



The Good Hope Conference office

Photo courtesy of Grant Lottering.

Good Hope Conference

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Good Hope Conference (previously known as Cape Field) was a subsidiary church administrative unit in the Southern Africa Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists from 1929 to 1997.

Current Territory and Statistics

The Good Hope Conference (GHC) was a constituency that administered the work among the people of mixed race (officially called "Coloureds" in South Africa) in the Western, Northern and Eastern Cape provinces of South Africa. In its final year, Good Hope Conference had 56 organized churches, 6,068 members in a population of 3,360,953.¹ Its headquarters were located on the Riverside Campus along 266 Klipfontein Road, in Athlone, Cape Town.

The Good Hope Conference had one high school (Good Hope High School) and two primary schools (Good Hope Primary and Riverside Primary Schools). The conference also owned a campsite in Jeffrey's Bay in the Eastern Cape where it hosted annual youth camps.

Origin of the Adventist Work in the Territory of the Conference

When South African farmer Pieter Wessels of the Kimberley district discovered the truth about the Bible and found the Seventh-day Adventist Church, he was eager to share his new found faith with everyone he knew. In his employ was a young gentleman of mixed race from Somerset West named Daniel Christian Theunissen. Wessels taught Theunissen how to care for horses and talked to him about the Sabbath.² It was, however, not until Theunissen relocated to Cape Town where he was employed by Pastor Asa T. Robinson that he accepted the teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Theunissen worked at Pastor Robinson's house where he became friends with his son, Dores Robinson. "It was Dores' discussion of the Adventist teachings that led (Theunissen) to believe and get baptized by Pastor Robinson in 1893."³

Theunissen had a burden to share his faith with the South African people of mixed race. He began preaching informally on Sunday afternoons at the Salt River market where a group of interested listeners emerged.⁴ By 1905, a sizeable group of Adventist believers lived in Salt River and four families lived in Parow.⁵ These families relied on train and tram services to travel to the church in Roeland Street in Cape Town City. This was both expensive and inconvenient, and therefore it was decided to organize a Sabbath School branch in Parow and the believers in Salt River were organized into a company with Theunissen as their leader.

At the same time, Theunissen was granted ministerial license by the Cape Conference and became the first South African minister of mixed race. The company that he founded in Salt River was organized into a church in 1909. In 1911, at the age of 38, Theunissen became the first ordained pastor among South African people of mixed race.⁶ A cornerstone for the Salt River Seventh-day Adventist Church was laid by Pastors Theunissen and Daniel May on May 1, 1918. On July 27, 1919, the Salt River SDA Church building was dedicated. "The officiating minister at the ceremony was Elder E. E. Andross, the General Conference secretary, accompanied by Elder K. Butler from the Cape Conference. Elder W. C. White offered the dedicatory prayer" after which Pastors Theunissen and May expressed their delight and gratitude for the building and for those who contributed.

The conversion of Daniel May is reminiscent of the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip. Just like the Ethiopian Eunuch was reading the prophet Isaiah (Acts 8:25-40) and was approached by the apostle Philip who explained to him all that he read, Theunissen saw May reading his Bible for two consecutive days and offered to explain to him the truths in the Bible.⁸ May's brother was already an Adventist who worshipped with the church in Salt River. May immediately accepted the Adventist truth and determined to become a gospel minister himself.

May collaborated with Theunissen and through their combined effort, the Sabbath School branch in Parow was organized into a company in 1915. They subsequently relocated to a refurbished stable in Goodwood and started a church school in 1916. This company which worshiped in Goodwood became an organized church and built a church building in Elsies River in Hugo Street in 1927.⁹

Theunissen and May's work stretched from Cape Town to Worcester in the Boland District and George in the Garden Route District of the Western Cape, as well as Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape. In the 1920s, Pastor Theunissen labored in Worcester where a little group was started. This little group first met in the members' homes and later in a public hall, until a new church was built in Esselin Park under the pastorate of La Kay between 1972 and 1974.¹⁰

