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(27) CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES IN AFRICA

Desmond P. van der Water

Origins and Spread

The story of Congregationalism in Africa traces its origins back to a coffee house in London in 1794. Every Tuesday morning, a handful of Christian ministers from different church denominations met at Bakers Coffee House ‘as a place for chat and the interchange of news by the London Ministers.’¹ In 1795, this group of ministers and others who had joined them formed ‘The Missionary Society’, later to be called the ‘London Missionary Society’ (LMS). The LMS declared its only purpose of its existence as follows:

The sole object is to spread the knowledge of Christ among heathen and other unenlightened nations.²

It is significant that the LMS, as a fundamental principle, established itself as an *ecumenical* mission body, intentionally setting out to avoid replicating British denominationalism in Africa, and wherever else in the world they ventured to proclaim the gospel. It is to be noted therefore that it was by default rather than by design that the LMS became predominantly Congregational. This ‘accident of history’ was simply due, in the course of time, to the other participating Churches founding their respective missionary societies. Notwithstanding this development, the LMS commitment to ecumenism remained a key element in the shaping of Congregationalism worldwide. A year after its establishment, the first LMS missionaries went to the South Sea island of Tahiti, to be followed a year later by a contingent to Sierra Leone. The first LMS expedition to African soil, however, ended in disappointment. Richard Lovett sums up:

The mission at once began to feel the effects of two factors which have exerted a powerful influence... the quality of the workers, and the deadly nature of the climate. Within half a year, three of the six missionaries were dead, a fourth had to be recalled, and the other two were able to pursue their labour for only a brief period.³

Not to be discouraged by this failure, in 1799 the LMS sent a Dutchman by the name of Johannes Theodorus van der Kemp to the Cape to do missionary work and to plant churches – a move which effectively *signalled the birth of Congregationalism in Africa*, and within Southern Africa in particular. Although van der Kemp landed in Cape Town,⁴ the first churches and mission stations were to be established in the Eastern Cape, to be followed soon after in the Northern Cape. It was in this latter part of Southern Africa that another LMS missionary, Robert Moffat, arrived in 1824 and established a mission station at Kuruman, where he also set-up the first printing press in Africa, and where the first translation of the Bible into an African language, namely Setswana, saw the light of day in 1857.⁵ The Kuruman Moffat

¹ Richard Lovett, “The History of the London Missionary Society 1795-1895”, Vol. 1 (London, Oxford University Press, 1899), 30.

² Lovett, “History of the London Missionary Society”, 30.

³ Lovett, “History of the London Missionary Society”, 480.

⁴ The ship in which van der Kemp arrived in Cape Town, known as the *Hillsborough*, mainly carried convicts bound for Australia. But it also brought other passengers who disembarked at this stage of the voyage, amongst whom were the LMS missionaries van der Kemp, Jakobus Kircherer, John Edmonds and William Edwards (Esther Johnson, “Cape Town: The establishing of Congregationalism in southern Africa” in Steve de Gruchy (ed), *Changing Frontiers: The mission story of the UCCSA* (Gaborone, Pula Press, 1999) 19).

⁵ Lovett, “History of the London Missionary Society”, 599.

Mission, which is one of the oldest mission stations in Africa, is still active and thriving in mission and ministry to this day. From the Northern Cape, Congregationalism spread northwards out into what is today Botswana and Zimbabwe. As the Eastern Cape, which represents the first strand of Congregationalism in Southern Africa, became more settled and less of a 'frontier', the LMS handed church ownership and authority to the local people who had been converted to Christianity, and turned its resources to the work in the north.

Robert Moffat was later joined by David Livingstone, who in 1841 reached Kuruman. During the nineteenth century, Livingstone and Moffat were among the best known LMS missionaries, opening up work among the Batswana and Ndebele peoples. Notwithstanding his substantial missionary enterprises, Livingstone is better remembered globally for his famous journeys of exploration into Central Africa and his 'discovery' of the Zambezi in 1851.⁶ On the strength of his expeditions for God and country, to his credit, Livingstone certainly paved the way for other missionary societies in Central Africa. The first strand of Congregationalism and Congregational churches in Africa traces its origins in the sterling missionary work done by LMS personnel.

