

MISSION TODAY

By Bishop Ndanganeni P. Phaswana

Introduction

SANIBONANI! RIA VUSA, LOMELANG: HOW ARE YOU? In our different mother tongues we greet you in your representative capacity. This kind of greetings asks for your well being in a pluralistic or representative manner. When we greet you in a question form we ask about your relationship within your family, with your neighbors and with the departed as well. It is a communal way of asking about your health which is an integral part of healthy relationship with your fellow human being. The underlining philosophy here is: *I belong therefore I am*. This is the real meaning of greetings in isiZulu, Tshivenda or Sitswana. This is the context that your forefathers and foremothers experienced when they proclaimed the gospel in the foreign lands.

They were armed with the Bible, some medical kits and a strong faith that God has sent them to convert the heathens and introduce the Reign of God. They had no other model except the one they were taught right here in Norway and other Nordic and European countries including America and Canada. They were simply following the Great Commission: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt.28:19).

The time was not yet ripe for the interfaith dialogue to be entertained. Any expression of faith which did not conform to this Scripture was dismissed. I am amazed at the manner they did it and converted thousands of the indigenous people at different times. The courage they displayed in wrestling with hostile territories and people bear witness to their belief and commitment to the course of the gospel. They had no energy to preach and or sell private or soul salvation. They did not find solace in presenting a fundamental Christianity.

Yes they committed too many mistakes. These they did in the course of executing the gospel mandate. They did not oppose apartheid or racial discrimination with all their strength and power. They thought by being quiet in the midst of injustice they will be allowed to proclaim the gospel without human made hindrances. We are the products of their sweat and courage.

Mission in context

Missionaries were not angels. They were human beings who had to face few challenges in the mission fields or mission stations that were established in response to the Christian communities that were birthed through the proclamation of the same gospel. Little did they know that the community of believers that gathered around them soon became rejected by the community for fear that its members comprised of witches who were expelled from amongst the indigenous people. Even if they knew they did not waver.

They established mission schools where kids were taught how to read and write. This proved valuable as the only bridge between husbands and their wives or relatives during the migrant labor system. Communication was simplified through letter writings. Schools also served as recruitment centres where new Christians were found and Christian education was instilled in their consciences. I met one old man who trained at Umphumulo Teachers Training College before it was turned into a theological one. He was extremely proud that he obtained his training at this college. He became a lay preacher in the church in Natal and also in Johannesburg where he later died. That college gave him a wealth of knowledge and a sense of meaning and purpose in his life that he cherished up to his last day here on this side of the grave. Unfortunately some Lutheran churches, like ELCSA, lost their influence in the society when they were forced to give up schools during the apartheid era. Denominations that kept their schools are experiencing membership growth at a faster pace than those that do not control centres of learning. ELCSA is one of those churches which are not keeping up the pace of growth in Africa. The challenge for this ELCSA or any mission church is to retrieve those golden days and foster Christian values in the minds of its communities.

Health Institutions

We are extremely thankful to the NMS for the diakonia arm of their mission work. They established three hospitals in the present South Eastern Diocese (SED). This is the area where they had anchored their mission work as you all know. The missionaries who were working at the time could have confined themselves to the proclamation of the gospel that did not have to be directed to the whole person. We are thankful that they interpreted it in its broader sense so much that they doctored a king who got healed and even gave them permission to preach the gospel amongst his own people. He himself was a teaching aid. It was good that they had this vision that was later reinforced by the LWF Document entitled: *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment, 2004*.

This document underlines Mission as the core business of the Church. The said document, reflecting on the meaning of proclamation says:

“Proclamation of the gospel, calling people to believe in Jesus Christ and to become members of the new community in Christ, participation in the work for peace and justice and in the struggle against all enslaving and dehumanizing powers are therefore an integral part of the mission of the church...” (2004:6).

To be the church is to be in the mission field. This mission field is both within and beyond her borders. The church that confines her mission activities to her boundaries runs the risk of smothering herself. The church exists for Jesus Christ her founder and God's people scattered throughout the global village.