

An extract from an address given at a Seminar on AFRICANISATION in Natal. This was transcribed from a tape recording of the address and apology is made for incorrect spelling of names, etc. [1980

Since the arrival of Methodism on shores of South Africa the Church has tried consciously to address its message mainly to the black people - even Barnabas Shaw came to Western Cape in response to a request by the Methodist soldiers' in the first army of the occupation of the Cape around 1795 - 1802. He is on record as having believed that the wider mission of Methodism was potentially in the black areas - hence his indomitable evangelical thrust amongst the Hottentots. For the sake of the work among these people Barnabas Shaw even dared to start his work with neither permission nor the approval of Lord Charles Somerset, the then Governor of the Cape.

In the Eastern Cape W. Shaw saw the area of his work amongst the indigenous people of the then British Kaffraria - and it was his determination to work amongst the black people that sparked off his vision of mission stations stretching from the Eastern Cape to Natal. The work of the Methodist Mission is commendable indeed and will continue to be an indictment to our own Church whenever she wants to opt out of active involvement with the people in what they encounter in their daily lives in this land. This said, though, does not in any way exonerate even the Methodist Missionaries from the failure of almost all missionaries of admitting little, if any, cultural value in Africa and of denying that Africa had a religion after all. Amongst Africans themselves, a number of outstanding men offered themselves for the work of the promulgation of the gospel through the Methodist witness - among the Baralong in Botswana Mulina (?) is reputed to have had an outstanding ministry. Samuel Matabate (?) needs to figure prominently in the minds of black Methodists when we recall our Fathers in this Church. Or when Watkins writes about Matabate (?): "In Sekekuneland he laboured for 9⁹ years unknown, unrecognised, unvisited and unpaid by any Church - and yet, remaining faithful to Methodism which he picked up in Natal, he patiently witnessed for Christ in the midst of distress and persecution or as bravely as any of the early Christians did."

Yet it was almost after 70 years of active Methodist witness in South Africa that the first 4 Methodist Ministers were ordained - after receiving their theological training in Healdtown in 1867 - 1870. They were Charles Pamla(?), James Luana(?), Charles Luana(?) and Boyce Mano(?). The Rev. William Taylor, after listening to the addresses of these men, and also of Joseph Tele(?) and William Shaw Khama, is said to have exclaimed: "These are the men to evangelise Africa. Mission cannot permanently depend on foreign brains, foreign devotion, and foreign money. The work must be done by the Paul's and Appolos' rising within the national Church. Men to whom the native superstition, habits and mode of thought are quite familiar."

Understandably, though, these men were sons of the soil of Africa. But despite that, their methodology of proclamation was patterned on that of their white missionary counter-parts. Charles Pamla, after a moving service by William Taylor, is on record as having

as having approached Chief Mgangaliswe(?) of the Thembu's, with his brother Sigwati(?) and spoke to them thus: "You know that Pato(?) and Kwabe(?) were great chiefs. Khama(?) was a boy and had no people. All three had an offer of Christ, but only Khama accepted Christ. And what was the result? Kwabe died a miserable refugee and got the burial of a dog. Pato spent many miserable years as a prisoner on Robben Island and died neglected. Khama remained true to God and now all the Amaxhosa people belong to him." This was a daring African preacher wanting desperately to embrace Christianity and make it his own truth but the limitations were far too great. He had no option but to use the white missionaries' language and approach. He had to use the incentives that the missionaries used to entice the people to believe in the gospel they were bringing.

This approach cannot be forgiven a contemporary black minister who has a wealth of history to learn from. The answer to the question: "Whither Methodism" must be directed first and foremost to the black Methodists. And it is to them that I will try to direct my answer first.

The Methodist Church of South Africa is our own Church given to us as a gift by God. In it are a multi-coloured people with roots from many continents. But it is in Africa. And it needs to be seen, this our own Methodist Church, to be in Africa. There are two main areas that have to reflect an African image if we are to boost the confidence of ordinary men and women that this Church is an African Church. That this Church is their Church. And those two areas are: (1) The structures and the leadership has to reflect an African image. (2) The liturgy of our own Methodist Church now must reflect an African liturgy. Let us therefore look briefly at the structures and leadership of our Methodist Church as we have it.

