desiring "to assist that part of the field where they had so little help."<sup>10</sup> W.S. Hyatt once reported, "The work in the Free State is new, and it needs strengthening, and I am sure that the brethren in the Cape will feel it a pleasure to once more go to Bloemfontein, and thus give one more lift to the work in that section."<sup>11</sup>

What was of particular interest was that farmers in the Free State were beginning to accept the Adventist message. Not only did this benefit the church financially, but farmers often expressed interest in having their workers hear the message. Such is the case with Mr. Churchill, a farmer from the Free State, who became disgusted with his church's decline and spirituality. Turning to the Bible, he discovered the seventh-day Sabbath.

F.B. Armitage and Brother van der Molen visited Churchill, and when he accepted the message, the way was wide open for the work to continue. Churchill was “very anxious that the natives on his farm should have a chance to know the truth.”<sup>12</sup>

Thereafter, D.F. Tarr was requested to visit the outlying districts of the Orange Free State, where interest was kindled by the farmers who were accepting the message.<sup>13</sup> Tarr travelled with J.R. Mtimkulu, a Black African pastor who could fluently converse with the Black African people from the Orange Free State and Basutoland (present-day Lesotho). They started out in the Clocolan district with Brother Ferreira, who employed quite a number of Black Africans. Brother and Sister Ferreira exerted a good influence over their workers, and together with the Sabbath services held in cooperation of Brother Blignaut, many of them became interested in the Adventist message. During Tarr and Mtimkulu’s visit, many responded heartily to the Adventist message and were baptized. From there they went on to the Reitz district to Brother Moolman’s farm, where Pastor Mtimkulu did faithful work among the Black Africans. They continued to the Thaba ‘Nchu district and all of their travels were marked with success.

One of the earliest pioneers to develop the work in the Free State among the Black Africans was Pastor Moeletsi, who served in Kroonstad in 1934.<sup>14</sup> This territory was harsh and unreceptive to Adventism.<sup>15</sup> Despite personal hardships, including the death of their daughter, the Moeletsis remained in Kroonstad until a church community was established. Pastor Moeletsi was succeeded in 1953 by Pastor H. Moabi, a committed and organized worker.<sup>16</sup> He held several efforts in the surrounding districts of the Free State and contributed in a notable way to the growth of Adventism among the Black Africans of the Free State.

The work among the Black Africans in KwaZulu-Natal also picked up when Bethel School was moved to Spionkop near Ladysmith in 1928. Bethel School was renamed South African Training College at Spionkop, and prepared workers who entered the mission fields. Bethel Training College remained at Spionkop until 1937, when it relocated again, back to Butterworth in the Eastern Cape Province.

Adventist work among Indian South Africans dates back to 1917. M.C. Sturdevant came across eleven Indian South Africans who were isolated from their church due to a disagreement.<sup>17</sup> Through fellowship and Bible study, they were converted and baptized, and joined the Florida Road Adventist Church in Durban in 1920. The first Indian congregation was formed from these members in Durban. At a South African Union Conference Executive Committee meeting in 1920, leaders realized the importance of taking the everlasting gospel to “every nation, tribe and tongue” and consequently resolved to work towards the “establishment of the Indian work on a stronger basis.”<sup>18</sup>

## Organizational History of the Conference

The first Seventh-day Adventist church in Natal Province was organized September 21, 1902, in Pietermaritzburg, and comprised 22 members. When the South African Union Conference was organized later



that year, the Natal Mission Society was organized into the Natal-Transvaal Conference. By this time, the conference had two churches and two companies. A farm was acquired in Sweetwaters, Natal, and served as the first headquarters.

Once the headquarters was established, Adventist believers proceeded with literature and education work. Amy Ingle opened a school in Sweetwaters, with an enrollment of ten learners. Other attempts were made to start church and house schools, but these turned out to be short-lived.

