CHAPTER TWO

THE LAUNCHING BASE:
EUROPEAN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM

The purpose of this chapter is to delineate the developments that led to the beginning of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tanzania in 1903. This will be done in three steps: (1) The early development of this young denomination and major theological concepts that were of importance for its missionary undertakings will be outlined. (2) The character of the movement in Europe will be investigated. Since European Adventists first brought this particular brand of Christianity to the then German East Africa, their peculiar identity reveals something about the background and characteristics of Tanzanian Adventism as well. (3) Finally, the steps that led to the establishment of the first Adventist mission in Tanzania will be examined.

2.1 The Historical and Theological Background

The Development of Seventh-Day Adventist Identity in the Nineteenth Century

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was two generations old. As a missionary movement with roots in the North American Millerite Revival,¹ Adventism was a product of the nineteenth century and in some respects resembled other “post-classical” missionary movements, which also had their origin in nineteenth century revival movements.² Since its inception in the aftermath of

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² Fiedler, The Story of Faith Missions, 13, 24–26, 121, defines as “post-classical missions” those that were founded from the nineteenth century onward, independent of older established churches, while “classical missions” are those that were strongly related to
Millerism in the mid-1840s and its official organization in 1863, the Seventh-day Adventist movement had experienced both continuity and change. Once a theological profile had developed by the early 1850s, several constants preserved the identity of the nascent denomination: a strong emphasis on distinctive eschatological teachings and the Sabbath doctrine, which led the denomination to adopt its name, and its peculiar remnant ecclesiology.

The remnant concept had its historical origin in the experiences after the “Great Disappointment” of 1844. The awaited end of the world had not come and only a small number of believers continued to assert the importance of the particular interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy that the Millerites had promoted. As an increasingly strong profile developed among this “Little Remnant Scattered Abroad” through emphasis on the Sabbath and a few other doctrines, sabbatarian Adventists came to view themselves as the eschatological “remnant” of the older Protestant churches, and often worked with the objective of founding folk churches. Many other post-classical missions (especially the “Faith Missions”) had their origin in revivals, especially the one that climaxed in 1859 and 1873 in the USA and England, respectively; see ibid., 112, 115–116. These revivals were also connected to the nineteenth century Prophetic Movement and thus to roots of Adventism.

For a detailed account of the theological developments during the founding stages of the Seventh-day Adventist Church including the Millerite Movement, see P. Gerard Damsteegt, Foundations of the Seventh-Day Adventist Message and Mission (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).


The nickname “Adventists” had originally been given to Millerites by outsiders, which is a parallel to the way the name “Methodists” originated. The denominational designation “Seventh-day Adventists” was adopted in 1860, three years before the official organization of the denomination, by leaders of the movement in the process of incorporating the publishing association that was then the main bond holding sabbatarian Adventists together.

This term occurred in the title of one of the first publications of Ellen White: Ellen Harmon, To the Little Remnant Scattered Abroad, Broadside (Portland: n.p., 1846).

They have been popularly summarized as Second Coming, Sabbath, Sanctuary, Spirit of Prophecy, and State of the Dead.