I. STRUCTURES AND LEADERSHIP

Twenty three years ago in 1957 the black people in the Methodist Church of the then South Africa indicated clearly that they wanted to see effective black leadership within the Methodist Church of South Africa. Voting for the President of Conference in 1957 a few votes were cast for the Rev. Seth Mokitini to be President of our Church. You all can recall the reaction of our Church then - that it rather tried to divert the black aspirations for leadership by creating semi-leadership posts of deputy chairman. And this came into effect in 1958. Even before the appearance of Seth Mokitini's name on the Conference Presidential ballot it had long been evident that there was leadership material that could be effectively utilised amongst the blacks within this our Church. As early as 1927 the Rev. Z.R. Mahabane had been appointed President of the African National Congress and no-one can argue that men of that calibre were not ripe for the Presidential chair of our Church.

Since 1957 we have seen a somewhat checked progress towards giving blacks effective leadership positions. The Methodist Church of South Africa has been on this soil for not less than 160 years now, yet all it can boast of as far as black leadership is concerned is 4 black Presidents, 6 black Chairmen at different times, 3 black C.E.Y.D. Secretaries, 2 black Missionary Department Secretaries and committees that have in most cases been pathetically overloaded with whites. The tendency has been

to appoint to these committees blacks who are acceptable to whites, who can articulate white feelings and could therefore mean no discomfort to our white brothers consciences. Sometimes we have blamed our black general secretaries and presidents for being utterly ineffective in responding to the black needs. Yet we have continued to turn a blind eye to the racial composition of the committees that sets and determines our policy. We need to realise that if our interest is more than exchanging a white skin for a black skin, we have to make sure that our men whom we put in leadership positions are not frustrated by white-dominated and white-controlled background bodies. In fact, hand in hand with placing our men in ineffective positions we need to overhaul the entire structural machinery. Lets face it, our entire structure in the Methodist Church of South Africa is an imported structure. A recent post-S.A.C.L.A. Methodist Consultation meeting at Ubombo observed that our structures robbed the leadership of effective authority and as a result there is no rapport between the leaders and those who are led. The initial step which we must take as black Methodism to repair this anomaly is to throw the Church back to the people. It is their Church and let us help them to feel that this Church is theirs by making them work out how they want this Church to be. Our structures have been imposed on us and the recommendation of the commission to consider the decentralization of authority, chaired by Donald Cragg at the moment, will still make very little sense and impact because the people have not been given a chance to say what they want for the structures of the Church to be effective and to relate to their lives.

What we need to do also is to re-educate the black people on the structures of our Church. We've got to work out an outline for the alternatives and then we must encourage some form of conversation amongst ourselves about what alternative structures there are that we can adopt for our own Church.

In the process we will not ignore the episcopal structures simply because they are unacceptable to the white Methodist and they are history that stretches to the conflict in Europe. We must examine them especially in the light of their place in the African Independence Churches and we must see if these do not offer us anything that will meet the sighs of African spirituality within our own beloved Church. We dare not discuss Bolaji Idowu the Patriarch of the Methodist Church of Nigeria, simply because those whose allegiances to English Methodism regard him as having betrayed the Methodist heritage. No white person will do this job for us because they are all closely tied to John Wesley - they are all closely tied to the culture that determines the tone of J. Wesley. It is our souls as black people that must be satisfied and this will happen only when we cast off our sloth as black people; when we decide to work and not expect so and so and so to do the work. It will be when all of us as a community, when jointly as black Methodists, we join hands and say "now is the time to make the Church our own Church." And it is only when we have the correct leadership - I am frustrated by the structures - that this Church of our Fathers will begin to take steps with what we want for a Church in Africa.

Mgojo alone in the midst of 10 Chairmen - useless, meaningless. If we appoint next year a black Secretary to go and take over the important post at the M.C.O. of the Secretaryship of our Church, what do we expect the man to do? Because the structures that matter, the things that are going to determine and control his thinking are still in white hands - are still embedded in Methodism as we have it in Britain.