As the territory of the Orange Free State was at first divided between the Cape Conference and the Natal-Transvaal Conference, most of the work in the Free State was under the responsibility of the Cape Conference, then often referred to as the Cape and Free State Conference. As the church in the Free State area grew it became self-supporting. The Cape and Free State Conference therefore requested the South African Union Conference to divide the territory into two separate conferences at their biennial session held in Claremont January 3-19, 1913.<sup>19</sup> The request was granted and the division was carried out with immediate effect, creating the Orange Free State Conference. Pastor W.B. White became the acting president, until the committee elected five brethren from the Orange Free State who nominated officers for the newly formed conference.

At the time, church leaders believed that the four churches in the Orange Free State were financially strong enough to “take upon themselves the work in that Province and that organizing more conference[s] would supply the need for more workers.”<sup>20</sup> They also believed that when “Conferences are divided and new men are got into the field the sooner we will see our work move forward with strength.”<sup>21</sup> The Orange Free State Conference started with six churches and three companies, and a combined membership of 122.

The Orange Free State Conference, also known as the Orange River Conference, continued for 15 years, until the South African Union Conference encountered financial difficulties, which made it evident that the union conference was not “warranted in carrying three local conferences with such a small membership.”<sup>22</sup> A meeting of the Orange River Conference convened in September 1928 to study the situation. This meeting found that 75% of the conference income was used for administration, leaving only 25% for evangelistic work. With such a limited budget available for evangelism it seemed unlikely that the church would grow. “So after very thoughtful consideration it was voted to favour [sic] disbanding the Orange River Conference, letting it be absorbed by the remaining two local fields.”<sup>23</sup>

A special business session was convened with representatives from the African Division, the South African Union Conference, the Cape and Natal-Transvaal Conferences, and a delegate from each church in the Orange River Conference. This special session took place in Bloemfontein, January 2-3, 1929, voting to disband the Orange River Conference. The Natal-Free State Conference took over the churches in the Free State, while the Cape Conference took over the church in the Cape Province. The administrators and workers were divided equally to strengthen both conferences.

For the next 29 years, the White churches in the Free State and Natal Provinces were mainly under the administration of the Natal-Transvaal Conference, with a few churches cared for by the Cape Conference. The church continued to experience growth in terms of membership and finances. At the 1958 Southern African Division executive committee's year-end meetings of 1958, South African Union Conference President, Pastor G. S. Stevenson, reported that membership had surpassed 16,000.<sup>24</sup> This growth in membership, accompanied by financial betterment, allowed them to organize a third self-supporting conference. Consequently, the Oranje-Natal Conference was organized in 1958. "The largest part of this conference came from the territory of the old Natal-Transvaal Conference,"<sup>25</sup> which then became the Transvaal Conference.

When work among the Indian people in South Africa began in 1917, the Indian Mission was carried forward by the two churches in Pietermaritzburg and Durban. When the South African Union Conference organized the Cape Field in 1933 to take over the work among Colored South Africans, the Cape Field was given jurisdiction over the work among Colored South Africans across the country and to include the Indians in their missionary endeavors. As the work increased, the South African Union Conference organized the first Indian Mission Field in 1956, with Pastor R. Lindup as its first president. When R. Lindup was called to Good Hope College, Pastor Hector Charles succeeded him and became the first Indian president in 1963. The Indian Mission was absorbed into the Oranje-Natal Conference in 1979.

The North Bantu Mission Field was organized in 1936, when the South Africa Mission Field was reorganized into two fields. The North Bantu Mission Field sponsored the work in a vast territory, including the Transvaal, Free State, Natal, Lesotho, and Swaziland. While the North Bantu Mission Field existed for the Black African churches in its territory, the officers who managed the field were all Caucasian men. South African Union President G.S. Stevenson spearheaded the call to place more responsibility into the hands of the Black people by putting them in charge of the work in their own territory.

G.S. Stevenson submitted a proposal to the South African Union Conference to establish missions for Black people along geographic and ethnographic lines.<sup>26</sup> Stevenson believed that this would affirm Black leadership. To manage this development, in 1960 the South African Union Conference formed two separate groups, known as Group I and Group II, which functioned separately though sat jointly on certain occasions.