Calvinia in the Hantam District received the message by divine intervention. Gert Koopman received a dream where an angel told him that Saturday was the biblical Sabbath day. Once the church heard about this special revelation, Pastor Theunissen was sent to Calvinia to investigate. A community of believers was established in Calvinia including the large Koopman family. Pastor Theunissen continued to visit them on a regular basis.¹¹

In 1925, Pastor A. W. Staples from the Cape Conference held evangelistic meetings in the town hall in George in the Garden Route.¹² The evangelistic campaign produced a plentiful harvest from which the church in George was organized. The George church was later split due to the political climate in South Africa at the time, and the members of mixed race formed the Elim Seventh-day Adventist Church not far from the town hall. They were later relocated to Pacaltsdorp when the Group Areas Act prohibited people of mixed race to own property in the town center of George.

Pastor Theunissen worked and lived in Uitenhage from 1920 to 1922 where a group was formed due to his evangelistic work. In 1925-1928 Pastor Theunissen was called back to Port Elizabeth to commence the work there. While working in Port Elizabeth, he continued to care for the work in Uitenhage.¹³

A church school for South African students of mixed race was started at Salt River church in 1929. At that time Helderberg College in Somerset West offered training only to students of European descent. The school in Salt River was a temporary arrangement until suitable grounds could be found to establish a school. A large plot along Klipfontein Road in Athlone was purchased where the Good Hope Training School opened in April 1930. The Good Hope Training School existed as a primary and secondary school for South African people of mixed race, and it also prepared pastors for ministry.

In October 1933, the Cape Coloured Field¹⁴ was organized as a mission field to carry forward the work among the people of mixed race in South Africa. Pastor L. S. Billes was appointed president of the new field. Shortly after that Pastor Theunissen was sent to Johannesburg.¹⁵ This was the first effort to send a person of mixed race beyond the borders of the Cape Province. Pastor B. W. Abney, a Black American missionary, was already working among people of mixed race in Johannesburg.¹⁶ The first new members joined the Johannesburg Central Church of the Natal-Transvaal Conference. In the 1940s, a church was established in Albertsville. When the Group Areas Act forced people of mixed race out of Albertsville and Johannesburg Central, members from these two congregations merged to form the Bosmont Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹⁷

Amid the work carried on among the South Africans of different racial backgrounds in Natal, the work among the South African people of mixed race took off in the 1940s. The first group of believers in Durban initially met in the city center in a Sunday-keeping church,¹⁸ and the first Seventh-day Adventist Church building in Natal was erected in 1957 in Mayville.

Early in the 1940s, P. F. Fouche visited St. Helena Island, a British territory situated off coast on the southwestern part of the African continent in the South Atlantic Ocean, where he learned of one person who was interested in the Sabbath truth. Fouche gave him a packet of tracts titled *Present Truth Series* and met with him during his stay on the Island.¹⁹ Fouche observed that the schools on St. Helena Island only took students as far as Standard 6 at the time and many of the islanders never finished school. Therefore, due to the high level of illiteracy on the island, he believed that canvassing would not prove to be very successful there. He however requested believers from South Africa to write letters to the few interested persons in St. Helena so that they may be encouraged to know that there are people from other parts of the world who cared about them.²⁰

In 1948, A. C. Le Butt, then president of the Cape Field, visited St. Helena Island. He visited the island to find out whether it would be possible to send a missionary family to the island.²¹ Le Butt was warmly received by the islanders and upon his return to Cape Town, he immediately obtained permission from the South African Union committee to send a missionary family to the island. Pastor and Mrs. Campher and their family were asked to pioneer the work on this isolated island. Within the first year of their stay on the island, five people were baptized. By 1956 a church was organized on St. Helena Island, with 39 baptized members.

