

The origins and early development of Scottish Presbyterian mission in South Africa (1824-1865)

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Abstract

This article traces the origins and development of the Scottish Presbyterian mission in South Africa through its Scottish antecedents to its actual establishment in South Africa in 1824 until the end of the first phase of the mission in 1865. It begins by examining the Scottish context, the contribution of voluntary societies and the “Disruption”, both of which had serious implications for missionary growth. It then moves to South Africa and examines the birth of the mission through mission stations, institutions and the participation of black people.

The origin of the Mission in Scotland

The Reformation

The Preface to the Scots Confession (1560) states clearly, “And this glad tidings of the kingdom shall be preached through the whole world for a witness to all nations, and then shall the end come.” The Confession closes with the prayer, “... let all the nations cleave to the true knowledge of Thee” (Cochrane 1966:163, 184). Clearly, it was the intention of the nascent reformed Scottish church that mission to the world *was* a priority. However, for more than two centuries, this did not materialise. The severe shortage of ministers may have been responsible, in part, for this state of affairs as well as the internal political situation in Scotland. While Ross (1986:33) acknowledges the insignificant missionary impulse and indifference on the part of the established church from the 16th century Reformation up to the late 18th century, he claims that mission has always been integral to the life of Christianity “despite its high and low points”. Let us consider the course of events that led to mission work becoming a reality

Prelude to Action

- The secular context

It was during the 18th century that Scotland began to experience substantial change in society. The Industrial Revolution led to increasing urbanisation, population growth, scientific discoveries (Hobsbawm 1962:46), democratic universities (Hobsbawm 1962:45; Devine 2011:30-31), political reform and the ongoing effects of the highland clearances (Mackie 1964:315-318). In terms of the Scottish diaspora, of which the missionary movement was a part, Thomson has claimed, “Of all the peoples of the United Kingdom it is the Scots’ contribution to the empire that stands out as disproportionate. They were the first peoples of the British Isles to take on an imperial mentality and possibly the longest to sustain one” (2008:51).

But it is impossible to refer to the ethos of the Scots without taking account of their religious values. Devine (2011:191) counters a false view that the influences of the churches was declining by the 19th century: “In fact, far from religious erosion, the Victorian era [1837-1901] saw quite a remarkable and hitherto unprecedented fusion between Christian ethos and civic policy.” And this ethos was fuelled by evangelicalism which was to be a powerful contributing factor to the “Disruption” in 1843: “It was evangelicalism above all which cemented the relationship between religion at home and the overseas missions” (Devine 2011:192).

- The ecclesiastical context

In 1796, a proposal was presented to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to begin overseas missionary work. Despite strong support, the proposal was defeated on the resolution:

To spread abroad the knowledge of the Gospel amongst barbarous and heathen nations seems to be highly preposterous, in so far as philosophy and learning must in the nature of things take the precedence: and that, while there remains at home a single individual without the means of religious knowledge, to propagate it abroad would be improper and absurd (du Plessis 1911:182).

And this in spite of an earlier decision to encourage the collection of funds for work among American Indians. Du Plessis (1911:182) attributes the formation of voluntary missionary societies to this disinterest on the part of the church. This is true of the genesis of the Scottish mission.

However, Hewat (1960:2) points to the poverty of the Scottish nation rather than disinterest as the reason for lack of action in this regard. This is supported by the further decision of the General Assembly to pray that God's promise be fulfilled "in giving His Son the heathen for His inheritance" though it was deemed highly inexpedient at that time to accord such ventures financial support. It further agreed that it would "embrace with zeal and thankfulness any future opportunity of contributing by their exertions to the propagation of the Gospel of Christ which Providence may hereafter open" (Hewat 1960:6). Those who were motivated to inaugurate a world mission approach therefore had to find a way to do this outside the formal structures of the church. Hence, the growth of voluntary societies.

