

Adventist Missionary Volunteer Society in Kenya (1932–1995)

GODFREY K. SANG

Godfrey K. Sang is a historical researcher and writer with an interest in Adventist history. He holds a B.A. in History from the University of Eastern Africa Baraton and a number of qualifications from other universities. He is a published author. He is the co-author of the book *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*.

Following the government restrictions on the activities of Adventists in Nandi, Kenya, between 1932 and 1963, the Adventists there relied on the Missionary Volunteer Societies to make up for the absence of formal Adventist schools in the region.

Introduction of the Missionary Volunteer Societies in Kenya

On February 28, 1932 the East African Union Committee sitting in Nakuru under Pastor Spencer G. Maxwell passed the resolution that each church in Kenya establishes a Missionary Volunteer Society (MV) for the youth and a Junior Missionary Volunteer Society (JMV) for children under 15.¹ Kenya at this time was under the North European Division (NED). During the Winter Council of the NED held at Poznan, Poland between December 9-14, 1934, it was resolved that the young people throughout the division should be encouraged to serve as Missionary Volunteers in order to enhance the mission work of the Church. Every church was urged to get the young people under twenty-five involved in MV and JMV. The MV and JMV programs quickly took root in Nandi. The programs included literacy classes and taught other practical skills.

Progress of the MV and JMV Programs in Kenya

By 1938, Spencer Maxwell, the superintendent of the Kenya Union Mission, wrote that there were already seventy-four MV societies in Kenya with a membership of 1,800. He reported that a large proportion of the missionary work was done through their activities bringing in thousands into the faith.² He stated that they had so far brought over 8,000 people to Sabbath-school within three months making an average of four new persons per Missionary Volunteer. Each of the MV societies had their own motto, written in the local language. He reported that the enthusiastic band of MVs stopped anyone by the road and conducted roadside Bible studies often sharing the Word of God from memory. Hospitality was a big part of the ministry of these young people. They freely shared cooked sweet potatoes, pieces of sugar cane and porridge along with Sabbath-school

pamphlets and tracts and hymnbooks. One of the societies reported that 100 people accepted the Adventist message during just one month's campaign.³ The MV and JMV activities included reading the Bible, memorizing selected verses and Bible quizzes. Maxwell reported that there were some of the MVs that memorized long Bible passages including the entire Psalm 119. Several of the MV societies had girls as leaders. That was quite significant because it brought gender parity among young people.

MV and JMV Programs in Central Kenya

In the Central Kenya Mission Field, Pastor J. C. Mwatsuma and later Pastor Nathan Oyiengo were the first African leaders of the MV and JMV programs. They organized the JMV classes in many churches particularly in Shauri Moyo which was the largest church in Nairobi at that time. By the early 1950s many churches had their own programs. The Kaigat church in Nandi also had its youth leaders including Philip Kili who led the Nandi delegation to the East African Youth Congress held at the Royal Technical College (now University of Nairobi) on September 2-7, 1958.⁴ The event brought youth from several East African nations. Several Master guides (leaders of MV and JMV societies) were invested during this congress. Among the attendees were Edward Mwanza, Shadrack Ong'ondo and E. Oendo who represented Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika; P. D. Bakker represented the European missionaries of East Africa,⁵ and Petro Risasi, Harun Owoor, Isak Okeyo, Paulo Nyamweya, Jeremiah Oigo, Ezekiel Rewe, Paulo Kilonzo, Isaya Fue, Abraham Sengoka, S. M. Golola, and Henry Guwedeko, who represented the African pioneers and were invited as guests of the congress.⁶

MV and JMV in Nandi

One of the early leaders of MV in Nandi was Jackson Metto. Due to his exemplary dedication, he was made the chief leader of the MV societies in Nandi, Uasin Gishu and Trans-Nzoia. Other pioneers who worked with Metto included Daniel Birir, George Kemboi, John Birgen, David Sing'oei, Dina Jeptoo, Ruth Jesugut, Samuel Birgen, Joseph Katam, and Thomas Kebenei. By the 1970's others, including Joseph araap Nabei, who later became an outstanding preacher, joined the team. Nabei and other MV leaders and members preached in many Youth-led crusades and efforts throughout Nandi and beyond. Others of his generation included Raphael Bor (a translator from Nandi to Kiswahili), William Tuwei, Mary Lagat (the daughter of Elijah Lagat, the chairman of the Board for Segero school), Hellen Too (later Kessio), Albert Sang, and Caleb Murei.⁷

