

SOUTH AFRICA

The missionary work which grew into the mission of the Church of Scotland in South Africa was started in 1821 with the arrival at Lovedale, in the Eastern Cape, of John Bennie and William Thomson. They were appointed by the Glasgow Missionary Society. They were joined by fellow Scot, James Brownlee of the London Missionary Society. Two years later, John Ross arrived, the first missionary to be designated as a missionary, by a Scottish Presbytery.

The contribution of the 'founding fathers' is remarkable. They all served for 50 years or more.. It seems that these men went without any clear remit from Scotland. Using their gifts and the opportunities which presented themselves, they laid the foundations of the mission pattern which was to be followed by succeeding generations of Scottish missionaries. Their emphasis was on building up Christian communities and providing education, which included training in practical skills such as agriculture and technical subjects.

Lovedale became famous for its educational institution throughout the whole of Southern Africa. It is interesting to note that in the formation of educational policy William Govan, the first Principal of Lovedale, sought advice from Alexander Duff of Calcutta and John Wilson of Bombay. Lovedale had black and white pupils at first, but this was ended in 1896 by a 'fiat' issued by the Government Superintendent of Education in the Cape Province – an early sign of the racial segregation which was to blight South Africa for the next century!

The direction the school should take became a matter for debate when James Stewart became Principal in 1866. Stewart wanted less academic education and more emphasis on the practical side. He also wanted Lovedale to expand its size. By 1897 the number of students had risen to 813. While most of the missionaries supported Govan's policy of academic training for a smaller number of students, Stewart's view prevailed. He had the support of Duff, who was now the Convener of the governing council in Scotland.

The provision of education spread as the number of congregations increased. Most district missionaries found themselves managers of numerous primary schools as well as having oversight of congregations with 10 or 20 outstations. Secondary education was centred at boarding schools such as Lovedale.

All this changed with the introduction of the Bantu Education Act in 1955 – a major plank in the growing edifice of apartheid. It was in this changed situation that I served in South Africa (1962 – 74). The Bantu Education Act placed African Education under an entirely separate system. It also meant that church/mission schools had to become private or be taken over by the Government. The Bantu Presbyterian Church/Church of Scotland had to hand

over its schools as they had previously been funded by the four Provincial Education Departments. The Church, however, elected to retain control of the hostels at two of its boarding schools. In 1960 the BPC asked the Church of Scotland to recruit a replacement Superintendent for Pholela Training and High School in Natal.

This was the appointment which I took up in 1962. I struggled long over the question of whether working in association with a Government school, I would, in fact, be tacitly supporting the policy of apartheid. After much thought and advice I decided to accept the post.

At Pholela, the missionary was known as the Superintendent of the Hostels. Although much had changed since the introduction of Bantu Education, the relationship with the Principal was good and I enjoyed a position of considerable influence in the situation. I was a member of the School Governing Council, conducted morning assembly and taught Religious Education two days a week. The Church rented the school buildings to the Government and so I was responsible for the maintenance of a considerable number of properties. My main responsibility was for the running of the hostels. All 380 students (220 girls and 160 boys) were boarders. I was responsible for organising all the activities out of school hours – sport, chaplain, BB Captain, entertainment etc. My wife filled in on numerous occasions when we were without staff in the Girls' Hostel. She also ran the Dramatic Society and a Bible Class and helped with the Girls' Brigade. There were three school principals during my time at Pholela. Latterly, I had to act as a negotiator between the students and the Principal.

Our first two years were extremely difficult. The political fall-out from the Sharpsville shootings in 1960 was still causing unrest in the black schools. There was also need for a huge shift on the part of the white missionary and his staff in order to be relevant to the students. They were no longer the grateful recipients of paternalistic goodwill, but people who had been radicalised by the black consciousness movement and were now angry young activists demanding social and political change. It was important that dialogue replaced unquestioned authority and that there was a realisation that you do not "incarnate good news into a situation; good news arises out of a situation" ("God in South Africa" Albert Nolan). It was my task to provide an environment where creative thinking and questioning were encouraged and respectful listening, on both sides, was the norm.

After our initial problems had been resolved we had ten very good years. Each year about 40 -50 students became members of the Church. This encouraged me to think that students were, to some extent, realising that, "The Christian has his place (in history) not just as a fighter for liberation, but as one who has been liberated." ("The Open Secret" Newbigin)

I would now like to touch briefly on the development of the Presbyterian Church in South Africa.

It had been a major policy view of the parent committee in Scotland that the length of stay of its missionaries should only be long enough to establish an independent, indigenous Church among the African population in South Africa.

The situation was, however, made more difficult by the growing racial divide in South Africa and the fragmented state of Presbyterianism in Scotland.

A Presbyterian Church in South Africa had already been established among the white Scots settlers in South Africa. It was the view of the United Presbyterian Church in Scotland that the mission in South Africa be integrated into the existing Presbyterian Church of South Africa (PCSA) to form a single Church, with black and white members. While this was supported by the U P missionaries in South Africa, the missionaries of the Free Church thought that this was a premature step, which would hinder black development and leadership in South Africa. Thus the missions of the U P Church became part of the PCSA, while the missions of the Free Church remained separate.

It was in order to resolve this matter that a Commission of two deputies was sent to South Africa in 1920 by the FMC of the now United Free Church of Scotland. The Commission recommended the formation of a separate black church and this was accepted by the FMC. Thus the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa was formed in 1923. It had 25,000 members. Although short of funds and ministers, the Church thrived with a strong lay involvement in both men and women's organisations.

Attempts were made in the 1960's and early 1970's to find a way for the black and white Presbyterian Churches to come together. Significantly, it was the BPC which rejected the plan for union. The situation under apartheid made blacks suspicious of any involvement with white organisations.

The ending of apartheid made it possible for the two Presbyterian Churches to consider union again. This came about in 1999. In coming together the black and white churches acknowledged their equal worth, their interdependence, their shared heritage and their common purpose. At the same time, however, they carried with them their own history – of hurt, prejudice, anger and pride.

They were betting on a future that seemed impossible in human terms, but looked at with the eyes of faith, could become “the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community for the sake of the world.” (“Transforming Mission” Bosch).