

# Mission in Africa

DANIERI D. NSEREKO

47

The practice of sending missionaries, mainly from the United States and Europe, to the "far lands" of Africa needs a thorough reappraisal — and the sooner the better. This proposal may sound extreme, but it is borne out by a consideration of some of the traditional missionary attitudes and of the present social, economic, and political conditions in the colonial and ex-colonial territories of Africa.

## I

As an Adventist, I can but praise the Lord for the fine work accomplished by missionaries in Africa. Wittingly or unwittingly, however, missionaries have been (or at least have seemed to be) associated with the colonial establishment.<sup>1</sup> They have tended to equate Western culture with Christianity, and in some instances they have actually worked hand-in-glove with the colonizers. For example, when W. H. Anderson, an early Adventist missionary to Africa, was looking for a site for a mission station, he was advised by Cecil Rhodes' colonial agent at Kolomo, Zimbabwe (or Rhodesia), "to go about a hundred miles farther, northeast, to the district of Chief Monze, of the Batonda tribe, a wily savage who had raised an insurrection the year before." Why did the colonial agent send Anderson to Chief Monze? "It would be good to have a missionary at hand watching him; for, as Cecil Rhodes had said, missionaries were much better soldiers for keeping the natives quiet, and, for the government, cheaper. So toward Monze's country they traveled."<sup>2</sup>

The missionaries' social and political outlook has tended too often not to be different from that of the colonial administrators; both groups have practiced racial and social discrimination against the indigenous peoples. Even today the Adventist churches in Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia, and South

Africa are designated on racial lines: white, colored, Indian, and Bantu — in that order.<sup>3</sup> Also, although Helderberg College is a church institution funded mainly by the Trans-Africa Division of Seventh-day Adventists, the Africans who constitute more than ninety percent of the total division membership are not admitted as students.

Missionaries' reports are still replete with condescending remarks about the people among whom they work. Thus in many Adventist publications in North America one still finds such terms as "natives," "primitives," and "savages" used to describe nonwestern peoples. Indeed, a recent article refers to "half-naked savages" of "wild and primitive" New Guinea — who were nevertheless humane enough to love the visiting missionaries "dearly."<sup>4</sup>

48

Too often Adventist missionaries still do not seem to be sympathetic with the colonial peoples' aspirations for freedom from colonial domination and exploitation, for recognition of their human dignity, and for the self-confidence which colonial rule has sapped from them.<sup>5</sup> When almost all the Christian churches in Rhodesia recently joined in a resolution opposing the "land reform" law introducing the pernicious system of apartheid (which the United Nations General Assembly has condemned as a crime against humanity), the Adventists did not participate. The same unsympathetic attitude is implicit in an article that glibly states that "hundreds of Portuguese have been cruelly assassinated by people promising independence to Angola"<sup>6</sup> — without mentioning the thousands of Angolans who have died from the bullets, bombs, and napalm of the Portuguese military forces, or the hundreds of thousands of villagers who have been forced to flee their homeland because of the colonial war,<sup>7</sup> or the thousands of Angolans who are in Portuguese jails without even a modicum of the due process of law.<sup>8</sup> Unlike other Christian missionaries, moved by the plight of the Angolan people, who work and pray for a change in Portuguese colonial policies, too many Adventists seem contented simply to say that "for Angola the time is favorable right now. . . . We should go there and preach Christ without being busy with political questions."<sup>9</sup>

## II

Although a great majority of the world community has been agitated and outraged by the colonial and racial situation in southern Africa, it is paradoxical that the Adventist church has remained, on the whole, woefully indifferent or at least conspicuously silent — as if no high Christian principles were involved. "We have not been as willing to fight for brotherhood as we

have been to attack the tobacco industry and to battle with lawmakers who hint at Sunday legislation. Though we have often been unafraid of crowds when principle was at stake, we seem to have been jittery when the principle of human brotherhood was at stake, and the church has lagged behind.”<sup>10</sup>

Christ must surely be preached at every opportune moment, but the church must not appear to be collaborating<sup>11</sup> with the discredited authorities in colonial territories.<sup>12</sup> Jesus of Nazareth must continue to be the example even in these matters. He began his ministry at the height of Roman imperialism, yet he did not in any way collaborate with the imperial regime. On the contrary, he declared that he had been sent “to proclaim release to the captives” and “to set at liberty those who are oppressed.”<sup>13</sup> Although he did not agitate as some Jewish politicians would have had him do, he was sympathetic to the plight of the people.

It is pertinent here to mention that in its momentous Declaration on Human Relations of June 16, 1971, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists stated, *inter alia*:

We recognize that prejudice and discrimination are sins. These sins both grind down the victim and scar the soul of the person guilty of them.

We further recognize that too often there has been a failure to display a reconciling and redemptive spirit; that too often as individuals and as organizations and institutions we have not only fallen behind the Christian ideal but have been negligent in seeking to correct injustice. This must no longer be so; therefore

*We pledge ourselves to work at all levels for the realization of the principles as exemplified in the life and teachings of Christ [emphasis added].*<sup>14</sup>

Rather than side with colonial and racial regimes, therefore, the Adventist church should come out forthrightly and unequivocally against the apartheid system of South Africa and Rhodesia and against the oppressive colonial policies of Portugal. And it should give every possible moral and even material assistance to the struggle for liberation in the Portuguese “overseas provinces” and in the other subjugated territories of southern Africa.

For the church should be just as concerned with the individual’s social well-being as it is with his physical health. The World Council of Churches has set a good example in deciding to allocate \$200,000 to “organizations of oppressed racial groups and to victims of racial injustice.” This decision should not be dismissed as simply another “unholy flirtation with the world,” or as a “manifestation of theological bankruptcy.” It should be seriously viewed as a reflection of a genuine commitment to the Christian ideals of brotherhood, love, and human dignity and equality.

By opposing the oppression of racism and colonialism, the Adventist church would not at all violate its long-cherished tenet of political neutrality. Rather, it would be following the example of the brave churchmen who dared openly to oppose Hitler's naziism and Mussolini's fascism. Indeed, it would be following Ellen G. White and the other Adventist pioneers who unflinchingly opposed slavery and even aided escaping slaves in violation of the law. Thus the church would be concretely reaffirming its commitment to Christian principles and, at the same time, would "not leave itself open to criticism that it and its members are largely indifferent to many of the great questions that agitate our age."<sup>15</sup>

### III

50

Tremendous changes have taken place in Africa over the past decade. Colonial rule has given way to independence; the family of nations has witnessed, within this short period, the birth of more than forty new nations, all of which are represented at the United Nations. The people in these countries have taken it upon themselves to determine their own destinies, and have launched ambitious economic, educational, and social plans. The colonial administrators have disappeared from the scene; the expatriates who continue to work in these countries are now servants of the new governments. Even foreign business has found it necessary (if only for public relations purposes) to hire nationals for executive positions in their operations in these countries. All these things are part of the process of decolonization: the elimination of foreign domination from all spheres of human endeavor and the restoration of the confidence, self-respect, and pride in national cultural values that had been negated by colonialism. Similar changes will inevitably take place also in Angola and the other territories still under alien or minority-racist control.

As leadership and responsibility in all phases of life thus devolve on the nationals of these new nations, the church and its institutions must not lag behind, or else complaints of "religious colonialism"<sup>16</sup> will be voiced by ever-increasing numbers of enlightened young Adventists. The long period of "tutelage" must come to an end; the churches must become national in character.<sup>17</sup> Missionaries should serve only in advisory or specialist and coordinating roles as they help the local people to administer their own churches, fields, and educational and medical institutions.

But the question arises: Have the local people been trained and prepared, during the long period of "tutelage," to assume positions of responsibility? Lamentably, this has not been the case. In fact, Africanization has been

much slower in the Adventist church than in other churches operating in Africa. As a result, a good number of African Adventist university graduates tend to be cynical or even cold toward their religion and to resent the prolonged presence of foreign missionaries in some areas of the church's work.

This has happened because education of the Africans — particularly higher education — has sometimes been discouraged. The situation in some places is described in a book by Tom Mboya:

There were, also, some churches — for instance, the Seventh-day Adventists — which thought it immoral to give Africans any academic education, and believed all we should learn was the Bible from the first page to the last, and perhaps how to do some woodwork and manual labor. Until a few years ago the Seventh-day Adventists thought it unchristian for an African to want to go to high school and college. I know of many Africans who were openly condemned in church for trying to get further academic education. In some cases Africans who defied the church on these matters lost their teaching jobs or other employment. As a result, there are today very few highly educated Africans among the Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>18</sup>

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that although Adventist medical institutions have been in operation for many years, at few of them will one find a national holding a high position of professional responsibility (except as nurses). There are instances where ambitious and well-intentioned young Adventists have been "advised" by missionaries not to seek the education necessary for these professional positions. Others, on their own, manage to attain this education (perhaps at Adventist schools in North America or Europe) and want to work for the church; but they find the conditions of employment such that it is impossible for them to do so. Indeed, the situation became so bad in Kenya that the church recently became the subject of debate in the Kenya parliament and in the press; and the government directed the church to correct the inequities within a specified time.<sup>19</sup>

#### IV

There is really no "lack of personnel" to work in Adventist institutions in Africa, as is sometimes suggested.<sup>20</sup> For the most part, Africans can do the work themselves. What is needed is encouragement and assistance for some of them to acquire the necessary training at an Adventist institution in the United States, Europe, or elsewhere. Thus the "foreign missions" in Africa can be developed, with deliberate speed, into largely self-sufficient units.<sup>21</sup>

This view is shared by many well-meaning Adventists both in Africa and in the United States. Frederick Diaz, for example, has sagaciously opined:

"[The] main thrust of our missionary enterprise today should be the training of national workers to assume leadership at all levels of our work in their own countries. Some missionaries would still be needed, but only in the highly specialized areas. We must not assume that ours is solely an American church and that the work will not succeed unless the Americans learn a foreign language and serve abroad. In view of the growing antipathy for Americans in many countries and the constant danger of our missionaries being expelled because of tense political situations, we must think in terms of restructuring our whole missionary enterprise. The national worker, and not the foreign missionary, is today the key to success abroad."<sup>22</sup>

This approach, moreover, is economically sound. For it is less costly to train a national who is likely to work in his own country permanently than to continue the traditional "From Home Base to Front Line" business of sending Americans and Europeans to Africa for varying periods of time.

What is being urged here, furthermore, does not detract from the Adventist church's internationalistic or universal character. To the contrary, this quality is enhanced, since true internationalism is based, not on paternalism or dominion by one racial or national group, but on the equality of all peoples within the whole church. To be sure, Adventism is an American religious movement in the sense that the "Adventist dollar" is mostly an American dollar, and hence there is a legitimate American interest in the way the dollar is spent. But this interest must be accommodated without sacrificing the principles of human equality and mutual respect.

There can be no doubt that the part played by American and European missionaries in the spread of the advent message in Africa is inestimable; the medical, educational, and welfare programs in many instances have been "manna from heaven," and their overall contribution to the development of the Adventist church in Africa has been invaluable. Missionary work is a command of Christ himself, and an essential part of Adventism. Unfortunately, since man is inherently fallible, some mistakes have been made in the execution of Christ's command. This of itself is not important. What is important is the recognition of the mistakes — and timely rectification.

The humble observations and suggestions made above are a concerned layman's views as to how the mistakes of the past can be rectified; how the divine command may be practically, efficiently, and equitably implemented — particularly in a complex and ever-changing situation of a continent jealous of its lately reacquired political freedom and human dignity, and yet friendly to anyone who is willing to assist in the consolidation of these

gains; and how church policies and practices, in general, may be brought in line with its Declaration on Human Relations, and thus contribute to the fulfillment of the Adventist mission in Africa.

#### REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Tom Mboya, *Freedom and After* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1963), pp. 10-20.
- 2 Arthur W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1962), vol. 5, pp. 15-18.  
In this work, which is the most authoritative available treatment of Adventist church history, the chapter dealing with Africa is not entirely fair or accurate in some important respects related to the current political situation. Historical events in southern Africa, for example, are recounted in such a way that the European colonizers (such as Cecil Rhodes' South African Company), who by brute force and treachery invaded, occupied, and raped the Africans' homelands, seem to be the heroes and the ones who "established order" in these territories. On the other hand, the African kings and chiefs who resisted these colonial invasions in defense of their own sovereignty and national patrimony are presented as villains, as "wily savages" leading "insurrections" and "rebellions." Colonialism and Christianity are made to appear to be one and the same thing, with Adventist missionaries playing the role of colonial policemen.  
Although the work was revised in 1962, no attempt was made to dissociate the church from the patently untenable practices of the past, or to modify the objectionable terminology referring to Africans. Can a student in an Adventist school in Africa be expected to accept these distortions as the "history" of his own church in his own land?
- 3 Samuel Monnier, I visited Angola, *Review and Herald* 147:2-5 (April 30, 1970).
- 4 John H. Hancock, On the march for God, *Signs of the Times* 97:2,30 (July 1970).
- 5 Mboya, p. 10. "In no case can I recall a missionary — Catholic, Protestant, or any other — fighting back and denouncing the colonial regime and the social set-up, or trying to create among Africans a new spirit of pride and confidence in themselves. Rather, they undermine this confidence by a negative attitude."
- 6 Monnier, p. 2.
- 7 In 1964 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that by then there were about 150,000 Angolan refugees in Congo-Kinshasha alone. See United Nations Document A/Ac. 96/227.
- 8 See John Carey's account on the work of the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Southern Africa, in *United Nations Protection of Civil and Political Rights*, pp. 95-126.  
Paragraph eight of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2547A (xxiv) of 1969 called upon the government of Portugal to observe the terms of the General Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, and the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of August 12, 1949. Portugal turned a deaf ear to this call. See the United Nations Secretary General's Report to the Twenty-fifth Session of the General Assembly, in *Documents of the General Assembly*, A/8057, p. 4.

- 9 Monnier, p. 5.
- 10 Charles D. Brooks, What will it take?, *The Journal of Adventist Education* 32:5-7 (April-May 1970).
- 11 Monnier, p. 5, reports that Portuguese authorities in Angola asked the Adventist church to move into areas vacated by other Protestant missionaries who had been expelled from the country.
- 12 See the United Nations Resolution 1654 (xvi) of 1961 regarding Portuguese colonial policies.
- 13 Luke 4:18.
- 14 *Review and Herald* 147:20.
- 15 Reo M. Christenson, The church and public policy, *Spectrum* 2:23-28 (Summer 1970).
- 16 See the memorandum submitted to the General Conference session of 1970 by the International Layman's Action Committee for Concerned Adventists.
- 17 Mboya, p. 13. "Many people want to see the church Africanized as rapidly as possible, in pace with the civil service."
- 18 Mboya, pp. 11-12.
- 19 It was this incident that precipitated the detachment of the East Africa Union Mission from the Trans-Africa Division, which has its headquarters in Salisbury, Rhodesia.
- 20 Monnier, p. 5.  
Nor is it difficult to understand why the Kendu and Ishaka Hospitals in the East African Union should be threatened with closure for "lack" of doctors. See *Review and Herald* 147:32 (December 31, 1970).
- 21 The new missions concept of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is instructive. According to a spokesman quoted in the *Review and Herald* 147:23, there has been a shift from "the colonialistic and paternalistic attitudes of sending people who build dependence upon the missionary to sending highly trained specialists who train the citizens to fill the needs of the countries involved."
- 22 Letter to the editor, *Review and Herald* 148:15 (February 4, 1971).