The voluntary societies

Bosch (2011:327) argues that voluntarism, which influenced the development of missionary societies was the result of "the Spirit of enterprise and initiative spawned by the Enlightenment". Their underlying ideology was that of "social and political egalitarianism" (Bosch 2011:328). Voluntary missionary societies developed in Europe and in the USA. They were essentially laypersons' organisations (Ross 1986:38), interdenominational (at least at the beginning) and were "humanitarian societies" (Hewat 1960:8). "This Protestant form of organisation – free, open, responsible, embracing all Classes, both sexes, all ages, the masses of the people – is peculiar to modern times, and almost to our age" (Beaver RP [ed.] in Walls 1996:242). Women played a vital role in these societies and found a place here "far earlier than they could decently appear in most other walks of life" (Walls 1988:151 in Bosch 2011:328) to the extent that they were appointed as missionaries on their own merit. Pre-eminent among these in the United Kingdom was the London Missionary Society (LMS) formed in 1795. Hewat (1960:8), notwithstanding what is said above, claims that it was because of the inability of people to stimulate the churches' interest in foreign mission that these societies emerged as a purely voluntary activity. Yet, Walls claims that missionary societies developed because of the organisational and operational inability of the churches. They had no "machinery ..., to do the tasks" (Walls 1996:246-7). In this way they may be considered subversive (Walls 1996:249). And so missionary agencies frequently took the form of voluntary societies (Walls 1996:260).

Following the General Assembly's decision of 1796, the Scottish Missionary Society and the Glasgow Missionary Society were formed and took up the cause of foreign missions. It was committed Christian women and men who supported these societies and they came, in large part, from the lower middle and skilled working classes which also provided many missionaries (Ross 1986:38). Women not only had a role but a place in the leadership of such societies (Walls 1996:250,253). They had been influenced by the mid-eighteenth century Evangelical Revival (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:42) which had stimulated an increased awareness of sin and a "joyful realisation of forgiveness" through God's grace in Christ" (Burleigh 1960:309) and had given a fresh lease of life to the churches as social and political concerns became matters for Christian concern and action. Sadly, Burleigh does not even accord the missionary societies a clear mention in his *Church History of Scotland* despite their significant achievements. Ross (1986:33) also argues that the growth of the modern missionary movement "coincided with the economic and political emergence of Britain as a dominant power in the world" which led to the idea of "the simple identification of Christian missions as the cultural and spiritual arm of European Imperialism".

As we saw in 1796, the Glasgow Missionary Society (GMS) was formed at a meeting held in the Chapel-of-Ease Session House in Albion Street, Glasgow. Soon afterwards (1 March 1796) a report was produced which enshrined the Society's missionary principles in *The Quarterly Paper* of the GMS (June 1828:3-4, quoted in Shepherd 1940:24-26). These included the choice of missionaries to work in pairs, a senior with a younger person, one of whom should focus mainly on evangelical work and the other on intellectual development (Clauses 1, 12); they should be legitimated by some official authoritative ecclesiastical body for their work (clause 2); that they be counseled regarding their mission (clause 3); they be commended to the care of the secular authorities in their context of service (clause 4); priority be given to language training before beginning service (Clauses 5,6,10); they should take account of the religious context of their potential converts becoming "all things to all men (sic) that they may save some" (clause 7); they should not challenge resistance and do anything to indicate Christian disunity.

The GMS held to an "evangelical conservative theology that in the racial relationships of South Africa were regarded as 'liberal'", i.e. evangelicals who held a "'liberal' view of missions" (van der Spuy 1971:3 referring to a report drawn up by the GMS, dated 1st March 1796). Van der Spuy (1971:4) believes that this approach stimulated the hope of developing the potential of human nature through education and evangelism (keystones of Scottish mission) in opposition to "a pessimistic view that regards human nature as

unchangeable". GMS liberalism is described as an openness to fresh ideas and an abhorrence of bigotry; it is related to liberalism in the political sphere in Scotland. Walls (1996:242) asserts that:

such associations could only arise in countries which had an open, responsible form of government, where Protestantism had prepared the way for civil liberty which arose from seizing the opportunities offered by a particular phase of western political, economic and social development.

In 1824, as the result of the tireless efforts of the protagonists of overseas missions, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland gave its blessing to the cause of foreign missions. However, the internal ecclesiastical Situation in Scotland was about to face problems which would have far-reaching consequences for the church both at home and abroad.

