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(45) The Seventh Day Adventist Church in Africa

Mary Getui

The roots of the Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA) date back to 1863 in the USA. The church sprang up in the aftermath of the great disappointment of 1844 when the second advent of Christ, as expected by the Millerite Adventists, did not happen. The three names associated with the birth of the SDA Church are Hiram Edison, Joseph Bates and Ellen G. White. By the turn of the nineteenth century, Seventh Day Adventism had spread to Europe, Australia, South and West Africa. East Africa was reached in the early part of the twentieth century. The SDA presence is worldwide, with about 30% of the membership in Africa.

The missionary tide has changed. The SDA Church in Africa is playing a key role in the diaspora. Members of the SDA Church from various parts of Africa 'travel with the SDA message' and continue practising their faith by attending and opening new churches in America, Europe and Australia.

Generally, the SDA Church in Africa abides by the tenets of the world church, hence this article will only highlight where applicable the African situation or context, with focus on the theological profile, structure, contribution to social responsibility and development and a highlight on some challenges.

Theologically, the SDA Church draws from 28 Bible-based fundamental beliefs summarised as follows:

1. *The Word of God*: The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God.
2. *The Godhead*: There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
3. *God the Father*: Is the Creator, Source, Sustainer, and Sovereign of all creation.
4. *God the Son*: Became incarnate in Jesus Christ. He became also truly human.
5. *God the Spirit*: Draws and convicts human beings, sent by the Father and extends spiritual gifts to the church, empowers it to bear witness to Christ, and in harmony with the Scriptures, leads it into all truth.
6. *Creation:* God is Creator. In six days the Lord made 'the heaven and earth' and established and rested on the seventh day of the first week, the Sabbath, as a perpetual memorial of His completed creative work. The first man and woman were made in the image of God as the crowning work of Creation, given dominion over the world, and charged with responsibility to care for it. When the world was finished, it was 'very good'.
7. *The Nature of Man*: Man and woman were made in the image of God. They disobeyed God; they denied their dependence upon Him and fell from their high position under God. Their descendants share this fallen nature and its consequences. But God in Christ reconciled the world to Himself and by His Spirit restores in penitent mortals the image of their maker. Created for the glory of God, they are called to love Him and one another, and to care for their environment.
8. *The Great Controversy*: Humanity is involved in a great controversy between Christ and Satan. This conflict originated in heaven when Satan led into rebellion a portion of the angles. He introduced the spirit of rebellion into this world when he led Adam and Eve into sin. To assist His people in this controversy, Christ sends the Holy Spirit and the loyal angels to guide, protect and sustain them in the way of salvation.
9. *The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ*: In Christ, God provided the only means of atonement for human sin. The death of Christ is substitutionary and expiatory, reconciling and transforming. The resurrection of Christ proclaims God's triumph over the forces of evil and assures final victory over sin and death.
10. *The Experience of Salvation*: In infinite love and mercy, God made Christ, who knew no sin, to be sin for humanity, so that in Him humanity might be made the righteousness of God. The Holy

Spirit renews minds, writes God's law of love in the hearts, and gives the power to live a holy life, and have the assurance of salvation now and in the judgement.

11. *Growing in Christ*: Jesus' victory gives humanity victory over evil. The Holy Spirit indwells and empowers for constant daily communion in prayer, feeding on His word, meditating on it and on His providence.
12. *The Church*: The Church is the community of believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.
13. *The Remnant and Its Mission*: The universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ, but in the last days, a time of widespread apostasy, a remnant has been called out to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ, and heralds the approach of His Second Advent.
14. *Unity in the Body of Christ*: The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. All are equal in Christ. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God.
15. *Baptism*: Baptism is a symbol of union with Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and the reception of the Holy Spirit. It is by immersion in water and is contingent on an affirmation of faith in Jesus and evidence of repentance of sin. It follows instruction in the Holy Scriptures and acceptance of their teachings.
16. *The Lord's Supper*: The Lord's Supper is a participation in the emblems of the body and blood of Jesus as an expression of faith in Him. Preparation for the Supper includes self-examination, repentance, and confession. The Master ordained the service of foot-washing to signify renewed cleansing, to express a willingness to serve one another in Christ-like humility, and to unite hearts in love. The communion service is open to all believing Christians.
17. *Spiritual Gifts and Ministries*: God bestows upon members in every age spiritual gifts. Given by the agency of the Holy Spirit, who apportions to each member as He wills, the gifts provide all abilities and ministries needed by the church to fulfil its divinely ordained functions. When members employ these spiritual gifts as faithful stewards of God's varied grace, the church is protected from the destructive influence of false doctrine, grows with a growth that is from God, and is built up in faith and love.
18. *The Gift of Prophecy:* One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White – the Lord's messenger. Her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.
19. *The Law of God*: The great principles of God's law are embodied in the Ten Commandments and exemplified in the life of Christ; and through the agency of the Holy Spirit, they point out sin and awaken a sense of need for a Saviour. Salvation is all of grace and not of works, but its fruit is obedience to the Commandments. This obedience develops Christian character and results in a sense of well-being.
20. *The Sabbath:* The Creator, after the six days of Creation, rested on the seventh day and instituted the Sabbath for all people as a memorial of Creation. The fourth commandment of God's unchangeable law requires the observance of this seventh-day Sabbath as the day of rest, worship and ministry, in harmony with the teaching and practice of Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day of delightful communion with God and one another. It is a symbol of redemption in Christ, a sign of sanctification, a token of allegiance, and a foretaste of the eternal future in God's kingdom. The Sabbath is God's perpetual sign of His eternal covenant between Him and His

people. Joyful observance of this holy time from evening to evening, sunset to sunset, is a celebration of God's creative and redemptive acts.