Organizational History of the Conference

When work among the people of mixed race first began in South Africa, there was no racial segregation in the local churches. New converts simply joined the nearest Adventist church. The mission work in the Cape Province was under the administration of the Cape Conference. The Cape Conference afforded Daniel Theunissen ministerial license in 1905 and ordained him as a pastor in 1911. Churches remained multiracial during the early years of the Cape Conference. In 1923, the Cape Conference placed the predominantly “Coloured” churches under a newly created department called the Coloured Department and appealed for racially separate

churches.²² The conference leaders at the time believed this was a step towards self-governing churches for South African people of mixed race.²³ The new developments were at first not favorably met by some local churches, but some churches agreed to try. The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Kimberly became the first church on record to undergo complete separation. A new congregation was formed for people of European descent in 1929 while the Beaconsfield Church remained a church for people of mixed race.²⁴ On September 7, 1930, the South African Union Conference passed an action to “approve the principle of separate Churches for (the) Coloured members throughout the Cape Conference” to promote the development of a separate church organization for people of mixed race.²⁵ In 1931, the George SDA Church separated and the Elim Church was formed for them, not far from the location of the George SDA Church.²⁶

Beginning in 1930 the Cape Conference determined to separate the Coloured Department entirely from the conference. The name “Coloured Department” was debated in 1931 as non-satisfactory though a more appropriate name was not determined.²⁷

In April 1933, the South African Union Conference held a constituent business meeting in Bloemfontein. Perhaps the most significant item of consideration from this session was the realignment of the work in the territory of the South African Union Conference. At the time, the world was experiencing a global economic depression. The church in South Africa experienced financial challenges when the General Conference had to reduce its appropriations to South Africa for up to 40 percent. The church in South Africa also lost some extension grants and consequently had to reduce the workers’ salaries.²⁸

The South African Union Conference had to make serious considerations to avoid disastrous retrenchments and setbacks on mission work. A survey commission was appointed to study how the church in South Africa could circumvent the adverse financial situation. On April 23, 1933, this commission reported their findings and recommendations to the business session of the South African Union Conference. “The report was favorably received and the recommendations of the commission adopted.”²⁹ The major developments from their recommendations included merging the Cape and Natal-Transvaal Conferences into one constituent conference known as the South African Conference. It also recommended that the work among the people of mixed race in the South African Union Conference be placed under a separate local field. It was also recommended that the two mission fields that had already existed for the work among Black South Africans in the north and the south be merged to form the South African Mission Field, although they were under the administration of the Southern African Division at the time.

The name given to the newly organized local field was Cape Coloured Mission Field. This name was agreed upon by the division, union conference and local conference leadership. The members of the Cape Coloured Mission Field objected the inclusion of the word ‘Coloured.’ It was therefore dropped and two years later, the local field was only known as the Cape Mission Field of Seventh-day Adventists.

Three years after the reorganization of the South African Union Conference territory, which attempted to combat the financial crisis, another reorganizing took place in 1936. The South African Mission Field, which was under the administration of the Southern African Division, was divided into two mission fields, namely the North Bantu Mission Field and the South Bantu Mission Field. The South African Conference was reinstated into its former territories with the Cape Conference administering the work among the members of European descent in the Cape Province, and the Natal-Transvaal Conference administering the work among the members of European descent in the Natal and Transvaal Provinces. The territory of the Orange Free State was shared between the Cape and Natal-Transvaal Conferences but with the Natal-Transvaal Conference taking the larger share. No change was made to the Cape Field which continued to sponsor the work for the people of mixed race in the entire country of South Africa.

The work among the Indian people in Natal was put under the responsibilities of the Cape Field until 1956 when a separate mission was started for the Indian people. When missionary expeditions were launched towards St. Helena Island in 1948, this South Atlantic island was also incorporated under the care of the Cape Field.

At the 1958 year-end Division Committee meetings, approval was voted for the South African Union Conference to grant conference status to the Cape Field.³⁰ By the end of 1959, the Cape Field members had grown to 2,079 Adventist members and it was believed that this mission field was strong enough to move toward becoming a self-supporting conference.³¹ The fourth business session of the Cape Field took place on the grounds of the Good Hope Training School in Athlone, Cape Town, and on December 20, 1959, the Cape Field of Seventh-day Adventists was granted a conference status and was renamed as the Good Hope Conference, with Pastor K. Landers as its first president.

The name 'Good Hope' was selected since the "bulk of the constituency resided in the Province of the Cape of Good Hope (formerly Cape Province)."³² When the Good Hope Training School relocated to a larger campus in Kuils River, Cape Town, in 1962 the vacated college dormitory at Riverside was renovated in order to become the new head office of the Good Hope Conference.

The South African Union Conference's constitution was revised during the special business session in Bloemfontein in 1953.³³ As a result, two union administrative committees were formed that would conduct their work separately but sit jointly on certain occasions. Under this revision, one committee administered the work of the self-supporting conferences, while the other committee administered the work of the mission fields under the South African Union Conference. Following this organizational pattern, two other committees, namely Group I and Group II, were formed in 1960. Group I retained the self-supporting conferences, including the Cape, Good Hope, Oranje-Natal and Transvaal Conferences while Indian Mission Field was also added to their group. Group II remained with the rest of the mission fields in South Africa under its care. In 1965, these groups were further separated and developed into independent union conferences. Group I continued as the South African Union Conference and Group II became the Southern Union Conference.

Movements toward a Merger of Church's Administrative Units

Not long after Group I and Group II were separated as independent union conferences, calls for uniting various church administrative units were heard again among church leaders from all organizational levels and members of the affected groups. Another factor that may have prompted the need for reorganizing was the vast territory covered by the Good Hope Conference. The Good Hope Conference was responsible for churches with predominantly people of mixed race throughout the entire country of South Africa and St. Helena Island. With their headquarters situated in Cape Town, there were many complaints of neglect by the leadership coming from the churches situated in the Transvaal and Natal provinces.

A first attempt to address this concern was done in 1975 when the Good Hope Conference created an office of a vice-president and situated him in Johannesburg to carry out his responsibility.³⁴ Pastor Gordon Van Ster, who served for nine years as the Conference Church Ministries director, was appointed to this position in which he served until 1977 when an alternative solution was realized. The need to unite organizations became inevitable and unavoidable.

The first merger happened between Helderberg College in Somerset West and Good Hope College in Kuils River in Cape Town. The two institutions were approximately 22 kilometers apart but served different racial groups. In 1973 plans to integrate these two institutions were set in motion and complete integration was realized in 1976.³⁵ At the end of 1976, the Good Hope College was discontinued, but the school offering primary and secondary education that was situated on the same campus was preserved and continues until this day.

The integration of Helderberg and Good Hope Colleges paved the way for uniting the church across all organizational levels. Just two years later, in 1978, all the churches consisting mainly of people of mixed race in the Transvaal Province were placed under the administrative care of the Transvaal Conference that previously oversaw only the work among the people of European descent.³⁶ Similarly, the churches in the Free State and Natal Provinces were placed under the administrative care of the Oranje-Natal Conference. The churches continued to have Black pastors but were now integrated with the local conferences in whose geographical territories they existed.

Later, the two racially established union conferences in South Africa, namely the South African Union Conference and the Southern Union Conference, merged at the recommendation of the General Conference on December 10, 1991. The newly merged union conference was called the Southern Africa Union Conference, the name it bears to this day. The integration of the local conferences only took place at a later stage. The Kwazulu Natal-Free State Conference became the first local conference in South Africa to achieve successful complete integration. In 1994 the Natal Field (constituency for Black South Africans in KwaZulu-Natal Province) and the Oranje-Natal Conference (constituency for Africans of all races in Free State and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces) merged to form the Kwazulu Natal-Free State Province.

At this time, negotiations were already underway between the Good Hope Conference (constituency in the Cape of Good Hope Province that oversaw the work among South African people of mixed race), the Cape Conference (constituency in the Cape of Good Hope Province that oversaw the work among the people of European descent) and the Southern Conference (Black constituency in the Cape of Good Hope Province).

Earlier in 1975, the report from the Inter-Union Committee, which studied ways of integration between the South African and Southern Union Conferences, recommended that churches be open for attendance by all races. On June 26, 1979 the Cape Conference established a Merger Committee to engage the Good Hope Conference in a discussion about a possible merger.³⁷ The committee's first report on October 17, 1979 indicated that a merger was not possible at that time but concerted efforts should be made to foster better working relationships between the Cape and Good Hope Conferences.