The "Disruption"

The "Disruption" occurred in Scotland in 1843 after a period of ten years of conflict over a dispute between those who adhered to the Establishment principle, i.e. "the Church by law established" (Burleigh 1960:266; Cheyne 1993:1) and those who supported the voluntary principle. The dispute concerned the relationship of the church to the state. Arising out of the 1829 government proposal for a Bill for the relief of Roman Catholics, Rev Andrew Marshall, Secession minister in Kirkintilloch, preached against ecclesiastical establishments as unscriptural and in support of the church and its mission being financed "solely by the liberality of its faithful people" (Burleigh 1960:325). Marshall attacked all forms of establishment as being contrary to the authentic mission of the church. This practice of the dissenting churches became the voluntary principle which promoted the idea of a secular state.

The two issues which brought the matter to a head were Patronage and the "Claim of Right". The former concerned the right of a landowner to impose a minister of his choice on a congregation and parish whose land he owned (Cheyne 1993:3), while the latter asserted the spiritual independence of the church. In 1843, the government refused to repeal the Patronage Act and to acquiesce in the demands of the Claim of Right. Those who could not accept the privileges of establishment any longer left the Established Church of Scotland and formed the Free Church of Scotland (FCoS).

Rev Dr Thomas Chalmers, leader of the Free Church body, claimed that the Free Church did not aim at Voluntarism. He claimed it was a national church: "We are advocates for a national recognition and national support of religion – and we are not voluntaries." He aimed to produce an *alter ego* of the Established Church "relying on the resources which their faithful people would supply" (Burleigh 1960:354). Saayman (1996:32) has rightly said that the Free Church had "a rigidly conservative and Calvinist interpretation of theology, and also harboured a tendency towards regarding itself as a national church". Hofmeyr and Pillay (1994:73) argue that the "Disruption" "Ultimately led to the split in missionary work and the formation of the Bantu Presbyterian Church". However, it would also be true to say that it sowed the seeds of the Mzimba Secession in 1898. This newly formed Free Church of Scotland espoused the cause of foreign mission as the result of the influence of its voluntarist members and supporters.

Later developments

From 1843, the Free Church strongly supported foreign missions. At that time, almost all missionaries belonged to the Free Church; they were probably theologically conservative according to Saayman (1996:32), being evangelicals. In 1845, the GMS transferred its work to the Free Church's Foreign Missions Committee (FMC). In 1847, the United Secession Church and the Relief Church came together to form the voluntary anti-establishment United Presbyterian Church of Scotland (UPCoS). It was co-operation between the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church in favour of disestablishment as well as in other areas of church life including missions that led in 1900 to their union as the United Free Church of Scotland. The clock turned full circle when the United Free Church united with the established Church of Scotland to form the Church of Scotland in 1929.

The beginnings of the Scottish Presbyterian Church Mission in South Africa

The beginning of British Mission work in South Africa

In 1799, the LMS sent a group of missionaries, including Dr Johannes van der Kemp, to South Africa. Part of the group embarked on a mission to the Bushpeople while others pursued a mission to the Bechuana, the Griqua-Hottentot and the Namaqua Peoples. Van der Kemp moved towards the Eastern Cape and settled for a

brief time with Chief Ngqika. Trouble with the authorities and settlers led to him abandoning this work in 1800. He returned to the Cape Colony and worked at Graaff Reinet before continuing his work among the Hottentot people at Bethelsdorp Mission.

Political problems between Britain and Holland and the cession of the Cape to Holland in 1803 led to the appointment of van der Kemp as superintendent of the LMS' affairs in South Africa. However, he died before hearing of the appointment and James Read, a colleague, was appointed in his place. He was succeeded by Rev George Thom who was, in turn, followed by Dr John Philip in 1819.