21. *Stewardship*: Human beings, entrusted by God with time and opportunities, abilities and possessions, and the blessings of the earth and its resources, are responsible to Him for their proper use. God's ownership is acknowledged by faithful service to Him and fellow humankind and by returning tithes and giving offerings for the proclamation of His gospel and the support and growth of His church.
22. *Christian Behaviour*: Members are called to be a godly people who think, feel, and act in harmony with the principles of heaven, who will be involved only in those things which will produce Christlike purity, health and joy, in amusement, entertainment and dress. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit; it is to be cared for intelligently. Along with adequate exercise and rest, members should adopt the most healthful diet possible and abstain from the unclean foods identified in the Scriptures, and also alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and the irresponsible use of drugs and engage only in whatever brings thoughts and bodies into the discipline of Christ, who desires wholesomeness, joy, and goodness.
23. *Marriage and the Family*: Marriage was divinely established in Eden and affirmed by Jesus to be a lifelong union between a man and a woman in loving companionship. A marriage commitment is to God as well as to the spouse and should be entered into only between partners who share a common faith. Divorce is permissible only for adultery. Parents are to bring up children to love and obey the Lord. By their example and their words, they are to teach them that Christ is a loving disciplinarian, ever tender and caring, who wants them to become members of His body, the family of God. Increasing family closeness is one of the hallmarks of the final gospel message.
24. *Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary:* There is a sanctuary in heaven – the true tabernacle which the Lord set up. In it, Christ ministers, making available to believers the benefits of His atoning sacrifice offered once for all on the cross. He was inaugurated as our great High Priest and began His intercessory ministry at the time of His ascension. In 1844, at the end of the prophetic period of 2,300 days, He entered the second and last phase of His atoning ministry. It is a work of investigative judgement which is part of the ultimate disposition of all sin, typified by the cleansing of the ancient Hebrew sanctuary on the Day of Atonement. In that typical service, the sanctuary was cleansed with the blood of animal sacrifices, but the heavenly things are purified with the perfect sacrifice of the blood of Jesus. The investigative judgement reveals to heavenly intelligences who, among the dead, are asleep in Christ and therefore, in Him, are deemed worthy to have part in the first resurrection. It also makes manifest those among the living who are abiding in Christ, keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus, and in Him, therefore, are ready for translation into His everlasting kingdom. This judgement vindicates the justice of God in saving those who believe in Jesus. It declares that those who have remained loyal to God shall receive the kingdom. The completion of this ministry of Christ will mark the close of human probation before the Second Advent.
25. *The Second Coming of Christ*: The second coming of Christ is the blessed hope of the church – the grand climax of the gospel. The Saviour's coming will be literal, personal, visible, and worldwide. When He returns, the righteous dead will be resurrected and, together with the righteous living, will be glorified and taken to heaven, but the unrighteous will die. The almost complete fulfilment of most lines of prophecy, together with the present condition of the world, indicates that Christ's coming is imminent. The time of that event has not been revealed, and therefore, members are exhorted to be ready at all times.
26. *Death and Resurrection*: The wages of sin is death. But God, who alone is immortal, will grant eternal life to His redeemed. Until that day, death is an unconscious state for all people. When

Christ appears, the resurrected righteous and the living righteous will be glorified and brought up to meet their Lord. The second resurrection, a resurrection of the unrighteous, will take place a thousand years later.

27. *The Millennium and the End of Sin*: The millennium is the thousand-year reign of Christ with His saints in heaven between the first and second resurrections. During this time the wicked dead will be judged; the earth will be utterly desolate, without living human inhabitants but occupied by Satan and his angels. At its close, Christ with His saints and the Holy City will descend from heaven to earth. The unrighteous dead will then be resurrected and, with Satan and his angels, will surround the city – but fire from God will consume them and cleanse the earth. The universe will thus be freed of sin and sinners for ever.
28. *The New Earth*: On the New Earth, in which righteousness dwells, God will provide an eternal home for the redeemed and a perfect environment, for here God Himself will dwell with His people, and suffering and death will have passed away. The great controversy will be ended, and sin will be no more. All things, animate and inanimate, will declare that God is love, and He shall reign for ever. Amen.

It is important to recognize the contribution made by Africa, way back in 1931, towards having these beliefs summarised in an organized structure. In the volume *Seventh Day Adventists Believe,* it reads '… in response to an appeal from the church leaders in Africa for a statement which would help government officials and others to a better understanding of our work', a committee of four, including the President of the General Conference, prepared a statement encompassing 'the principle features'[1] of belief.