In 1965 Group II was organized into the Southern Union Conference to administer the work among the Black population in South Africa. They dissolved the North Bantu and South Bantu Mission Fields, and organized in their place nine smaller mission fields. The work in the territory of the Free State and Lesotho was organized into the South Sotho Field, and the KwaZulu-Natal provinces were organized into the Natal and Zululand Mission Fields. This was done subject to a revision in two-years' time if it was determined that a separate union conference structure was necessary.

Pastors and members in the affected areas were displeased with this reorganizing, and felt that this was fostering division in the church. In order to mitigate the displeasure of the members and pastors of the nine

mission fields, the work was reorganized again in 1963. The South Sotho was joined to the Transvaal Field, and the Natal and Zululand Mission Fields were merged with Swaziland. In 1967 the Southern Union Conference organized the work in Lesotho into a separate mission field, shortly after Lesotho gained political independence in October 1966. The Lesotho Field then only administered the work within the borders of the Kingdom of Lesotho. In 1968 the Trans-Orange Field was established, which later became the Trans-Orange Conference. The Natal Field was formed by separating the work in Natal from Swaziland, and thereafter only took care of the Black work in the Natal Province. Until 1994, the Natal Field served the Black churches in Natal, and the Oranje-Natal Conference served the White, Colored, and Indian work in the Natal and Free State provinces.

The years leading up to 1990 were characterized by political unrest and economic hardships brought about by sanctions imposed against South Africa, giving the government of South Africa no choice but to repeal the *Apartheid* laws. This decision was announced during the Presidential speech at the opening of the South African Parliament on February 2, 1990. South African President F. W. de Klerk announced the end of the ban of political parties such as the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party, along with other subsidiary organizations. The highlight of the president's announcement was the release of Nelson Mandela after 27 years in prison.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church did not remain unaffected by these developments in the country. Pressure from the General Conference led to the successful merging of the South African Union Conference and the Southern Union Conference on December 10, 1991. Both union conferences served the same territory for different racial groups. This paved the way for the racially segregated conferences and mission fields to follow suit. The administrators of the Oranje-Natal Conference and the Natal Field seized the opportunity to break the walls of racial segregation by initiating exploratory talks of merging the two constituencies into one church administrative unit, to better proclaim the everlasting gospel in the context of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6–12 to all peoples, without regard to race.

At its business session on November 14, 1992, the Oranje-Natal Conference voted to accept the recommendation to merge with the Natal Field. The time frame for the merger was determined by the recommendation of financial experts of the Southern Africa Union Conference and the local conference.<sup>27</sup>

Representatives from the General Conference often visited the administration of both constituencies to encourage them to think of and devise ways to work together. This merger did not come about without considerable hardship. What was particularly difficult to overcome was the inequality that already existed among the two constituencies, as one was a self-supporting conference while the other was a mission field. The workforce needed to learn to work together as equals, not only at a collegial level, but also as equals before God. Under *Apartheid* it was considered a socio-political abomination for a White South African to be thought of as equal to an African.

Some of the factors which hindered the merger included the economic disparities which existed between White and Black people at that time in South Africa's history due to the *Apartheid* regime. While the number of isiZulu-speaking members from the Natal Field was twice that of members of the Oranje-Natal Conference, financial and material resources were almost non-existent. The Natal Field was financially supported by the union conference. The *Apartheid* spatial planning had created Black African townships on the periphery or at a distance from a metropolis area. Consequently, properties belonging to the Natal Field were in an unattractive market location. Such properties had no material value when compared to that of the Oranje-Natal Conference, and improving such properties was tantamount to a lost financial injection.

A substantial amount of money was needed to bridge the financial deficit and ensure that the Oranje-Natal Conference did not carry the Natal Field as a financial burden, and that the economic weakness of the Natal Field did not increase the potential of being subservient in the negotiations between the two entities.

