

Mission Accompaniment in South Africa (Brian E. Konkol)

The history of Christian missionary movements in South Africa began with the coming of Dutch settlers in 1652, French Huguenots in 1668, and Germans a few years later.¹ While numerous Church leaders were sent with intentions to serve solely alongside the white settler populations, the first European missionary sent to minister primarily among indigenous residents was a Moravian, George Schmidt, who began his work at Genedendal, about one hundred miles east of Cape Town.² The conflict between white “settler” and black “mission” churches immediately became a principal concern, as race relations emerged as a dividing factor among Christian believers. While a number of Church leaders attempted to affirm equality, numerous white settlers refused to accept this practice, as racial prejudice and the interest of labor and land clashed with theology. As a result, various Christian congregations allowed for racial separation in worship.³

In the midst of racial segregation and various forms of exploitation came small glimpses of equality and mutuality. For example, Dr. Johannes van der Kemp, of the London Missionary Society (LMS), arrived at Cape Town in 1799 and received numerous criticisms due to his “immoral” actions. Some LMS missionaries, including van der Kemp, were accused of immorality because they sought “to be relevant to the conditions and struggles of the...Africans”,⁴ instead of focusing their service upon the immediate desires of white settlers. While van der Kemp spoke in favor of keeping racial groups separate in worship,⁵ one can argue that “shades” of equality were accomplished.

In addition to van der Kemp’s unconventional activity, Bishop John William Colenso, the first Anglican Bishop of Natal, was tried for heresy due to accusations of “revolutionary and unpopular missionary practices”⁶. Colenso’s biblical interpretation, theological views, and outspoken attitude about the mistreatment of “African natives” created significant opposition from the High Church party in South Africa and in England. Colenso refused to reject African religious traditions, but instead integrate African traditional religion and Christianity into dialogue.⁷ Colenso collected numerous adversaries, for the South African bishops, headed by Bishop Gray, pronounced Colenso’s deposition in December 1863. However, while leadership succeeded in restricting Colenso’s ability to preach both in Natal and in England, they were unable to remove him from Episcopal office.⁸

Similar to van der Kemp, Bishop Colenso’s missionary activity was far from perfect, as “African natives” in his midst were often regarded as inferior, and as a result were not consulted on decision-making, financial, and administrative matters. In addition, racial segregation continued to filter through churches as white and black believers worshiped in separate facilities. Nevertheless, even in the midst of unjust activity, “shades” of equality were present in Colenso’s missionary activity, as seeds for a more diverse church were planted. Colenso’s campaigns revealed the racist foundation underpinning the colonial regime in Natal, and as a result, he made numerous enemies among the colonists and clergy. However, even in the midst of resistance, due in part to Colenso’s work, certain English-speaking churches became more multiracial in character.⁹

While examples of progress toward racial equality can be noted, racial division continued in the midst of missionary activities in the late 18th and early 19th century. Black South Africans had to choose between membership in “mission churches” (whose membership was wholly black but continued to be under the control of white missionaries and their mission boards in Europe or North America); “multiracial denominations”, which were largely of British origin and were

often regarded as worse than wholly black congregations; and "African initiated" congregations, which began as a result of black Africans separating from European domination. In June of 1906, *Christian Express*, a Church of Scotland missionary journal published at Lovedale, offered an editorial which articulated challenges which resulted from a lack of mutuality between racial groups:

It may be that the Missionary Churches have been slow to recognise that the Native (African) Church is quickly leaving its childhood behind, and is able to take upon itself an increased measure of self-control. It is conscious of new powers and is impatient of dictation. Because the parent has been slow to observe the development which was bound to come, and has not been quick enough to recognize the need of directing these new energies to work on useful and absorbing enterprises, the Native Church has in these separatist movements wrestled from the parent's hand what it regards as its rights, and has asserted its ability to manage its own affairs.¹⁰

While missionary activity in South Africa included numerous forms of misdeeds throughout the early 20th century, and while certain denominations were credited with theological justification for exploitation and segregation, the early years of Apartheid rule through the Nationalist Party in South Africa also saw an emergence of equality. A small number of Christian denominations developed as public voices against injustices taking place against the black South African majority. While numerous examples exist, one particular figure worth mention is Father Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican missionary priest working in Sophiatown (outside Johannesburg), who provided a passionate and courageous attack against the Apartheid regime. In 1956 Huddleston published "Naught for Your Comfort", which included stories of hardship faced by black South Africans in his parish. He concluded:

In opposing the policies of the present Government, therefore, I am not prepared to concede that any momentary good which might conceivably emerge from them is good. Nor am I prepared to concede that the motives which inspire such policies have any quality of goodness about them. For both the acts and the motives are inspired by a desire which is itself fundamentally evil and basically un-Christian; the desire to dominate in order to preserve a position of racial superiority, and in that process of domination to destroy personal relationships, the foundation of love itself. This is anti-Christ.¹¹

Over the course of thirteen years in Sophiatown, Father Trevor Huddleston emerged as a much-beloved priest and respected anti-Apartheid activist, earning him the nickname Makhalipile ("dauntless one")¹². He accompanied local communities, fought tirelessly against Apartheid laws, and as a result, in 1955 the African National Congress bestowed upon him the rare honor of "Isitwalandwe"¹³, at the famous Freedom Congress in Kliptown.¹⁴

While the Dutch Reformed Church continued in its public justification of apartheid (and while others continued support more privately, and yet many remained silent) through the mid and late 20th century, other denominations, mostly "English speaking",¹⁵ were increasingly prophetic in their witness, and as a result numerous foreign missionaries were removed from South Africa. After 1948, more equality in practice emerged as missionaries assisted with protest against the government, as churches spoke out against race classification; the Group Areas Act; the Immorality Act and Mixed Marriages Act, separate education, security bills and acts, and other forms of oppression.¹⁶ As the apartheid government continued its priority of dividing citizens based upon race, and because a growing number of churches understood their calling to social equality, conflict between church and state was often unavoidable.¹⁷

While more detailed accounts of church involvement in resistance to apartheid are found elsewhere, for the purpose of our gathering today, it is clear that shades of *accompaniment* – “walking together in a solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality” – can be found in the midst of the church’s activity. As is the case in any place and time, missionary activity was, is, and never will be “perfect”, for mistakes take place, and motives intended for good many be carried out in flawed manners. However, even in the midst of countless misdeeds, one can argue that “shades” of accompaniment, in the form of mutuality and solidarity between missionaries and the indigenous populations of South Africa, were an ongoing reality. To conclude that all European-led missionary activity in South Africa was unjust would be to ignore the various cases of individuals who learned to appreciate local cultures, advocate for equality, and more (albeit slowly) toward integration and shared leadership in the Christian Church.

Through ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches, whom paved the way for the “Programme to Combat Racism” in 1970, international Church bodies provided various forms of assistance to those in the resistance to Apartheid.¹⁸ However, in the mid-1960’s black South Africans continued a process of “breaking away” from European influence, in the sense of “black consciousness”, “black theology” and “black awareness”¹⁹. Speaking to these topics, Lutheran theologian Manas Buthelezi declared:

In a very real and special sense this decade marks the beginning of a “Black Renaissance”. Never before now have black people been so successful in retrieving the image of their blackness from the dung-heap of colour prejudice and a maze of statutes that make it difficult for the black man to be proud of his colour. Never before now have black people derived inspiration and strength, not in possessing military might, wealth or constitutional power – for all these are denied them – but in delving into the immeasurable resources of the liberating gospel and exploiting that which God has implanted in their souls.²⁰

While foreign missionaries may have possessed numerous positive intentions and helped create opportunities in the realms of education and evangelism, many blacks considered white Christianity as a form of European domination²¹. However, companionship and solidarity – which is now perceived as *accompaniment* – continued to exist. While numerous missionaries were often seen as insensitive to African culture, and some were used as agent of European colonial expansion, there were others depicted as “defenders of the blacks” and “critics of colonists”. Clearly, the “truth” of missionary history is complex,²² yet it cannot be denied that faithful missionary work took place in the midst of such challenging times.