In 1816, the LMS sent Rev Joseph Williams to work in the Eastern Cape near Fort Beaufort and in 1820 Rev. John Brownlee settled at Tyumie Mission. Lennox (1911:20) suggests that it was on the initiative of the dispossessed Ngqika Chief Kreli who invited the Scottish church to send missionary personnel. Brownlee was joined at Gwali, the mission called Tyumie, by Rev William R Thomson and Mr John Bennie from the GMS in 1821. These were the precursors of the Scottish Presbyterian church mission in South Africa which was about to begin.

Scottish Presbyterian Church Mission is established

The ordination of the Rev John Ross in 1823 by the Presbytery of Hamilton and his setting apart for missionary work came on the eve of the Church of Scotland officially recognising the necessity of overseas mission in 1824. He was the first minister seconded to mission work by the Church of Scotland and joined the work in the Eastern Cape "armed" with a printing press. This marked the genesis of a literary tradition which would culminate in Lovedale Press becoming the premier mission printing and publishing company in South Africa (Duncan 2001). At this time, in order to secure the Presbyterian polity of the mission, Thomson, Bennie and Ross constituted themselves into the Presbytery of Kaffraria on 1 January 1824 (Lennox 1911:22). Lovedale Mission was also founded in 1824 to be followed in 1830 by Burnshill, Pirie and Balfour Missions. The latter work was short lived, however, despite the sterling work of Ross and McDiarmid. These were missions of the Free Church of Scotland. As soon as the work at Tyumie was secure, the mission reached out under the Rosses and Bennie in the direction of the nearby Ncehra valley.

These early missionaries were joined in 1827 by Rev William Chalmers (catechist) and James Weir and Alexander McDiarmid (industrial missionaries). Thomson, Weir and Alexander Balfour, a recently converted African teacher, were stationed at Tyumie. Bennie, Chalmers and Charles Henry, another African teacher, were placed at Lovedale. Bennie distinguished himself in literary work in the Xhosa language. All of these, along with their families came under serious threat during the war of dispossession (1835-1836) though Thomson had already left his position at Tyumie in 1829. Rev James Laing arrived in South Africa in 1830 to be followed in 1836 by Rev James Niven. Niven was settled first at Igqibira and later in 1849 at Gxulu in the Keiskammahoek area at Uniondale mission (Lennox 1911:31). Uniondale had been part of the GMS South African mission and vision since 1838 (Mostert 1992:1007). From 1849, Niven was assisted by Rev Tiyo Soga, recently returned (1848) from training and ordination in Scotland (Williams 1978:19). A particular benefit was derived from the GMS decision to train a class of "African helpers" (Shepherd 1955:8) including Balfour and Henry. They were earnest, devoted and effective. It is interesting that from the earliest period the intention to train a local ministry was evident (Holt 1976:50).

Back in Scotland, the GMS transferred its work to the Free Church in 1845 following the "Disruption". According to Cheyne (1993:12), the "Disruption" had a positive effect on missions with the development of "missionary endeavour on a scale and of a quality hardly surpassed by any other communion in the English-speaking world". Certainly, the Free Church mission emphasised educational work and evangelism, while the United Presbyterian Church came to promote evangelism and church building. One of the prime obstacles to mission, which delayed but did not detract from ongoing mission, was the wars of dispossession which raged for over a century (1779-1791, 1807, 1811-1812, 1818-1819, 1834-1835, 1846-1847, 1850-1853, 1877-1878, 1889-1891; see Duncan 2003:76) and on the ending of each war in succession, the black population was forced further to the east and north-east of the Cape, followed by the missionaries "in view of the desirability of maintaining amicable relations" (Du Plessis 1911:184) with black people.