Another factor which posed a difficulty for the merger was the educational qualifications of a number of pastors of the Natal Field. Among Black Africans, persons were typically called into pastoral ministry based on their love for the work of the Lord as attested by the number of years spent in independent colporteur ministry. Successful colporteurs were recommended for pastoral training at Bethel College; however, some of them did not have a matriculation certificate and were became pastors without the necessary training.

A difficulty which was to be resolved before the merger would be successful was the rationale of equal salaries among pastors, in particular where some workers spent several years in academic institutions pursuing theological degrees, while others never graduated from secondary school. Laying off some pastors was avoided, as it would have resulted in laying off more Black pastors than White Pastors. Immediate salary parity threatened to suddenly bankrupt the Oranje-Natal Conference and collapse the envisioned new organization.<sup>28</sup>

To resolve this matter progressively, two important decisions were made prior to the consolidation. First, it was agreed upon that a phased-in approach to salary parity would be implemented over at least two terms, with a clear report in each constituency business session on progress made in closing the disparity. Secondly, that this agreement would be chronicled as an addendum to the Model Constitution, in order to allay all the financial concerns.

Testing the waters between the two entities began early in 1992. Various subcommittees, such as the finance, relocation, and merger subcommittees, were set up to look into certain pertinent issues and come up with recommendations for implementation towards the merger. One of the earliest attempts towards coexisting in the workspace was when Mrs. C. Bengu was permitted to do her accounting work for the Natal Field in the office of the Oranje-Natal Conference. The Natal Field had their headquarters in Durban, but Pastor Bengu was pastoring in Pietermaritzburg. This not only relieved her from commuting between the two major cities, but gave her the opportunity to work with her counterparts at the conference office.



In addition to this, both organizations made a conscious decision to work together in almost all administrative matters of the then-racially divided church, long before the actual merger. It was realized that if a common building could be found in which both organizations' officers and staff could operate, it would facilitate smooth transitioning into a unified entity. Consequently, the administrators of the two organizations submitted a jointly-signed request to the General Conference for financial assistance. The requested funds were earmarked for purchasing an office building for the merged conference. The General Conference gave R600,000, which was used to purchase the current headquarters of the Kwazulu Natal-Free State Conference in Pinetown, one year before the official merger took place. Both organizations moved into the new building and immediately started working together.

Many frustrations were raised regarding the General Conference's insistence that the racially divided conferences in South Africa should merge while the same situation existed in the North American Division. Thankfully this did not find traction from church members from both organizations. More importantly, the political environment in South Africa at the time played a major role. South Africa had just become a democratic country, and every citizen, regardless of race, color or creed, yearned to be seen as supporting and identifying with the newly earned democracy. Anything that had a racial undertone, worse so when it was the church which preached equality before God, was to be held as anathema.

At the last business session of the Oranje-Natal Conference in November 1994, the merger was realized when both the Oranje-Natal Conference and the Natal Field were dissolved, and the Kwazulu Natal-Free State Conference was organized. Pastor C.F. Venter from the former Oranje-Natal Conference was elected president.

## Beyond the Merger

After the merger, the Kwazulu Natal-Free State Conference continued to encourage and facilitate comprehensive, integrated, and holistic interdepartmental evangelism at all levels of the church, through different programs cutting across all sectors of the church community.

Cultural diversity has necessitated the deployment of full-time evangelists across all language and ethnic groups, with preference given to those already within the workforce. Limited finances have often delayed plans until budgets become available.

Involvement of members in daily and weekly Bible study, with a focus on prayer for revival and reformation, has kept the church committed to and expecting the soon return of Jesus Christ. A spirit of revival can be observed through encouragements and testimonies shared on various social media platforms, as church members encourage and praying for each other.

Various training programs continue to equip church leadership to be efficient and effective. The conference has created different ministries to meet particular needs, such as Sisters for Christ, a branch of women's ministries

to meet the needs of girls of growing young women. Outreach such as health expos share a holistic approach to life.

In consultation with pastors, churches, and schools, the conference has determined specific baptismal goals, aiming to expose every soul to the saving grace of God through Jesus Christ.