The administrative structure of the church starts at the local church, and proceeds to the district, the station, the conference/mission/field, union, division, to the General Conference. The General Conference serves as the headquarters. It is based in Silver Springs, Maryland, USA. Of the thirteen administrative divisions in the world, three are in Africa, namely East-Central Africa, Southern Africa-Indian Ocean and West-Central Africa with headquarters in Kenya, South Africa and Ivory Coast, respectively.

The General Conference session takes place every five years. While it is an open forum for SDA adherents, the General Conference Executive Committee, drawn from the top leadership of the SDA Church worldwide, deliberates on key issues. The Annual Council handles and builds towards the General Conference Session. There are also advisory departments, committees and commissions that handle appropriate matters.

While the SDA Church emphasizes evangelism where the twenty-eight fundamental beliefs are the focus, the church is engaged in initiatives for social witness, development and *diakonia* that relate to these beliefs. These initiatives aim at the edification of church members and non-members. They can be termed 'intra-outreach' and include education, health literature and health evangelism, social services, media evangelism and special ministries.

The church runs education institutions from basic to tertiary. In Kenya, the University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, was the first private university to be granted a charter in 1985 as was Babcock University in Nigeria. In the tertiary institutions, secular and theological programmes are on offer. These institutions provide trained human resources for service in the church and in the wider society.

The church has also invested in health facilities – clinics, dispensaries and hospitals. Of notable mention is the Benjamin S. Carson Sr School of Medicine at Babcock University in Nigeria, which is named after the renowned neurosurgeon. It was inaugurated in 2012.

Colporteur or literature evangelism is an outstanding feature of the SDA Church. Volunteers sell and distribute literature ranging from the Bible to books on health, family and other life issues. The literature is

[1] Seventh Day Adventists Believe, page V.

in both international and local languages. To facilitate literature evangelism, the church has set up publishing and printing facilities such as the Africa Herald Publishing House in Kenya.

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and the Seventh Day Adventist Welfare Services are agencies that can be termed as the 'intra-outreach' development arms of the church. They operate internationally and across Africa, responding to war, disaster situations, and engaging in health and education initiatives.

The SDA Church operates several radio and television channels such as Adventist World Radio and Hope Channel that reach or are based in Africa. They offer a wide range of programmes, some specific for the SDA audience and others for consumption by the general public.

The church also concentrates on 'in-reach' programmes. Some of these include the Sabbath School. This is a weekly Bible study session at church, where members, divided according to age, discuss a designated quarterly theme, with specific topics for each day of the week that members are expected to apply to the individual and the context.

The annual camp meeting is another 'in-reach' programme. Just as for Sabbath School, the theme is universal, but the application is contextual. A camp meeting is also an opportunity to focus on other issues such as health, family life and stewardship. The different age groups as well as special needs groups also have designated programmes. A recent development is, where those congregations that can afford it, invite international speakers and guest choirs.

Involvement of the laity is another aspect that has contributed to the growth of the SDA Church. Given that clergy are few and have large flocks and geographical areas to cover, the church officers, from elders to those in charge of and engaged in various departments and programmes of the local church, play a key role in running the weekly, and especially Sabbath church programmes. The laity, in their financial giving of tithes and other offerings such as church building, make a significant contribution towards church growth and development. The Adventist Lay Service Industries (ASI) consists of lay professionals and business people whose objective is to train lay people to go into mission as the context dictates. Far-flung areas have been reached through provision of motorbikes. This could be termed 'mission within'.

The various categories in the church, such as those of age, gender and position, participate in activities of their own initiative or those organized by the church hierarchies. The children, youth, Adventist Men Organization and the Women Ministry gather for camps, retreats and conferences. The shepherdesses (the pastors' wives) also have and run programmes specific to their needs. One such event is the East and Central Division Youth Congress and Students Retreat held in December 2014 at the University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya which attracted about 1,000 participants. The theme was 'Turning Cities Upside Down: Training our Youth for Evangelism in the 21st Century'. Across the continent, The Vocational Bible School (VBS) is a big attraction for children during school holidays.

The SDA Church in Africa is thriving numerically but has to cope with some challenges.

A major challenge is culture-related, for example, the practice of polygamy, early marriages and spiritism. In responding to some of these issues, conferences are held and publications are released. The publication *The Church, Culture and Spirits – Adventism in Africa*, is a response to spiritism. It should be pointed out, however, that critique of African culture that could lead to appreciation and application of edifying African cultural values and practices has not been given due attention.

Another challenge for the church in Africa is that, while the numbers are growing, the 'wallet contribution' is not so much. Even so, through 'inter-outreach', the church in Africa contributes quarterly through the '13th Sabbath' offering. This fund supports projects in a specific region of the world church.

The world church, including Africa, has been challenged and has hearkened to the need to reinvent itself in order to address emerging issues such as HIV and AIDS, the environmental crisis, technology, gender and urban ministry, among others.

This brief survey is an indication that the SDA Church is one of the main denominational families that is making a major impact in Africa, and is contributing to the development of the SDA Church worldwide.

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