Into this *melée* came the *Mfecane* (1824) and then refugee Mfengu (*siyamfengusa* – we are wanderers seeking refuge) people (Duncan 2003:19-23), all of whom were dispossessed by the Zulu king Shaka. They took the side of the British against their African colleagues (Erlank 2003:20) and were given land in return, though many settled at mission stations like Lovedale. Hewat (1960:181) viewed them as "more receptive than the Xosa, and [they] became the mainstay of the Scottish Mission", an example being the Lovedale mission where Rev Mpambani J Mzimba was one of the African trained ministers (Mzimba 1898). During this time, following the rise of the prophets Nxele and Ntsikana in the 1820s, early exponents of different forms of Africanised theology and practice, the mission had to contend with opposition from prophets Mlanjeni, Mhlakaza and Nonquause linked to the rising discontent among the Xhosa people and the wars of the 1840s and 1850s along with the cattle-killing tragedy of 1857. This put the missionary families at serious risk and while some returned

to Scotland, others relocated temporarily. However, when the western part of the eastern Cape lost its independence after the War of the Axe (1847) and became a Crown Protectorate of the British Empire, making its inhabitants dependent, along with the “cattle-killing” incident, mission Christianity began to expand rapidly (Erlank 2003:19; cf. Switzer 1993:122).

In 1837, the GMS split over the voluntary principle. The continuing GMS allied its work with the established Church of Scotland and later the Free Church; the offshoot Glasgow African Missionary Society (GAMS) worked with the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland which was formed in 1847. The GAMS was responsible for the work at Tyumie and Igcibira and later at Mgwali and Tutura. However, until 1842 both societies missionaries had worked together in the same presbytery. In 1857, the Presbytery of Kaffraria was admitted as a presbytery of the Free Church of Scotland. Later, as other presbyteries were formed in the Transkei, the Synod of Kaffraria was established. All of these bodies came under the care of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland.

When the FC and UPC united in 1900, there were 28 congregations of the Scottish mission in South Africa with 14,402 members (Hewat 1960:184). Work was taking place in the Eastern Cape in the Ciskei and Transkei established by both churches, and in Natal under two missions established by the FCoS, the Mission Council and the Presbytery of Natal. Mission work in the Transvaal began in 1886 with a meeting between Rev William Mpamba and “a leadership corps of those sons of the area who had exposure in working in the diamond fields of Kimberley exposed to the gospel through [the] Native Congregational Church of Rev Gwayi Tyamazshe, a Lovedale trained minister” (Manaka 1996:1).

The institutions

Fundamental to the missionary work of the missionaries, was educational work. The foremost FCoS institution was Lovedale, opened in 1841 (Duncan 2003) with Rev William Govan as its first Principal. The original intention was to train teachers and evangelists but, in time, the work of the mission diversified as trades’ training was introduced, especially in the area of bookbinding, printing and publishing. To this was added agricultural and medical mission, theological education for the ordained ministry, a Bible school for the laity and the establishment of a “native” University of Fort Hare in 1916. The mission institutions also suffered from the wars of dispossession, particularly during 1846-1847 and 1850-1853. Educational work was co-opted into Governor Sir George Grey’s Ordinance to Cape Colony in 1854: “The plan I propose to pursue with a view to ... attempt to gain an influence over all the tribes included between the present north-eastern boundary and Natal” (quoted in Shepherd 1971:22) as a means of spreading western civilisation and Christianity by means of production, through industrial training, rather than war. Carpentry and masonry departments were opened and towards this end, Grey made grants of £2,200 for wagonmaking and £600 for training blacksmiths (Henchman 1927:33). By this time, Lovedale had become a centre of missionary outreach (Burchell 1979:7). In 1861, agriculture and a bookbinding department were established and a journal, *Ikwezi*, was published in several issues largely authored by black persons including William Kobe Ntsikana and Zaze Soga (Switzer 1993:120). In time, the bookbinding department would expand into the Lovedale Press. At the same time, an initiative was developed to introduce female education and was assisted through the offices of Sir Langham Dale, superintendent-general for education in the Cape. Although this was not in line with Scottish church missionary policy, “Dale’s benevolent attitude to African education during his term of office from 1859-1892 facilitated the growth of Lovedale ... especially in directions ... which at the time were not considered by the Home Church to be essential to missionary endeavour” (Burchell 1979:11). But during this time, the Grey Plan came to an end in 1863 and the Education Act of 1865 created three categories of grant-aided schools based on race (Switzer 1993:131) which hampered the educational work of the mission. The only other substantial problem seems to have related to the threat the establishment of such institutions posed to the local population and culture whose traditional lifestyle was challenged in the 1830s and the 1840s.

