

ESSAY REVIEW

A CENTURY OF METHODISM IN ZIMBABWE

A Century of Methodism in Zimbabwe is a welcome addition to our somewhat slow-growing literature on the church in Zimbabwe.¹ It aims at documenting 'the contribution of the Methodist Church to the spiritual and the material development of the people of God in Zimbabwe' (p. vii) and opens with a brief but well-thought-out introduction by one of Zimbabwe's Vice-Presidents, Joshua Nkomo. Short as it is, this history of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe covers a wide range of topics including the church's confrontation with Ndebele and Shona traditional culture, its leading personalities from the missionary era to the present, its efforts at educating Africans, some of its dilemmas during the turmoil of the liberation struggle, its theology, and its vision for the future.

One of the most interesting features of this book, and one of its greatest strengths, is the fact that, with the exception of Zvobgo's chapter which is exclusively based on archival research, the chapters are written by Methodists who draw freely upon their personal experiences and on oral interviews as well as upon written (both published and unpublished) sources. Furthermore, although it is intended as a commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of Methodism in Zimbabwe, it is far from being a mere eulogy of the Methodist Church and its achievements. The chapters by Banana, Manyoba and Chirisa are very critical of the cultural and political policies of the Methodist Missionary Church. Indeed, the criticisms amount to telling the church why it was not as successful as it should have been. They also indicate that some of the errors committed by the missionaries and other church leaders have not yet been amended and that they require urgent attention if the Methodist Church is to make any progress in an independent Zimbabwe.

A detailed examination of the contributions by Zvobgo, Manyoba, Banana and Chirisa, which are the most interesting chapters and which form the core of the book, will illustrate these points. In addition, the limitations of these chapters reflect the limitations of the book as a whole.

Zvobgo's contribution is the product of meticulous research by an acknowledged authority on the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. His chapter, by far the longest in the book, is elegantly constructed out of material extracted from the minutes, reports, and official correspondence of the church's governing bodies. Not only is the account delightful reading, but it highlights the major issues in the development of the Methodist Church in this country.

Zvobgo begins with a brief narrative of the coming of the Methodist missionaries to Africa and then to Zimbabwe. He then briefly describes the missionaries' efforts to commend the Word of God to the Shona by translating the Bible and the Methodist Hymn Book into their language.

¹ C. S. Banana, *A Century of Methodism in Zimbabwe, 1891-1991* (Harare, The Methodist Church, 1991), xii, 234 pp., Z\$27.00.

The healing mission of the church is also considered, particularly the training of African nurses and the building of a modern hospital at Waddilove Mission. The main focus of the chapter is, however, on what Zvobgo considers to be the greatest contribution of the Methodists to this country's development: the education of Africans.

The history of the Methodist educational programme is traced through the century, focusing on Waddilove Mission in Mashonaland and Tegwani Mission in Matabeleland. Waddilove began very humbly in 1900 offering lessons in scripture, agriculture and building to six students but by 1948 it had 340 boarders, 20 theological students, and 300 day-scholars in its primary schools. Although the theological college was moved to Epworth in 1953, as was the domestic-science course for girls, this loss was more than compensated for by the expansion of the agricultural training programme. When teacher training was phased out in 1979 the dominant preoccupation of the mission became secondary education for both sighted and blind students. Similar developments took place at Tegwani, which, like Waddilove, laid an emphasis on education in the domestic sciences for girls and on academic subjects and teacher training for men. As far as secondary education was concerned, in 1951 Tegwani became the second school after the Seventh-day Adventist mission at Solusi to admit students for the Junior Certificate. Development at Tegwani was uninterrupted, its enrolment steadily increased and its examination results remained excellent until the Mission was forced to close down as a result of forcible recruitment (including abduction) of schoolchildren by ZIPRA forces.

Although he is very impressed by the Methodists' record in the field of education, Zvobgo does not completely lose sight of the purely religious activities of the Methodist Church, singling out the following topics for brief scrutiny: the rules and regulations governing church members; the training of ministers; and various church organizations and movements. The statistical data with which Zvobgo illustrates the growing size of the church's responsibilities over the years adds greatly to the authority of his narrative. However, Zvobgo treats these very important issues, issues which I believe had the greatest religious and intellectual impact on the church and its mission among the Ndebele and the Shona, only from the viewpoint of the church leaders. While I acknowledge that this is inevitable given the nature of his sources, it would have been more interesting if the *Ruwadzano/Manyano* women, members of the Men's Christian Union and of the youth movements had been allowed a voice in this account, to tell us what it was (and still is) like to live under the strict church regulations against polygamy, lobola, beer-drinking, burial customs and so on. Such information would provide us with concrete evidence of some of the ecclesiastical policies and practices which have served to hinder the progress of the church in this country. In addition, Zvobgo's account leaves us with more questions than answers; for example, he informs us that the Methodists provided their women students with an education based on domestic training. At a time when gender issues are topical, it would certainly have been interesting to learn a little more about parental and societal reaction to the education of females, as well as what employment opportunities were available to women.

Manyoba and Banana's chapters explore the Methodist Church's confrontation with the rich traditional culture of the Ndebele and the Shona, the church's role in the politics of colonial Zimbabwe, and its difficulties during the liberation struggle. As both authors have the advantage of a long and intimate association with the Methodist Church they are able to rely on personal experience in addition to oral and written sources.