During COVID-19, church operations transitioned to virtual platforms. Social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube channels became the only plausible and practical tools to conduct church business and foster community. Sabbath programs were provided through platforms such as DSTV and Gauteng TV.

Intense resource shortages have continued to impede plans for mission. The objective of having a culturally diverse Bible worker and instructor team in place of full-time evangelists has not been realized due to lack of budget.

With the world fast embracing information technology as the most effective medium of communication, the conference has found itself lagging behind. Lack of finances has made it impossible to operate a full-time media/communications department.

COVID-19 had an equally devastating effect on church membership. Some church members lost their ability to earn income as the market dried up. Others lost their jobs. Tithing and offerings fell sharply. While the organization embarked on virtual platforms to sustain its operations, some members could not afford access and became a lost membership because church service to them was unavailable even virtually.

## Future Outlook of the Conference

Prospects for the gospel commission in this part of God's vineyard rests in God's hands. Evidently, nothing is too big and impossible for God.

The use of information technology through various social platforms cannot be overemphasized. There is no going back. The conference must make a concerted effort to ensure effective use of information technology, even in rural areas. The Kwazulu Natal-Free State conference is composed of two provinces, KwaZulu-Natal and Free State. Another unresolved dynamic is that members of Black churches in Free State remain and continue to reside in the Trans-Orange Conference territory. There seem to be no prospects of them transferring their membership to the Kwazulu Natal-Free State conference in the future.

The KwaZulu-Natal province has a large rural region with churches spread far apart, with membership having a high rate of unemployment and low tithes and offerings. This necessitates cross subsidization and a resource allocation bias towards rural areas.

Africa and its independence from its colonial masters, from the north to the south, has the unfortunate persisting phenomenon of the Seventh-day Adventist church becoming extinct amongst minorities after each

country gains its political independence from the west. Signs of this undesired phenomenon repeating itself exist in the Kwazulu Natal-Free State conference. This imposes a burden that each incoming administration develop and implement a minority groups-targeted evangelism objective within the overall conference strategies of “Reach UP, Reach IN, and Reach OUT.”

The Kwazulu Natal-Free State conference is committed to supporting and remaining united with the world church. Since 2015 the conference has not only adopted the General Conference theme, “Reach UP, Reach IN, Reach OUT,” but also implemented its strategic goals so that our mission emphasis and focus are relevant and applicable to all members. It hopes to continue doing the same.

## List of Presidents

### Orange Free State Conference

W.B. White (1913–1914); O.K. Butler (1914–1919); G.W. Shone (1919–1922); J.N. de Beer (1922–1927); J.J. Birkenstock (1927–1928); S.G. Hiten (1928–1929)

### Indian Field

R. Lindup (1956–1963); H. P. Charles (1963–1975); W. J. J. Engelbrecht (1975–1978); E. Armer (1978–1979)

### Oranje-Natal Conference

A. W. Staples (1958–1962); G.E. Garne (1962–1967); E.C. Webster (1967–1971); J.T. Rautenbach (1972–1974); E. Armer (1974–1976); A.M. Wessels (1976–1978); G.J.A. Breedts (1978–1983); D.H. Swanepoel (1983–1986); W.L. Grobler (1987–1989); C.F. Venter (1989–1994)

### Natal-Zululand Field

P.M. Mabena (1961–1963)

### Oranje-Natal Field

D.M. Malotle (1963–1968)

### Natal Field

S.G. Mkwanzanji (1968–1976); J.S. Khumalo (1976–1979); N.A. Maseko (1979–1984); G.B. Mbokazi (1984–1985); A.N. Nzimande (1985–1987); J.S. Khumalo (1987–1989); P.M. Mabena (1989–1994)

### Natal-Free State Conference

C.F. Venter (1994–1998)

### Kwazulu Natal-Free State Conference

J.G. van Niekerk (1998–2001); A.N. Nzimande (2001–2006); B.M.P. Ngwenya (2006–2013); C.M. Nhlapo (2013–2015); L.C. De Waal (2015–present)

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