Under the leadership of Pastor Jackson Maiyo, which started in 1961, renewed efforts were made to organize the youth under the JMV and MV. Soon the MV societies were introduced in new churches across Nandi, Uasin Gishu, Trans-Nzoia, and Elgeyo-Marakwet. Pioneers at Kaigat included Moses Chirchir, Peter Biwott, Stephano Mitei, Julius Lagat, brothers Barnabas and John Ng'eny, Kenneth Mutai, Zipporah Keino, and others. In the Tuloi, Kabaskei, and Emgwen areas pioneer youth leaders included Solomon Songok and Jackson Meli. In the Lelmokwo area, Amon Chepkwony, Hosea Barngetuny, Elkana Ng'isirei, and Jacob Birech were among the first

MV leaders. In the Kungurweet area pioneers included Joshua Chepsiror and Reuben Arusei⁸

Spread of the MV and JMV Programs Beyond Nandi

From Nandi, the MV and JMV programs spread to Uasin Gishu. To help establish the MV and JMV in the new areas, some youth leaders from Nandi such as Elijah Lagat moved to the area. In Tarakwa, a city in Uasin Gishu, James Chirchir, Isaiah Bore, Isaac Baywo, Stephen Tarus, Paul Ruto, Richard Mosonik, Rebecca Baywo, Hellen Jeptanui, Zephaniah Kili, Noah Rono, Paul Metto, and Michael Masai were among the first leaders and members. This group welcomed the girls who left their homes to escape circumcision and hid them from their pursuers⁹

The MV and JMV programs played a crucial role in providing Adventist education to church youth at that time. In the absence of Adventist schools, Adventist youth attended either secular schools or to those sponsored by other denominations. They suffered greatly for issues such as Sabbath observance. They turned to MV and JMV societies to fill what they lacked in their formal education.

Evangelism Programs

In 1959 the MV from Nandi conducted the first public evangelistic meeting at Chepnego where ten people gave themselves to Christ. In 1963 another youth evangelistic campaign was held at Kapkerer where 14 people accepted the Adventist faith. The Central Kenya Field recognized the potential of the youth for evangelism and the need to equip the youth with the necessary skills in public preaching. In 1968 a training in public evangelism conducted by Pastor Jackson Maiyo in Kaigat, equipped many youth and youth-led evangelistic programs gained a new impetus in Nandi, Uasin Gishu and Trans-Nzoia counties. The youth evangelistic efforts came to be known as *Mashambulio*.¹⁰ *Mashambulio* comes from the Kiswahili language and means “coordinated attacks or assault.” The young evangelists were ready to “assault” the people not with weapons but with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Within the MV societies, divisions were created that were responsible for each county. Evangelistic campaigns lasted three weeks and were conducted mainly in unentered areas at least once a year.

The first of these evangelistic crusades was held in December 1969 at Kabirirsus near Metkei in Keiyo. The crusade was held at the request of Ezekiel Tanui who had moved to Burnt Forest from Keiyo. He requested that an evangelistic crusade be conducted at the home of his origin. Ezekiel Tanui later joined the ministry and became an ordained minister. The Kabirirsus campaign was successful. The following years successful evangelistic campaigns were held in other places: Ng’enyilel in Uasin Gishu (1970), Ziwa in Uasin Gishu (1971), Machungwa in Trans-Nzoia (1972), Kibabet in Nandi (1973), Chemase in Nandi (1974), Kapkoimur in Nandi (1975), Kaptel in Nandi (1976), and Kapcherop in Elgeyo-Marakwet (1977). After the evangelistic campaign in Kapcherop, which was a historic meeting with thousands in attendance, the youth leaders decided to split the team into two in order to reach more places. They created the Nandi Team and the Uasin Gishu/Trans-Nzoia