In what could now be described as *accompaniment*, black theologians of the late 20th century did not only speak to blacks, but they also had a message for white Christians.²³ This “two-way highway” activity falls in line with what is now described as the mutual teaching aspect of accompaniment. In the midst of ongoing resistance to the Apartheid government, black theology was a powerful challenge to white Christianity, both in South Africa and abroad, and was seen as a catalyst for Christian renewal and change in society.²⁴ While white missionaries were long perceived as “teachers” and black South Africans as the “students”, both parties recognized the need for the roles to be reversed, which is a mark of mission as accompaniment. As Bishop Desmond Tutu declared in 1976:

We are involved in the black liberation struggle because we are also deeply concerned for white liberation. The white man will never be free until the black man is wholly free, because the white man invests enormous resources to try and gain a fragile security and

peace, resources that should have been used more creatively elsewhere. The white man must suffer too because he is bedeviled by anxiety and fear and God wants to set him free, to be free from all that dehumanizes us together, to set us free for our service of one another in a more just and open society in South Africa.²⁵

In light of Tutu's remarks, the Church in South Africa had radically changed, as black consciousness and contextual theology radically changed the ways in which white South Africans, as well as European mission companions, viewed their role in the South African Church. While European mission societies continued to wield an amount of control, especially financial, an increasing degree of "accompaniment practice" could be observed. As churches in South Africa struggled against apartheid through the late 20th century, an international ecumenical movement took hold. Apartheid was increasingly stated as heresy,²⁶ and European mission societies continued to support the resistance movement. As European mission societies increasingly realized that South African Christians must ultimately take control of their movement, a role of "leading" was increasingly changed into "accompanying".

A significant shift had taken place when in comparison to the origins of missionary activity hundreds of years before. Instead of "establishing" the Church, missionaries of the late 20th century became more involved with "accompanying" the Church. Instead of decision-making authority resting solely in the hands of foreign missionary boards, local churches – equipped with their own leadership, policies, and constitutions – took priority in their own mission and ministry. Rather than a "one-way" flow of resources and education, local congregations articulated "mission in reverse", and the need for Churches of the North to be enlightened. And perhaps most of all, instead of implanting the priorities of the European Church, local congregations in South Africa named their own concerns, which for many included the struggle against the Apartheid regime. While these shifts were by no means total, a substantial amount had taken place, thus creating a South African church which was increasingly independent.

In the years following South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, the practice of accompaniment continued to mature as foreign missionary bodies realized the important lessons which could be received from experiences of South Africans. Among other things, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission offered valuable insights for greater understanding the process of forgiveness and nation building. In addition, instead of looking to South Africa only for what it "needed", foreign missionaries could better look for "assets" to build upon. Also, instead of insisting upon "Western" forms of church structures and worship practices, missionaries began to understand the ways in which the Gospel message flowed through various forms of culture. And largely due to lessons learned from the anti-apartheid struggle, missionaries were reminded that mission and ministry was not solely centered-upon evangelism and church planting, but rather, it is holistic in nature, thus the need to consider social awareness, advocacy, and prophetic action. As a result of the South African church's willingness to put faith into action through protest against unjust regimes, foreign missionaries were lead to re-examine long-held intellectual separations between the physical and spiritual.

In addition to alternative understandings of Christian mission, the late 20th century experienced a massive shift in the "center" of Christian faith. In the year 1900, it was estimated that 87% of the world's Christians were in Europe and North America, yet at the turn of the 21st century 60% were in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.²⁷ As a result, in terms of statistics, Christianity is no longer a "European religion", and the gap is predicted to grow wider over time. By 2025, roughly two-thirds of all Christians are expected to be living in Africa, Asia, or Latin America, with Africa and Latin America having become the continents with the largest Christian

presence.²⁸ As Jan Pranger wrote: “What these numbers signify is that already at present and increasingly in the future a random sample Christian is not likely to be a privileged white Westerner but a poor Southerner of a different complexion”.²⁹ As a result of these realities, missionary activity in the 21st Century – in South Africa and throughout the world – will be much different from anything that has taken place in the past.

¹ De Gruchy, John & Steve de Gruchy (2005) *The Church Struggle in South Africa: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pg. 1

² King, Bernard (1967). *The Pear Tree Blossoms: The History of the Moravian Church in South Africa, 1737-1869*. Genadendal: Moravian Church Board.