Manyoba examines how the Methodist missionaries — who were closely associated with the British settlers but who thought of themselves as having a special call to win the souls of Africans for the Kingdom of God — confused their evangelical work with European cultural imperialism. For example, the missionaries seemed to accept the colonial policy of segregation as the natural order of things; even in the urban areas where Africans and Europeans lived side-by-side the Methodist Church provided separate ministers — who studiously refrained from exchanging pulpits — for each community, separate ministerial training programmes, separate health facilities and separate schools. Similarly, cultural imperialism was expressed quite clearly in missionary attitudes towards African marriage customs, beer-drinking and entertainments as well as religious beliefs and customs: they were all condemned as being unchristian and church members were debarred from participating in them. The burden of these regulations fell disproportionately heavily on women members, many of whom were wives of polygamists or were married to non-Christians and were required to brew the beer for, and to participate in, African religious ceremonies. Aware of the impossibility of shielding their flock completely from unchristian influences, the missionaries encouraged church members to live on mission farms where 'heathen' practices were discouraged. This proved to be a disaster as African families came to live on the farms less for reasons of religious conviction than for material benefit.

Another mistake made by the missionaries, Manyoba asserts, was that they made no serious attempt to understand African religious beliefs and practices, especially those related to illness, death and funeral and memorial ceremonies but simply condemned and outlawed them. As a result many African Christians oscillated between the two religious systems. This problem is still with the church and has assumed serious proportions with the resurgence of traditional religion after Independence. Manyoba draws our attention to the legacy of colonial Christianity with which the church in Independent Zimbabwe must come to terms if it is to survive and grow.

Banana also regrets that the missionaries did not take into account African cultural, political and religious systems but simply brushed them aside as unchristian and by so doing missed an invaluable opportunity to build the Methodist Church on a solid foundation. Banana's account, however, deals rather with the role of the Methodist Church in the UDI period. The White Methodist missionaries did not condemn the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965, while their Black colleagues seethed with anger at what they thought to be the church's compromise with the White government. Feeling on both sides ran high after the decision by the World Council of Churches (supported by the Methodist Church of the

United Kingdom) to support financially the humanitarian programmes of the ZAPU and ZANU forces. White Methodist ministers in Zimbabwe protested vehemently against this decision while at the same time clamouring for the appointment of chaplains to the Rhodesian Security Forces. Caught between these diametrically opposed views and intent on maintaining church unity, perhaps at all costs, Revd Andrew Ndhlela, the first African Chairman of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, resorted to fence-sitting, which was severely deplored by the radical African ministers as a compromise. As Banana points out, the liberation struggle exposed deep-seated racial divisions in the church, and attempts to 'paper over the cracks' by compromise did not help the situation. The Methodist Church was plunged into worse difficulties when Banana and many lay people decided to disassociate themselves from the prevaricating leadership and threw their support behind the liberation forces.

One of the strengths of Banana's contribution is the detailed research, much of which was undertaken in the Methodist Archives in London, underpinning his statements. This research invalidates the accusation that in this work Banana has simply poured out his bitterness at being forced to resign his ministry. It is also a good example of how sound history can be written by a participant using both subjective and objective evidence.

My major criticism of Banana's chapter is that it reaches no definite conclusion. Even though he mentions the attitude of the Methodist Church to ZANU(PF) and its support of the ZAPU-ZANU unity negotiations, we are told next to nothing about how the Methodist Church pulled itself out of the mess created as a result of the liberation struggle. My experience in the Evangelical Lutheran Church leads me to believe that the damage inflicted by the liberation struggle and the civil war in Matabeleland on the physical infrastructure, the moral integrity, the credibility and the unity of the Methodist Church cannot be easily and quickly repaired. Moreover, a discussion of post-war repair and healing would have served as a neat and appropriate transition to Chirisa's chapter which deals with future programmes in church leadership training, formal education, health, stewardship, church autonomy and evangelical work.

Chirisa's main concern is that the Methodist Church must recognize its past errors and seek to correct them in its future operations. Of particular interest in his contribution is the brief section on evangelism and 'church planting', which involved an eight-year plan (1983-1991) under which church leaders and some lay people were given intensive training in evangelism and pastoral care. They were then to return to their preaching stations to pass on their newly-acquired skills. A second, ten-year, plan was due to be inaugurated in 1991 and was supposed to move away 'from large evangelistic missions to personal witnessing' so that every Methodist would 'become a personal witnesser' (p. 185). This plan also envisaged that the number of preaching stations would be increased from 1 300 to 2 000, the ultimate intention being to build a network of churches throughout the country so that members would not have to walk long distances to gather together for worship. The church was confident that it could mobilize the manpower and other resources necessary for this task.

These plans sound very interesting and the activities most praiseworthy; however, since Chirisa has not attempted an evaluation of the plans, or an analysis of the success (or otherwise) of the eight-year plan, one is left with no option but to describe them as noble dreams.

This book contains a tremendous amount of information on the Methodist Church's official policies regarding the provision of education and health services to the African population of Zimbabwe, its view of African culture, its organizations and evangelist movements, its role in colonial politics and in the liberation struggle, its future programmes, and so on. It is, therefore, essential reading for both Methodist Church leaders and lay people as they seek to understand their past and plan their future. In addition, this book has lessons not only for the Methodists, but for all Christian denominations in this country. Its main limitation, as I stated before, is that it is written 'from above' and does not include the grassroots point of view.

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