(UG/TN) Team. In 1978 the Nandi team moved to Meteitei while the UG/TN team moved to Eldama Ravine in Baringo where more people joined the church in the area. The following year 1979 the UG/TN team went to Turbo in Uasin Gishu and the Nandi team went to Serem in Southern Nandi. The following year 1980 the UG/TN team went to Siyoi in Elgeyo Marakwet while the Nandi team went to Kapkagaon in Nandi.¹¹

Youth Seminars

In 1981 the Central Kenya Field was split to create the Western Kenya Field which started without a designated officer for the youth. To fill the gap, the church took time that year and the following to educate the youth and sharpen their evangelism skills through seminars that were held at Mosoriot Teachers College near Eldoret. The main speakers in the 1981 Youth Seminar included Pastor Kenneth Bushnell and E. H. Sequeira, a youth chaplain.

In 1982, the General Conference adopted the 1000 Days of Reaping, a program for a worldwide series of mass evangelistic crusades. It commenced on September 18, 1982 and ended on June 15, 1985. All church members were encouraged to carry the message of salvation by faith through Christ to their neighbors and associates. The youth in Nandi joined the program. In December 1982 the UG/TN team held an evangelistic crusade at Chepterwai on the edge of Nandi. In 1983 they moved to Barsombe in Uasin Gishu and, in 1984, to Moi's Bridge. By January 1985, c. 65,000 new members had been recorded in the East Africa Union which consisted of Kenya and Uganda. That added to the existing 200,000 members with the eventual target of 100,000 new members expected by the end of that period.¹² Those statistics made the East Africa Union one of the fastest growing administrative units worldwide - a record it has held for many years. In 1985 the Nandi youth held their crusade at Kiplombe in Uasin Gishu.

After the 1000 Days of Reaping program was officially closed, the youth continued to conduct their annual evangelistic campaigns in various places: Kamoi in Elgeyo Marakwet district (1986); the Tugen estate in Uasin Gishu (1987); Chebiemit in Elgeyo Marakwet (1988); Likuyani in Kakamega County (1989); Nyawa in Elgeyo Marakwet (1991); Jepkogin, Chelingwa, and Kipsoen in Elgeyo Marakwet (1993); and Kibigos, Kogwongoi, and Yemit in Elgeyo Marakwet (1994).¹³

Following some rising challenges including mounting costs of renting vehicles, food, and advertising, the youth movement slowed down their crusades, particularly to distant regions. The last *Mashambulio* was held in 1995. New youth programs were introduced and the youth movement in Kenya is still strong. Practically every church and Sabbath Schools have a youth club with the Adventurers, Pathfinders, and Master guides that prepare them to evangelize their communities and beyond.

Daily Nation, January 9, 1985.

Maxwell, S. G. "Missionary Volunteers in Kenya." *The Advent Survey*, September 1938.

Press Committee. "Report of the East African Youth Congress in Nairobi." *British Advent Messenger*, December 12, 1958.

Sang, Godfrey K., Kili, and Hosea K. *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*. Nairobi, Kenya: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017.

Schlehuber, F. E. "Five Wonderful Days." *Southern African Division Outlook*, November 15, 1958.

NOTES

1. Minutes of the EAU Meeting held at Nakuru on February 28, 1932, East Kenya Union Conference archives, Nairobi, Kenya.
2. S. G. Maxwell, "Missionary Volunteers in Kenya," *The Advent Survey*, September 1938, 6.
3. Ibid.
4. Press Committee, "Report of the East African Youth Congress in Nairobi," *British Advent Messenger*, December 12, 1958, 1-3.
5. F. E. Schlehuber, "Five Wonderful Days," *Southern African Division Outlook*, November 15, 1958, 1.
6. Press Committee, "Report of the East African Youth Congress in Nairobi."
7. Godfrey K. Sang, Kili, and Hosea K., *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya* (Nairobi: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017), 152-162.
8. Ibid.
9. Kipchoge Chomu, unpublished research paper, Eldoret, Kenya, in the author's private collection.
10. Sang et al, 162.
11. Ibid.
12. *Daily Nation*, January 9, 1985, 18.
13. Personal knowledge of the author as a participant in the youth activities in Nandi, Kenya.

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000