³ Cf. Moorrees, Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, p. 595; the text of the Resolution is taken from “The Dutch Reformed Churches and the Non-Whites”, Fact Paper 14, July 1957, where the issues are also discussed

⁴ De Gruchy, John & Steve de Gruchy (2005) *The Church Struggle in South Africa: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pg. 11

⁵ De Gruchy, John & Steve de Gruchy (2005) *The Church Struggle in South Africa: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pg. 14

⁶ Hinchliff, Peter. *Church in South Africa*, pg. 71

⁷ De Gruchy, John & Steve de Gruchy (2005) *The Church Struggle in South Africa: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pg. 17

⁸ For additional reading, see: Draper, Jonathan A. editor (2003). *The Eye of the Storm : Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications

⁹ De Gruchy, John & Steve de Gruchy (2005) *The Church Struggle in South Africa: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pg. 22

¹⁰ Wilson and Perrot (eds.), *Outlook*, pg. 377

¹¹ Huddleson, Trevor (1956), “Naught for your Comfort”. London: Fontana

¹² “The Life and work of Trevor Huddleson”, including biographical notes, speeches, and information is found at: <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/solidarity/huddlebio.html>

¹³ The Isitwalandwe Medal is an award given by the African National Congress (ANC). Isitwalandwe means “the one who wears the plumes of the rare bird.” It was customarily given to the “bravest warriors”, those distinguished by their leadership and heroism

¹⁴ The Trevor Huddleson CR Memorial Centre was founded in 1999. Additional information can be found at <http://www.trevorhuddleston.org/>

¹⁵ De Gruchy, John & Steve de Gruchy (2005) *The Church Struggle in South Africa: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pg. 84: “The designation “English-speaking churches” is a somewhat clumsy and untheological description. However, in exploring the churches response to apartheid it seems impossible to avoid the phrase or find a satisfactory alternative. “English-speaking churches” does not refer in any primary sense to some common doctrinal or liturgical commitment and practice, nor does it include all those churches in the country who use English as their main language or communication and worship. Rather, the designation refers to those churches of British origin that have grown together over the years as a result of the ecumenical movement and their common attitude toward the racial situation and apartheid in particular. They have not claimed this title for themselves. It was given to them by the mass media, politicians, other churches, and the populace in general. The English-speaking churches were regarded as those who opposed the racial policy of the Nationalist government.

¹⁶ Cawood, Leslie. (1964) “The Churches and Race Relations in South Africa. Johannesburg: Institute of Race Relations.

¹⁷ Cf. *Apartheid and the Church* (1972), Spro-cas Church Commission Report. Johannesburg: Spro-cas. Pg. 6

¹⁸ De Gruchy, John & Steve de Gruchy (2005) *The Church Struggle in South Africa: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pg. 126

¹⁹ Justo Gonzales has described a fourth “self” of the “Three-Self Movement (self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propogating) to be that of “self-articulation”.

²⁰ Buthelezi, Manas. “The Challenge of Black Theology”, an unpublished, mimeographed paper.

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- ²¹ Comaroff, Jean & John Comaroff (1991) *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- ²² Wilson, Monica (1976) *Missionaries: Conquerors or Servants of God*, an address published by the South African Missionary Museum. Kingwilliamstown: South African Museum, 1976.
- ²³ Moltmann, J. (March 1979) "The Liberation of Oppressors", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 26. Carl H. Pinnock, "A Call for the Liberation of North American Christians", in Carl E. Armerding (ed.), *Evangelicals and Liberation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), pg. 128.
- ²⁴ De Gruchy, John & Steve de Gruchy (2005) *The Church Struggle in South Africa: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pg. 178
- ²⁵ Tutu, Desmond (July 1976). "God-given dignity and the Quest for Liberation in the Light of the South African Dilemma", *Liberation*, the papers of the Eighth National Conference of the SACC.
- ²⁶ The Lutheran World Federation, which met in Dar-es-Salaam in 1977, adopted a motion declaring *status confessionis* in South Africa. This notion meant that the Church could no longer regard apartheid as sinful or immoral, but it had publicly rejected it as heresy that stood against the core of the Christian faith. For additional reading: "From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation" (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), pg. 71-72.
- ²⁷ Barrett, David B. (ed.), George Thomas Kurian (ed.), Todd M. Johnson (ed.). (2001) *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World, Volume 1: The World by Countries: Religionists, Churches, Ministries*. New York: Oxford University Press
- ²⁸ Jenkins, Philip (2002). *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pg. 3
- ²⁹ Pranger, Jan "Lutherans in the World Church: An Overview", pg. 11. Aageson, James and Arland Jacobson (eds), (2008) *The Future of Lutheranism in a Global Context*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers