

PERSONAL PIETY AND SOCIAL WITNESS:

A CASE STUDY IN ZIMBABWE

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Churches are tempted to be self-centered and self-preserving, but are called to be serving and sharing. Churches are tempted to be self-perpetuating, but are called to be totally committed to the promises and demands of the kingdom of God. . .

-- the mission of the community in Christ is to prepare itself and all people for the coming reign of God by the proclamation of the good News;

-- the structures at the service of this community must be dynamic, flowing and flexible, allowing for the creativity of all members of the community and the emergence of all kinds of ministry;

-- the ongoing process of formation has to be based on the daily living experience of the people for the full realization of their humanity;

-- this necessarily requires that the church be politically and socially aware of the struggles of the oppressed and involved in them;

-- consequently the Word of God must be read from the point of view of the oppressed. . .

Evangelism is true and credible only when it is both word and deed; proclamation and witness.¹

To those of us from a Wesleyan heritage attending the WCC's Melbourne Assembly, these words struck a resonant chord. The call to a holistic evangelism enunciated here is consistent with John Wesley's teachings and his guidance given to Methodist bands and classes.

Not all persons of Wesleyan heritage, however, have affirmed such a gospel. Fifteen years ago I served as Organizing Secretary for a national Year of Evangelism in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Our materials emphasized personal witnessing in an approach called "New Life for All". Simultaneously I served as Urban Secretary of the National Christian Council in a program

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of joint action for mission that included numerous social justice concerns. In succession, two Methodist pastors came to my office. One eagerly sought for materials on personal witnessing but chided me for getting involved in political matters. The other came for social action guides but spurned the helps for faith sharing. To each I responded: "You are not true to your Wesleyan heritage!"

The genius of John Wesley was not merely in the creative organization of the people called Methodists into self-reliant "little congregations" under local leadership. The ecclesiolae in ecclesia (little churches within the church) remained vital insofar as they combined concerns for personal piety and social witness.

It is the thesis of this paper that such a balance, when combined with a theology of holistic evangelism and the dynamic of "little congregations" under trained local leaders, provides a dynamic model for Methodist revitalization in our own day.

This case study draws upon data from two continents and two historic periods--eighteenth-century England and twentieth-century Zimbabwe in Africa.

Underlying the analysis is the concept of "elective affinity" developed by the famous German sociologist, Max Weber. For Weber ideas, including religious ideas, often gain affinity with the interests of certain social groups and thereby enter into the processes of social action and social change.² This theory may help to explain why Methodist class meetings in two distinct historic periods and cultures functioned not only in renewing the church as an institution, but also in the transformation of the larger society. Weber's argument is akin to that of Elie Halévy, the French historian, who argued that the Wesleyan revival saved England from a violent revolution like that of neighboring France.

In the analysis that follows we shall consider three questions:

- 1) Does a close affinity exist between the Wesleyan marriage of personal piety and social witness, and the values of African cultures, in particular those of the people of Zimbabwe?
- 2) Was this linkage of personal piety and social witness strong in Methodist bands and class meetings during John Wesley's lifetime?
- 3) How is this linkage actualized among Methodists in Zimbabwe today?

A Fitting African Theology

In sharing our anxieties and our love,
Our poverty and our prosperity, 3
We partake of your divine presence.

These words are but one of many affirmations by the Revd. Canaan Banana, first black President of Zimbabwe, that personal piety and social witness must be combined for Christians.

The elective affinity of biblical concepts of justice and traditional African values has been articulated clearly by President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia. Writing on "Faith and values" in his winsome Letter to My Children, Kaunda confesses:

The African-ness which has its roots in the soil of our continent. . . is basically a religious phenomenon. . .

For me, God is more a Presence than a philosophical concept. I am aware, even in solitude, that I am not alone; that my cries for help or comfort or strength are heard. Above all, my belief in God gives me a feeling of unlimited responsibility. What a terrifying thing that is! I am guardian rather than owner of such powers and talents as I possess, answerable for my use of abuse of them to the One who loaned them to me and will one day require a full reckoning.⁴

Throughout his writings Kaunda displays a rejection of every dualism that would separate the spiritual and the physical. African like Hebrew thought emphasizes the unity of personality.

Zimbabwe more than any other African state has clergy-politicians who have articulated the relationship between personal piety and social justice. Bishop Abel Muzorewa, like Revd. Banana a Methodist, and the

first African Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, in reflecting on his conversion in his autobiography, writes:

The basic commitment to seek for wholeness in life which I made at Old Umtali that day is, I believe, consistent with our traditional Shona philosophy of life. In it we centre on the belief that life is a whole, and that it can be lived to the fullest when every thought, action and human relationship is in conformity with our spiritual values.⁵

When the Bishop entered politics and became both President of the United African National Council and honorary Commander-in-Chief of the liberation army, this linkage between prayer and action had deep existential significance. Like Elijah he found assurance of God's care in prayers answered in the midst of struggle. Out of the depths of virtual house arrest in Maputo, Mozambique in 1975 he wrote of singing with his family this Shona hymn:

In the past your people were persecuted, God;
 But you saved them with your power. . .
 They were arrested and imprisoned;
 You released them and cared for them.
 They were evicted from their homes and accursed;
 But you comforted them and they continued to love you.
 Some were laughed at and beaten up;
 But you, God the Father, you strengthened them.
 GREAT GOD, GREAT GOD, FATHER OF US ALL.⁶

Twelve years earlier the Revd. Ndabaningi Sithole, a Congregational pastor, had entered politics and become National Chairman of the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union. In his keynote address to the First Assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches, Sithole wrote concerning the link between piety and politics:

If a preacher, pastor or priest who had especially deepened his religious faith, was moved by the Holy Spirit to give himself to a truly sincere witness for truth, for justice among men and for love of neighbour, he was always considered as a dangerous man, as a revolutionary.⁷

In the years that followed, Sithole was to find this link between faith and political action put to the test as he spent more than ten years in jail as a political prisoner.

From Sithole to Muzorewa to Banana, we discern a direct and consistent line of thought that rejects any relegation of Christian concern to "spiritual affairs". In his major paper for the WCC's Melbourne Assembly, President Banana interpreted Christ's message of "good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18) as follows:

The need of facing this issue in dualistic terms is typically western. . . If western theologians are unable to see that the spiritual message of the Gospel is contained in the historical temporal realities by which Jesus was surrounded, that is their problem, not ours. The poor of the world know very well what Jesus is saying. That is why they find in him the plentitude they are looking for. They will never accept any longer the disincarnate "spirituality" of western Christianity, "scornfully superior to all earthly realities."⁸

Does a close affinity exist between the Wesleyan marriage of personal piety and social witness, and the values of African cultures, in particular those of the people of Zimbabwe? Space does not permit a detailed examination of traditional African values to determine their relationship to biblical concepts.⁹ It is sufficient for the purpose of this analysis to note the consistent affirmation by leading Christians active in politics that there is for them a unity between personal piety and the struggle of social justice. Later we shall consider how these norms relate to the developing concern for holistic evangelism in the "little congregations" of Zimbabwe Methodism.

Faith and Action in Wesley's Class Meetings

Is President Banana's indictment of Western spirituality accurate or a caricature? More specifically, did the early Wesleyan bands and class meetings promote a personal pietism that eschewed involvement in social justice concerns? Or was a linkage achieved between personal piety and social witness?

Wesley's own stance concerning "solitary religion" was clear and straightforward:

Solitary religion is not to be found there (in the religion of Christ). 'Holy Solitaries' is a phrase no more consistent with the Gospel than Holy Adulterers. The Gospel of Christ knows of no Religion, but Social; no Holiness but Social Holiness.¹⁰

Although Wesley had participated in devout cells since his Oxford Holy Club days, he developed bands and classes in the growing Methodist societies to meet the practical need for Christian nurture among growing numbers of the people called Methodists. The bands were small cells with an average membership of six. Participants, either men or women, gathered for confession, prayer, and encouragement as early as 1739. By 1842 the Bristol society, having reached 1,100 in number, needed new smaller groupings. Thus the class meeting evolved. At first merely a system of visitation by a class leader, they soon evolved into group meetings in homes.

The Wesley class meeting provided for many persons in the growing mining and industrial communities a place to feel at home. The basic structure resembled that of a family, with the class leader as father figure. Henry Longden, an early class leader, described the role as follows:

He ought to be a father in Christ; a man of sound and deep experience. . . He ought to lead the people forward, to find out their hindrances and besetting sins. . . set before them their high calling, and continue his anxious labours till he delivers them up to the Great Shepherd.¹¹

Gloster Udy, in a detailed analysis of the Wesley class meetings, concludes that four general personality needs were fulfilled for class members: new experiences, security, a response of empathy,¹² sympathy and love from others, and recognition of one's own value. Such personal fulfillment enabled the class to be a dynamic force in the lives of members.

Although the classes focused on intense personal interaction between group members, a stimulation of social concern took place. This may appear to be more of a by-product than a direct result of the class meetings. The fact is that most class members lived side by side with persons facing acute hardships (loss of life, health, housing, employment, of freedom if imprisoned, and, above all, of dignity and self-respect). The classes began to serve as channels for arousing social concern and for relief activities. This included mutual aid and loans to members. Later the larger autonomous welfare

societies developed. Thus it was that class members first visited the sick in their homes, helped to found the first free dispensary in London. From visits to prisoners emerged movements for prison reform. Beginning with concern for children and their welfare, expressed in class meetings, Methodists moved to found both Sunday Schools and day schools. Even adult education was a class leader's concern.

Udy describes this dynamic as a "field of power" in community life:

Individuals personalizing the new values, began to create the awareness of an awakened conscience, which was impelling them to live and act according to new standards.¹³

This "field of power" began within the band or class meeting. The nucleus of vital interpersonal relationships created there enabled participants to bring the totality of their life under the close scrutiny of loving friends. Wesley admonished the class participants to guide and strengthen every member through both the highs and lows of life: You are

taught of God not to forsake the assembly of yourselves together, as the manner of some is, but to instruct, admonish, exhort, reprove, comfort, confirm, and in every way build up one another.¹⁴

The resultant sharing, confession, discipline and participation had therapeutic value. Later products of this school of Christian living went on to form benevolent societies, trade unions and political parties to express their concerns for social justice. Snyder is accurate in his assessment:

Wesley learned what radical Christians today are beginning to stress: a really effective struggle for social justice begins with building a biblically faithful community of Christian Disciples.¹⁵

Through Prayer to Action in Zimbabwe

Turning to Wesleyan influences in Africa it should be noted that missionaries from Great Britain exported two forms of the "little congregations" that proved effective--the class meetings and the women's societies (called Manyanos in South Africa and Ruwadzanos or Rukwadzanos in Zimbabwe, literally "the fellowship"). Transplanted into African soil, they flourished at a time when their counterparts in Britain often had lost their earlier vitality.

Even more remarkable was the flourishing of such groups among churches founded by American Methodists, for the class meetings died out in much of America prior to the development of mission fields in Southern Africa in Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia). Is this further support for the "elective affinity" these? I believe so.¹⁶

Vital class meetings and Manyanos developed first in South Africa among Methodists. B.A. Pauw noted in 1960 that about 25% of all African Christians claimed Methodist affiliation. Methodism appealed through important roles given to lay leaders and small intimate groups:

"These factors. . . are inherent in the typical Methodist pattern of Church organization with its 'class' system making for the forming of small regularly co-operating groups of church members, and its range of lay preachers . . . and Class Leaders offering extensive opportunities for leadership. The acceptability of the 'class' system, and the extensive mobilization of the lay element in spreading the Gospel, combined with the Methodist ardour for 'winning souls', have probably contributed to the remarkable strength of Methodism."¹⁷

In fact, the Methodist models of "little congregations" under lay leadership appealed to many Africans frustrated by clerical domination within churches controlled by whites. Many broke away to form African independent churches. Bengt Sundkler, in his pioneer work on this remarkable phenomenon, asserts that the Methodist pattern of lay leadership and class organization has been imitated by many other churches.¹⁸

While men assumed major leadership as local preachers and class leaders, Methodist women found their needs fulfilled primarily through the Manyanos. Mia Brandel-Syrier found in South Africa that the Manyano developed from a deep religious need for fellowship and sharing. They grew rapidly until 'now they are certainly in the country, but also in town, the most powerful voluntary association cutting through traditional tribal groupings.'¹⁹ Her description of the organization of class meetings within the Manyanos replicates closely 18th century descriptions:

. . . The Manyanos are subdivided into different classes or groups, each under a special 'class-leader'. These class-leaders receive special training and are elected by the so-called 'Leaders meeting'. They must be persons who 'have spiritual feeling and sufficient Christian experience, they must know the scriptures and show fruitful life'. The classes, each under their own leader, meet weekly after the Sunday service, and receive instruction in prayer and Bible reading as well as 'admonishment'. The leaders, as we have seen, are also responsible for the collection of Church dues and other contributions. The system seems to work well, and the position of class leader is highly coveted amongst the women.²⁰

In Zimbabwe these women's fellowships (Ruwadzanos) linked with British Methodism followed closely the patterns of the Manyanos of South Africa. Those of the sister Methodist church linked with the United Methodist Church in the USA, however, evolved differently. Among United Methodists women participated separately in class meetings and women's fellowships, with the latter the more significant grouping.

The Rukwadzano rweWadzimai (RRW) of the United Methodists in Zimbabwe began as late as 1929 (in a church founded in 1896). At first it was a worshipping fellowship of the wives of ministers, ministers in training, and pastor-teachers. Although outwardly a sister organization to the Women's Society of Christian Service of American Methodism, it developed its own character, responding to the felt needs of Zimbabwe women. In doing so it drew deeply from the well of revivalism introduced by American missionaries.

Farai David Muzorewa, in his perceptive study of the RRWs, notes that most leaders claimed that the Holy Spirit was the driving force behind the birth and early growth of the movement:

Prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit became the central norm of the group's worshipping life. . . . Members constantly give testimonies to the 'miraculous' powers of healing, exorcism, and conversion, present as Rukwadzano women pray together.²¹

The climax of each year's program is the annual campmeeting--a five-day outdoor revival meeting attended by up to 10,000 persons (men and women, but under RRW leadership). The spirit of these gatherings has many parallels with American frontier campmeetings of the 19th century--spirited singing, forceful evangelistic preaching, and prolonged periods of prayer, testimonies, and counselling following the services. Gifts of the spirit and informal leadership emerge during all-night prayer sessions seeking individual conversions, healings, or exorcisms.

Alongside praise and prayer the women emphasize instruction in the Christian faith and life. They intersperse prayer services at the campmeetings with periods of teaching, often on the Bible or on family relationships desired in the Christian home. Weekly meetings include interpretation and moral exhortation concerning the rules of the society which are designed to build up a good Christian wife and mother.²²

Visitors note strong charismatic and pietistic elements which have developed to meet felt needs among Zimbabwean women. Another powerful attraction is the ability of the RRW to fulfill important personality needs, closely paralleling those described by Udy for Wesley's class meetings--the needs for sociability, status, security, and approval.

Investigating the RRW in Mutare (formerly Untali), Zimbabwe's third largest city, I was struck by the number of women who sought Christian marriage after common-law marriage and the birth of children primarily in order to qualify for membership in the Rukwadzano. Why? On the level of personality

and social analysis, the answer can be found in the way the RRW fulfills the following basic social needs:²³

1. Sociability. For women migrants to town and for those lacking the support of extended family members while living there, the RRW functions like a kinship group providing friendship, affability, and companionship. Often members form deep personal friendships with daily interaction like that of kinswomen in a rural village.
2. Status. Dressed in their distinctive uniforms, church women in Zimbabwe present a striking appearance at weekly meetings and revivals. The common uniform is a social leveler in which differences of education, income or social class are immaterial. The prayer or testimony of the uneducated grandmother is judged to be as efficacious as that of a schoolteacher.
3. Security. Times of personal and family crisis can be lonely and difficult in town for persons separated from the support network in the rural home village. The RRW has provided for their women members the emotional and financial support at times of death, sickness, or economic privation traditionally given by kinfolk.
4. Approval. Amid the pluralism of values evidenced in an urban township the RRW functions as an island of stability setting and maintaining standards of behavior for its members.

The rules, in addition to prohibitions on beer brewing and use of tobacco, include others against "arguing, fighting, and the use of 'evil medicine'." As important as the formal rules, however, is the system of informal control over behaviour that takes place as members interact frequently, sharing their frustrations and temptations and encouraging one another in love.

Thus far our analysis of the RRW has focused upon its dynamic in meeting the felt needs of individual members--needs which for a first generation urban dwellers are parallel to those expressed by members of Wesley's first bands and class meetings. But the society as a national organization for women has responded also to wider community needs. Muzorewa in 1975 wrote concerning them:

Today there is a new dynamic in the United Methodist Rukwadzano. Without repudiating former emphases on spirituality, order and discipline, the group has accepted new responsibilities to meet needs arising in the changed social structures of the modern world.²⁴

Concerned at limited opportunities for continuing education for young girls, the RRW in 1967 pledged \$4,400 of their savings to help establish a girls' high school. When the government turned down their request they used the money to establish a small domestic science program at Sunnyside, south of Mutare. Later it developed into a government-approved high school for girls. Seeking to develop human dignity and pride among school-leavers and unwed mothers, the RRW launched training programs at five church centers in 1971 in weaving, rug-making, sewing, and pottery-making, and a more intensive residential course at Nyakatsapa, utilizing the unused buildings of a former language school for missionaries.

During the same period the RRW moved toward political activism. Camp-meetings after 1964 added information sessions on current social issues facing the nation. Members in uniform risked arrest as they protested in 1964 the deportation of Bishop Ralph Dodge, and in 1970 the banning of Bishop Abel Muzorewa from most rural areas. During the years of the liberation war, RRW members gave covert assistance to guerrilla fighters, as well as overt help to many victims of the conflict, especially those placed in "protected villages" by the white authorities and refugees in towns.

Concerning this shift of emphasis Muzorewa has written:

Today the Rukadzano women have moved away from that pietism in which Christians are enjoined to accept passively their lot in life as 'the Will of God'. The new social concern which has replaced it, however, unlike that of many African secular protest movements, is built upon a strong faith in the power of prayer to guide Christians into effective social action.²⁵

A parallel "elective affinity", as yet undocumented, is taking place in class meetings in Zimbabwe. In the past they did not function as a primary reference group or as "little congregations". A change occurred, however, during the liberation struggle wherever church worship services and other meetings were suspended or banned due to the conflict. Then class meetings flourished as house churches. In one district a new ritual of foot-washing was introduced as a means of linking those separated by the conflict. Each village sent a representative to pray with the pastor in voluntary exile at the church center. The foot-washing symbolized their caring for one another and the 'sacrament' was later shared in each class meeting upon the representative's return.

Conclusion

In this paper I have endeavored to demonstrate a creative model for holistic evangelism combining concerns for personal piety and social justice. Recent trends in ecumenical Protestant and Roman Catholic thought, as well as that increasingly among evangelicals, stress the imperative of relating the Gospel message to social realities of poverty, injustice and powerlessness. This is not a new priority, as a study of Wesley's holistic approach suggests.

