

Saw Samuel Elected President of Southern Asia-Pacific Division

He says he will seek God's wisdom to value each day as a precious gift to be used wisely.

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Saw Samuel, who was elected president of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division on Tuesday, said he would seek new ways to reach the many Buddhists and Muslims in his region even as he sought wisdom from God to value each day as a precious gift to be used wisely.

The General Conference's Executive Committee, the top governing body of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, elected Saw on March 22 to replace Leonardo R. Asoy, who succumbed to a rare bone marrow disease in January.

Samuel, who previously served as executive secretary of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division, said he had a particular burden to share the gospel with unreached people in his division, which encompasses 14 countries with a population of 1 billion but only 1.3 million church members.

"My main burden is to engage and involve our young people and professional and non-professional lay members in reaching out to the unreached Chinese, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and secular urban people," Samuel said. "I do have a great concern also for dropped, missing, and backsliding members."

Samuel's remarks indicate that he intends to pursue the course of Asoy, who was elected president at the General Conference Session in San Antonio, Texas, last July. Asoy said at the

time that he was especially eager to find ways to reach Buddhists and Muslims in his division.

Asoy passed away on Jan. 12 of complications from myelodysplastic syndrome, a rare disease in which the bone marrow is unable to produce adequate healthy blood cells. Asoy, 56, had been elected to replace the ailing Alberto C. Gulfan Jr., who served as president for 12 years and succumbed to cancer on Sept. 26 at the age of 64.

Samuel, the first Burmese to serve as an Adventist division president, said his vision for the Southern Asia-Pacific Division was to mobilize, unite, and use its God-given resources of young people, professionals, regular church members, and media and technology to spread the gospel.

His favorite Bible passage is the prayer of Moses in Psalm 90 and particularly verse 12, which reads, "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

"Life is short and precious," he said. "We need wisdom from God how to use our time, health, and strength, and our God-given resources."

Leaders of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division – which stretches from Pakistan and Sri Lanka in the west to Indonesia and the Philippines in the east – nominated Saw as the next president at a March 18 meeting at the division's headquarters in Silang, Philippines.

"We had multiple prayer sessions to ask for the leading of the Holy Spirit, and we felt His presence," said Ted N.C. Wilson, president of the Adventist world church, who attended the meeting of about 40 members of the division's Executive Committee during an Asian trip that also took him to Japan and Hong Kong. "The atmosphere was very respectful and Christ-like. ... We were sobered by the recent death of two division presidents."

On Sabbath, March 19, church leaders paid tribute to Gulfan and Asoy and their families, and presented their widows with flowers and a glass plaque with an inscription that Samuel read out loud. The short service at the church at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies underscored on the two leaders' strong emphasis on evangelism through a local initiative called Integrated Evangelism Lifestyle, which is closely connected with the Adventist world church's Total Member Involvement initiative.

During the Friday meeting to nominate a new president, committee members shared their perspectives and views in a respectful manner throughout the morning and afternoon, Wilson said.

"I was so proud of the comportment and attitude of the committee members," he said. "They were truly wanting God's will to be done."

Samuel, who had served as acting division president since January, was first elected executive secretary of the division in 2010. Before that, he worked for two years as ministerial secretary of the Southeast Asia Union Mission in Singapore. The rest of his career as pastor and administrator were spent in Thailand, serving as executive secretary of the Thailand Adventist Mission (2002-08); director of Leadership Education and Development (LEAD) program at the Thailand Adventist Mission (2006-08); youth director at the Thailand Adventist Mission (2002-04); pastor of the Bangkok Adventist Hospital Church (2000-02); and chaplaincy coordinator for Seventh-day Adventist English Language Schools in Thailand (1998-99).

Samuel graduated with a Doctor in Ministry degree from the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies in the Philippines this month. He received bachelor's and master's degrees in religion from Spicer Memorial College (now Spicer Adventist University) in Pune, India, in 1995 and 1997, respectively.

He is married to Orathai Chureson, the Southern Asia-Pacific Division's children's and family ministries director. They have two children, Amanda, 12, and Sorawin, 10.

Samuel's six years of experience as executive secretary of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division gave him the opportunity "to observe and learn many things that will help his future leadership under the Holy Spirit's guidance," Wilson said.

"He is very spiritual, respectful, humble, and mission-minded servant leader whom God will use mightily as the Southern Asia-Pacific Division team and all members in that great division keep their eyes upon Christ as the Leader of the church," he said.

Wilson encouraged Samuel "to be strong in the Lord as he humbly moves forward with the work assigned to him."

"He will need to lean on Christ daily and claim the promise of James 1:5 every day just as I try to do," he said. The text reads: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (NKJV).

"It is only through God's wisdom that we can humbly and effectively work," Wilson said.

In addition, Wilson said, Samuel and his wife will need to make sure that their schedule includes appropriate family time.

"This is their first mission field as are our families for all of us," Wilson said. "Pastor Samuel does not have to do everything, and no leader can. He will certainly need to delegate many responsibilities and maintain a strong vision and evangelistic outlook in his leadership. I know God will guide him in doing this."