

Remembering Issues in Africa

Ted Esselstyn

Professor, Mount Vernon Nazarene College; Mount Vernon, Ohio USA
Formerly Africa Regional Education Coordinator, Church of the Nazarene

Five periods can be observed in the century of the Church of the Nazarene's work in Africa:¹ First, 18 years of intense evangelism, emphasizing discipling converts from witchcraft and ancestral worship before membership.² Second, 17 years of testing during the Great Depression and World War II, when the Church was grounded in prayer and holiness doctrine. Third, 23 years of rapid advance into new areas and development of traditional district and local structures.³ Fourth, 12 years of transition, dividing the expanded field and structurally changing from elected to appointed leaders. Fifth, 21 years of restructure and outreach, discipling converts after membership.⁴ Only a few issues influencing the character of the Church and its future can be addressed here.

Whom to evangelize? Government regulations preventing denominations from working in the same area and missionary concern to preach where no one had heard dominated the choice and placement of mission stations⁵ and churches. Denominational emphases were ignored. Missionaries entered wherever there were “open doors” — from Cape Verde in 1900 and Mozambique in 1925 to the present.⁶ Missionaries also tried to “preach to the masses” — to reach the multitudes. Today, reaping the harvest is the primary thrust.

How to evangelize? During the first four periods the procedure was: Preach for salvation, disciple converts individually, encourage sanctification, baptize believers, and take them into membership. Initially few converts knew Christianity, and catechism (indoctrination) classes lasted up to two years. In time, some districts reduced this to six months. During the fifth period pastors were encouraged to receive members after just twelve lessons — “catch, string, then clean.” Has the rapid influx of many, only briefly indoctrinated, independent-church pastors and their congregations into the denomination endangered its holiness character? If so, how is this problem to be rectified?

Witchcraft, Demons, Ancestral Worship, and Polygamy: National leaders addressed major conflicts with traditional African culture during the first and second periods, developing practices still followed in southern Africa: Charms, witchcraft and ancestral worship were rejected; men who practiced polygamy could not be full members (despite Old Testament precedents). Because these issues are not directly addressed in the *Manual*, there

¹ Cape Verde is over 100 years old but only became an official part of the Africa Region in 1980. On the continent itself, the Church is 91 years old.

² Harmon Schmelzenbach era. He died as a result of malaria in 1928.

³ Dr. David Hynd dominated the compassionate ministry during this era. Dr. William Esselstyn was the elected Field Superintendent from 1941 to 1967.

⁴ Dr. Richard Zanner was appointed the first Region Director and spearheaded the outreach to Africa until 2000 when Dr. Fred Huff was appointed.

⁵ E.g., Endzingeni, Swaziland; Tavane, Mozambique; Blouberg, South Africa; and Chipoko, Malawi.

⁶ Hindsight has revealed that most preachers came from the small rural farms where youth escaped indenture by professing a call to preach.

are no uniform procedures, and procedural challenges regularly arise.⁷ Should the issues of all areas of the International Church be addressed in its official documents?

Ministerial Preparation: Two concepts of ministerial preparation have been in effect. The first programs — in Swaziland, Cape Verde,⁸ and Mozambique — required those professing a call to demonstrate this by preparation equivalent to national educational averages. Ministers, thus, became leaders in their communities. After the 1952 merger with the IHM, in Swaziland and among South African black people, only a call was required. By 1968 not one black Nazarene elder had finished high school, although many lay members held multiple degrees. Ministerial leaders were hard to find. Massive efforts were undertaken to upgrade the education of ministers. What is / should be the relationship between education, call, and holiness ministry?

Church Structure: North American Nazarenes cherish democratic procedures. At the same time hierarchical elements exist in our Church polity. Africa has long operated under chieftains with counselors. Early mission programs operated democratically. The present structure is largely hierarchical (with some exceptions in district and local structures). To what extent is democracy essential to the holiness message and Protestant character of the Church?

Compassionate Ministries — schools, clinics and hospitals — have been an integral part of our character from the beginning, as well as a source of controversy. During the Great Depression and WWII, when preference was given to compassionate ministries, competition for finances and personnel led some to believe that compassionate ministries were detrimental to Church development, which took precedence over meeting needs. Outreach in Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe excluded compassionate ministries. Later, compassion became a separately funded arm of the Church; world evangelism funds were used only for church work, narrowly defined, including ministerial education. Primary schools, high schools, higher education, and medicine were not part of the primary mission of the Church. Social transformation projects were irrelevant to this mission — a liberal departure from the gospel. A changing world has now highlighted such projects as means for entering evangelism-restricted areas. Is compassion integral to our mission, the gospel, discipleship, and holiness?

Apartheid: The roots of this ugly issue lie in the master / servant structure of Europe. Calvinist South African pioneer farmers considered Bantu God-ordained perpetual servants. The British held the black man at arms' length. The National Party formalized relationships into Bantu, Coloured, and White categories.⁹ There was to be no social contact across these

⁷ In Swaziland a Nazarene MA student at the University of South Africa wrote in a 1990 draft of his thesis that Polygamy was accepted by his Church but not allowed in Swaziland because David Hynd opposed it. Professors could find nothing in Nazarene church documents to refute his statement. They requested me to read the paper.

⁸ Cape Verde had the highest standard – completion of university entrance requirements, and they have the highest level of recognition in their country.

⁹ For clarity I am using the South African terms “Bantu,” meaning people in Zulu, for the indigenous tribes of Africa; “Coloured” for mixed race or non-Africans not of European descent; “White” for those of European descent, predominantly British, Dutch or French. One among many strange twists – Japanese were classified “White” while Chinese were “Coloured.”

boundaries. Under the British, neighbors frowned upon missionaries who met Bantu or Coloured at the front door. Under the Nationalists, it became an offense. Expatriate violators were deported.

Nationalists enforced puritanical moral standards, opposed communism, and promoted church work. The vast majority of Nationalists were devout Reformers. As the philosophy developed, each Bantu tribe was encouraged to follow their traditional way of life, and all education was state controlled. There were many abuses.

Nazarene response to Apartheid was mixed. Government support for church work and opposition to atheistic communism, the American concept separating Church and State, and biblical injunctions to obey the law, led Nazarene missionaries to defer to apartheid laws. Many white Nazarenes, even missionaries who viewed it as a wrong, supported the basic separate-development concept. But it was a government / society issue beyond the concern of true Christianity. Not surprisingly, church growth in Bantu South Africa was slow. The Church's relationship with the Coloured and Indian people was different, and that part of the Church became strong.

When should a holiness church get involved in social and political issues?