A similar institution, but on a smaller scale, was later opened in 1877 in the Transkei at Nqamakwe; it was called Blythswood. It was the result of the work of Rev Richard Ross of Toleni (Cunningham Mission, established in 1856) and Captain Matthew Blyth, Transkeian magistrate at Ntlambe (Soga 1930:209, 218-219). The UPCoS had opened Mgwali Girls’s School in 1857 under the supervision of Revs Tiyo Soga and Robert Johnston who left soon afterwards, leaving Soga to develop the mission. In 1856, the FCoS began work at Toleni and called it Cunningham Mission and at Mbulu (Paterson). We note that later than our period, work was initiated at Buchanan Mission in East Griqualand and at Pietermaritzburg, Mpolweni, Msinga (Gordon Memorial Mission) and Kalabasi. Most of these missions concentrated on agricultural mission and evangelism.

Mission stations

Mission stations were the centres in which native evangelists, catechists, pastors and teachers were prepared for mission as each mission established myriads of village schools around their congregations. This was vital since

most of the mission work was done by them and not their mentors who often “fretted within the confines of the mission station” (Elphick 2012:24) which was not the original intention. They were intended to be the vanguard of mission and they also served to protect local people who had settled nearby “if they were not to be drawn back into the vortex of paganism” (Holt 1976:28).

What about black participation?

We noted the efforts made at Lovedale in connection with the training of evangelists who were also interpreters for the missionaries. Yet, many remain nameless despite the vast amount of work they carried out among their own people and their achievement on behalf of the mission for “African teachers and pastors were increasingly the community face of mission Christianity” (Erlank 2003:30). This is demonstrated in the growth of missions, members and congregations up to the end of the 19th century. The only credit is given to those exceptional people who either were the first blacks to achieve something such as the first black nurse to qualify, Cecilia Makiwane (Wilson 1976:4), the first black minister trained abroad, Rev Tiyo Soga (Williams 1978), or those who attained a certain notoriety like Rev Mpambani J Mzimba (Shepherd 1971:59,60). Until recently, the work of Rev William Mpamba in establishing Work in the Transvaal at Donhill was little known. Manaka (1996:1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10) has redeemed this situation in the case of the Transvaal giving us the names of Mokele Raphele, Daniel Moqaba Mamabolo, Timothy and Saul Mamabolo, Jacob Mabija, Timotheus Mamabolo, Lucas Makoale and Revs Yekela Mbali, Candlish Koti, Arthur Ntuli, Titus Finca and EM Molaba.

Wilson (1976:8) is also one who does acknowledge by name some of those great black missionaries who made significant contributions to the spread of the Gospel among their own people: Jan Tshatshu, Ntsikana, Tiyo Soga, John Knox Bokwe, Elijah Makiwane, Mpambani Mzimba. She also notes that in 1876, 13 black missionaries offered for foreign service in Malawi, including a William Koyi, Shadrack Mgunana, Isaac Williams Wauchope and Mapassa Ntintili (Thompson 2000:15-24). Their ability to communicate in their own languages made them especially useful until, and even beyond, the point where the missionaries could speak in the vernacular. Although some of the abovementioned came from a period later than our present scope, it is nonetheless instructive to note their ongoing influence.

Yet, we should not forget the significant role played by the eldership and the diaconate (as in board of deacons) from 1844 (Cory Ms 9038, 3 July 1844). Erlank (2003:32) refers to elders and deacons being elected, but it is necessary to remember that these offices were accessed through ordination. From this position they could be supported by readers and teachers.

That the missionaries were the focus of mission activity cannot be contradicted in the light of the above. All accounts focus on their activities based on their assumptions and prejudices. The fact that little account is taken of socio-economic factors points to the complicity of the missionaries in the prevailing colonial climate of the time. So they conform to the negative attitude towards blacks, their cultures and civilisations. In the educational sphere, the “Christianity must precede civilisation” (du Plessis 1911:365) slogan misrepresents the situation where black civilisation is devalued to the degree that it is dismissed because ideologically civilisation is equated with Western civilization. (This is in accord with Dr James Stewart of Lovedale’s ambition, echoed by his successor, James Henderson, “to bring the native people into line with the European occupants of the same land” (du Plessis 1911:364)). The purpose of mission was, therefore, conformity. Even Wilson (1976:6) falls into this trap as she identifies sophistication with “wide-scale relationships, a literature, some centralised form of government, and such military power as goes with economic development and centralised authority” compared with “an isolated people, with limited technology and no writing”.