The temptation remains, however, to institutionalize the church's response. A fundamental character of the missionary enterprise has been to conceive of the Church as a highly organized institution with a specialized ministry, specialized buildings, church headquarters, hospitals, schools, etc. The strengthening of ecumenical and para-church organizations has not reduced dependence on this bureaucratic model. This has been characteristic of those concerned about world evangelization (e.g. The Billy Graham Association, Campus Crusade, World Vision, etc.) as much as for those concerned about social justice issues.

Meanwhile at the grassroots level significant "little congregations" are engaged actively in outreach and ministry to the felt needs of their neighbors. At their best they combine concerns for personal piety and social justice at the local level. They are called by various names: house churches, basic Christian communities, and independent churches. Wesley's class meetings and their modern-day parallels, including the women's fellowships and class meetings of Methodists in Zimbabwe, are models worthy of study and emulation. Others also desire a holistic approach to evangelism, freedom of the Spirit, local autonomy, and lay leadership.

NOTES

1. Your Kingdom Come: Report on the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, Melbourne, Australia, 12-25 May 1980 (Geneva: WCC, 1980), pp. 217, 216-17, 218.
2. See From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, Translated and edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1946), pp. 62-63.
3. Canaan Banana, The Gospel According to the Ghetto (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977), p. 17.
4. (London: Longman, 1973), pp. 17, 18.
5. Rise Up and Walk: The Autobiography of Bishop Abel Tendekai Mizorewa, edited by Norman E. Thomas (Nashville: Abilmon, 1978), p.22.
6. Ibid., p. 191.
7. Drumbeats from Kampala: Report of the First Assembly of the AACC.
8. Your Kingdom Come, pp. 109, 110.
9. For further study see J.S. Mbiti, New Testament Eschatology in an African Background (London: OUP, 1971) and African Religions and Philosophy (London: Heinemann, 1969).
10. Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems, published by John and Charles Wesley, 1739, pp. VIII-IX. Quoted in E.R. Taylor, Methodism and Politics, 1791-1851 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1935), p. 103.
11. Henry Longden, Life of Henry Longden (3rd American edition; Baltimore: Plascitt & Co. 1828), p. 47. Quoted in Gloster S. Udy, Key to Change (Sydney: Pettigrew, 1962), p. 37.
12. Ibid., pp. 46-52.
13. Ibid., p. 94.
14. The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley. Collected and arranged by S. Osborn in 8 vols. (London: R. Needham, 1868-70), I, p. XXIII.
15. Howard A. Snyder, The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 1980), p. 165.
16. In his Boston Ph.D. dissertation entitled "The Role of the Methodist Class Meeting in the Growth of an African City Church: a Historio-sociological Study" (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1967) Jud Nordby describes in detail the process of adaptation by Methodists in Luanda by which class meetings became vital house churches. Organized like villages along tribal lines, they effectively nurtured both spiritual and social needs of migrants adjusting to life in a large city. During the war of liberation (1961-75) the class meetings remained vigorous when public services and church building was severely restricted by the Portuguese. Today most of the class meetings described by Nordby in 1967 have evolved into self-supporting congregations.
17. Religion in a Tswana Chiefdom (London: International African Institute, 1960), pp. 225-26.
18. Bantu Prophets in South Africa (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948), p. 137.

Notes (cont.)

19. Black Woman in Search of God (London: International African Institute, 1962), p. 16.
20. Ibid., p. 80.
21. "Through Prayer to Action: The Rukwadzano Women of Rhodesia," in Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa, ed. by T.O. Ranger & John Weller (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 258.
22. See Muzorewa, Ibid., pp. 263-4 for details.
23. Norman E. Thomas, "Functions of Religious Institutions in the Adjustment of African Women to Life in a Rhodesia Township," in Focus on Cities, edited by H.L. Watts (Durban: Institute for Social Research, University of Natal, 1970), pp. 282-90.