

## **Roots and Fruits: Rev James L Wilkie – Zambia 1961 – 1976.**

I was brought up and educated in Aberdeen, the son of Christian parents who came from the Free Church of Scotland tradition. Through SCM in Schools I was led into the Student Christian Movement at University there, and completed my MA and BD. My fiancée, Irene Watson, graduated in Medicine the same year, and we were married immediately. The next year I spent as an Ordained Assistant Minister, she completed her Pre-Registration requirements, and we offered ourselves to the Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland to serve overseas. In the summer of 1960 I joined the Iona Community, spending three months on the island where Irene joined me for the last few weeks, and in September we moved together to St Colm's Missionary College for three months training.

In February 1959 I had discovered Lesslie Newbigin's pamphlet '*One Body, One Gospel, One World*', and it provided theological understanding of my calling. At St Colm's we found an excellent staff that blended the evangelical and ecumenical traditions. Kenneth Mackenzie taught us about the Livingstonia Mission in Northern Rhodesia where we were being sent, and the Principal, Jean Fraser, had formerly worked for the World Council of Churches.

We reached our mission station, Mwenzo, in the remote north of what was still Northern Rhodesia in January 1961. I was initiated into my work by our colleagues Gillian and Alasdair Morton and for the next ten years I was immersed in the languages, cultures and church of the Winamwanga people and the other tribes that surrounded them. It was a period of great political change. The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, into which we immigrated at Bulawayo, was broken up, and in 1964 Northern Rhodesia became the independent country of Zambia.

The area where I worked as a parish minister had been evangelised by the Livingstonia Mission from Nyasaland. Through church unions in Scotland, from being a mission of the Free Church, it passed to the United Free Church, then to the Church of Scotland. The three mission station areas of Mwenzo, Lubwa and Chitambo were separated off and became directly responsible to Edinburgh when Northern Rhodesia became a separate territory. When I arrived they were being run by the Scots missionaries responsible through a 'Mission Council' to Edinburgh. My ministry was transferred from that of the Church of Scotland to the United Church of Central Africa in Rhodesia (UCCAR). This was a union of churches that sprang from the work of the London Missionary Society, the Church of Scotland and the United Missions to (Northern Rhodesia's) Copper Belt (UMCB).

In accordance with the Church of Scotland's 'Integration' policy, in 1962 the mission was integrated into the UCCAR and governance passed to that Church. Then in 1965 three months after Zambia became independent, the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) was born and at its inauguration I became one of its founding ministers. It was constituted from the union of the UCCAR, the churches founded by Methodist Missionary Societies in the south of

Zambia, and the Churches in Barotseland, to the west, founded by missionaries of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society.

At Mwenzo the mission had been set up on the traditional three-fold line – schools, medical work and congregations. Until recently the missionaries had controlled all the schools and paid all the teachers. They also staffed and financed the local hospital. The local converts who made up the church saw these institutions as ‘their’ schools and hospital. In accordance with Church of Scotland policy that where these could be locally financed they should be, they had recently been handed over to the Government which at the time was rich from the income from copper exports and gladly accepted responsibility.

Our colleagues helped me to understand that our task now was to help the African Church work out what it was to ‘be church’ when all the medical and educational work begun and hitherto run by the mission had passed to Government control. We believed that such a church should be self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting. These would all be difficult aims for the future.

All this took place during our first hectic tour. Irene my wife had continued to practise medicine in the old mission – now government – hospital, while bearing three children. I had learned how to enable our family to survive in this remote area, and had become reasonably competent in the local language. With my fellow ministers I toured widely in the villages of an area of nearly 5,000 square miles and for the last year was Clerk to the Northern Presbytery of the UCCAR when my colleague Bill McKenzie went on leave. I wrote up our experience in an article that Lesslie Newbigin, the editor of the International Review of Missions, published in July 1965.

Our second tour was spent in the same language area, but stationed at the local district centre – Isoka – where a new Boys’ Secondary School had been established by the Government. Like a Roman Catholic priest also based in town I served as chaplain to the prison and the school, and taught some Religious Knowledge classes. I also continued my village touring and Presbytery duties, now as Treasurer.

At the foundation of the United Church of Zambia the country’s President, Dr Kenneth Kaunda had challenged the UCZ to press on with Church Union (“One Zambia, One Nation, One Party, **One Church!**”) and the new office bearers obediently invited the local Anglican Church to enter into Church Union talks. As a member of the group that met the Anglicans, I soon perceived that these talks could not succeed. The UCZ’s African leadership was really too busy trying to work out what it was to lead this new Church to want to rock the boat further. And anyway, coming from my tradition, I believed that the Body of Christ comprised all the Christians in any place who would agree to come together as the One Body of Christ to proclaim the One Gospel to the whole world. But I discovered that the Anglicans saw themselves as part of the world-wide Anglican Communion and so not at all free to move theologically towards the UCZ.

However there was another level of ecumenism where I discovered great strides could be made. We could work together practically as fellow human beings, and indeed as fellow Christians. In my first tour I made lasting friendships with – and recognised Christ – in fellow missionaries who came from a much more 'evangelical' tradition than that in which I had grown up. Very gradually I began the same process with Roman Catholic priests, discovering that we shared many concerns and on some things could work together. Wherever the structures would allow it, a great deal of God's Kingdom-work could be carried out together. While remaining loyal to my denomination, as the years passed, this for me became my practical ecumenism.