All this would indicate that mission was perceived as a two-way process between the sending churches in Scotland and the missionaries in the field, little account, if any, being taken of the needs and desires of blacks apart from what was perceived on their behalf by the missionaries. Scant attention was taken of black experience and there seem to be no available contemporary black assessments of this area of mission work and its implications.

By the 1860s, the impact of the Free Church mission was substantial according to Mackenzie (2007:199-200):

In Kaffraria [eastern Cape] there were thirteen missions and eighty-one Scots missionaries, twenty-eight “native staff” and seventy-three day schools with 4,000 pupils ([in] a Christian community of 9,500). In the Transkei, fourteen missions, forty-five Scots missionaries, seventy-one African staff, 202 schools with 10,650 pupils ([in] a community of 17,712). And in Natal, five missions, eighteen Scots missionaries, eighteen African staff, 202 schools and 1,845 (and a community of 10,985).

By any standards this was a considerable achievement.

An assessment and conclusion

From this brief overview, we have noted a number of points which indicate the poor profile accorded to blacks in this area of mission history, despite individual significant contributions. Nonetheless, the special contribution of the educational establishments cannot be denied. Yet, Du Plessis (1911:365) has posed the question of the educational work eclipsing the evangelical purpose. This might be true if evangelism is seen as separate and distinct from education in the unfolding mission and certainly Christian teaching, and the expectation of conversion was not absent in places like Lovedale. Saayman (1996:33) points out that the dual purpose at Lovedale was to “civilise and christianise” and notes with Stewart’s appointment as principal in 1870 that it “became more strictly Christian rather than secular in the education it offered” (Burchell 1979:15-18). It might be claimed that the education offered prepared young minds for a future that might not match their expectations given the developing political and economic situation.

So the eastern Cape mission fulfilled other purposes than the purely evangelical as it “early had an important position and influence which it has maintained throughout its history” (Lennox 1911:22). As in other places, “[t]he early Protestant missionaries to these places found themselves with great latitude and an initial store of goodwill. Some of them came to wield influence over vast domains, even while they made few tested converts ...” (Landau 2010:12). Mostert (1992:1006) claims that the missionaries:

were a divided, tense, irritable and critical set, vigilant of one another’s morals. But they were a brave people in coping with their disillusion as they struggled hard in their isolated circumstances without noticeable success, and little immediate prospect of any.

He (Mostert 1992:832-823) counsels us not to adopt too romantic view of the missionary enterprise for we have to place it in its European/African context:

The missionaries’ view of the Xhosa was often indistinguishable from that of the colonists. The common missionary attitude towards the Xhosa had settled into one of severe and unqualified censure for their attack on the colonists, intensified disgust for most of their customs, and firm support for any colonial initiative that would help to stamp out the most offending of them ...

Missionaries who arrived in the late 1830s and during the 1840s – and new faces were continually turning up on the Cape frontier – found a missionary establishment firmly settled within the conventions of colonial society and largely accepting that its place was there; it was an easily assimilable viewpoint and, almost to a man, the newcomers accepted it.

Victorian-age missionaries ... more interested in the practical business of conversion than in social disadvantage and inequality, in the number of souls harvested the guardianship of indigenous rights, helped to provide the scapegoats for the disabused idealism and frustrations of the failure with the Xhosa.

Yet, in spite of this negative critique, we have to acknowledge the efforts and sacrifices made by those missionaries who felt called to serve overseas often at great cost to themselves and their families. However, we may never know the extent to which black missionaries and Christians also suffered for having made the leap of faith, a leap that often led to estrangement from families, friends, lifestyles and cultures.

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