The Inter-Conference Church Unity Contact Group was formed on June 22, 1982 to "seek ways of improved church unity"³⁸ between the Cape and Good Hope Conferences. After many discussions and negotiations between the Cape, Good Hope and Southern Conferences, including involvement from the Southern Africa Union, the Cape Conference in its regular business session on November 19, 1995 voted to accept the Merger Committee's recommendations.³⁹ One of the recommendations was to dissolve the Cape, Good Hope and Southern Conferences and merge their territories to form one constituency that would oversee the racially segregated churches in the Cape. The vote was taken, and 70,49 percent of the voting member were in favor of the recommendation, but the Cape Conference's constitution required 75 percent to initiate the recommended merge. Nevertheless, the Cape Conference executive committee voted "to recognize the majority vote and encourage continued and further dialogue with the (Good Hope Conference) and the (Southern Conference)."⁴⁰ Following the Cape Conference's action, the Good Hope and Southern Conferences proceeded with the merge. Thus, the Good Hope and Southern Conferences were dissolved and a new conference named the Southern Hope Conference was organized on September 13, 1997 with the headquarters in Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape.

List of Presidents

Cape Field: L. S. Billes (1933-1936); J. N. De Beer (1936-1942); A. C. Le Butt (1943-1954); E. W. Bradbury (1954-1958); E. A. Buckley (1958-1959).

Good Hope Conference: K. Landers (1959-1968); D. G. Theunissen (1968-1972); A. D. Jephthas (1972-1975); J. M. Niekerk (1975-1981); J. Human (1981-1982); D. G. Theunissen (1982-1983); G. Beyers (1983-1986); J. M. Niekerk (1986-1989); E. C. Le Roux (1989-1990); G. R. van Ster (1990-1991); A. N. Ryan (1991-1997).

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1. "Good Hope Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998), 374.
2. Passmore Hachalinga, "Daniel Christian Theunissen (1873 – 1956)," *Southern News Notes*, Issue 2 (July 2020), 7.
3. Ibid.

4. I. F. Du Preez and R. H. du Pre, *A Century of Good Hope: A History of the Good Hope Conference, its Educational Institutions and Early Workers, 1893 – 1993* (East London, South Africa: Southern History Association, 1994), 1.
5. O. O. Fortner, "The Cape Town Church," *South African Missionary*, November 1905, 1.
6. Passmore Hachalinga, *Echoes from Table Mountain: Experiences of the Seventh-day Adventist Pioneers in the Cape – Adventism's Gateway into Southern Africa* (Somerset West, South Africa: Bevan Litho Publishers, 2021), 90.
7. *Ibid.*, 95.
8. Du Preez and du Pre, *Century of Good Hope*, 12.
9. *Ibid.*, 22.
10. *Ibid.*, 35.
11. *Ibid.*, 36.
12. *Ibid.*, 40.
13. *Ibid.*, 45.
14. The name "Cape Coloured Field" reflected the acceptable practice in South Africa to refer to the South African people of mixed race as "Coloureds" or "Coloured people." The depiction "Coloureds" is also used and preferred in South Africa today.
15. L. S. Billes, "Spring Programme for the Cape Coloured Field," *Southern African Division Outlook*, October 15, 1933, 2.
16. Du Preez and Du Pre, *Century of Good Hope*, 49.
17. *Ibid.*, 53.
18. *Ibid.*, 55.
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25. Ibid., 137.
26. Ibid., 127.
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28. N. C. Wilson, "Cape and Natal-Transvaal Conference Amalgamated," *Southern African Division Outlook*, May 15, 1933, 6.
29. Ibid.
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36. Du Preez and Du Pre, *Century of Good Hope*, 57.
37. Du Preez, "Coloured Community in South Africa," 292.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 295.
40. Du Preez, "Coloured Community in South Africa," 296.

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