A second strand of Congregationalism to Southern Africa came from the USA, through the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), which arrived in South Africa at the invitation of the LMS. Following their charter in 1812, the ABCFM dispatched their first personnel in 1835 to work among the Zulu people of the Natal colony, and the Ndebele in Zimbabwe. With the discovery of gold in 1886, the work of the LMS and ABCFM spread to the Witwatersrand. The early missionaries were not simply intent on founding new churches. From the start, they fought for the rights of the indigenous peoples, and established educational institutions. The ABCFM was also committed to local church autonomy and sought ways to cease being 'mission' and to become 'church'. For several reasons this proved to be a difficult process 'bedevilled by issues relating to leadership, authority, finance, culture, property and power.'⁷ By 1964 however, the Bantu Congregational Church was formally constituted and the transition from American-led 'mission' to Zulu-led 'church' was achieved.

The third strand in which Congregationalism emerged in Southern Africa was, as Steve de Gruchy points out, 'not a missionary movement, but rather a *settler movement*' whereby 'English settlers – traders, miners, soldiers, teachers – arrived in both the Cape and Natal colonies.'⁸ By the 1960s, there were three distinct forms of Congregationalism in five Southern African countries, namely Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Botswana and South Africa. On 3rd October 1967 these three strands of Congregationalism *united* to become the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA). At the united act of worship, the Congregationalists entered into solemn covenant with these words:

We covenant to worship, work and witness together in the fellowship of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa for the building up of the Body of Christ and the manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth.⁹

⁶ Lovett, "History of the London Missionary Society", 615.

⁷ Steve de Gruchy, "Towards a Congregationalist Theology of the Land", *International Congregational Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (August 2002), 232.

⁸ Steve de Gruchy, "Towards a Congregationalist Theology of the Land", 232.

⁹ D Roy Briggs, "A Covenant Church: Studies in the Polity of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa in terms of Its Covenant" (Gaborone, Pula Press, 1996), 23.

The Nature of Congregationalism in Africa

Centrality of Covenant Principle

True to its origins, the fundamental nature of Congregationalism in Africa, for over two hundred years to the present time, never changed from its foundational principle, namely that of being a church *united by a covenantal bond*. This centrality of covenant in Congregationalism's identity harks back to its foundation when the first synod of Congregational Churches in England articulated the following definition of Congregationalism:

A Congregational Church is by the institution of Christ a part of the militant-visible church, consisting of a company of saints by calling, united into one body by a *holy covenant* for the mutual edification one of another, in fellowship of the Lord Jesus.¹⁰

Congregational churches in Africa consistently maintained all the major hallmarks of classical English Congregationalism in its understanding of church, with the *covenant principle* at the heartbeat of its life, work and witness. Roy Briggs suggests that there are 'intriguing points of contact between the biblical concept of the covenant...and the traditional African idea of *ubuntu*.'¹¹ Referring to Hebrews 11:29-39, in which the author speaks about the heroes and heroines of faith during the Old Testament period, of whom is said 'only *with us* should they reach perfection' (italics added), Briggs inverts the statement to suggest that 'only *with them* should we reach perfection' (italics added), concluding that 'this is the equivalent of the African dictum: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.'¹²

Due to the geographical areas in which the LMS and ABCFM missionaries worked, Congregationalists in Africa – in Southern Africa in particular – are mainly concentrated amongst the so-called Coloured people and the black African communities. Given the cultural and traditional contexts of these communities there were going to be different notions of church, community and family from that which was obtained in Europe and the USA. This is particularly the case with the distinctive ideas of kinship and community, as Briggs asserts, which 'differ radically from Western notions of individualism, socialism and collectivism'.¹³

With regard to the understanding of family as the basic unit in society within the African context, family includes the 'extended' family, namely grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. Like the family, the kinship system as a whole has a vertical dimension as well, which includes the living-dead and the tribe's unborn offspring. The kinship concept expands from the clan or tribe to include the nation and humankind as a whole. The idea of the 'extended' family in its horizontal and vertical dimensions, in the present, past and future, represents a distinct parallel to the Christian doctrine of the communion of saints. The expansion of the concept into the clan, the tribe, and the nation where the sense of community is fully maintained, can be directly related to the understanding of the covenant within African Congregational churches. Similarly, the importance *ubuntu* ascribes to solidarity among the members of the clan, the tribe, the nation, is arguably identical with the emphasis the covenant lays on unity among covenant members. It is precisely against this background that the Congregationalist principle of covenant finds a natural home within African beliefs, culture, customs and practices. Within Congregational churches in Africa therefore, the theology and practice of covenant does not, generally speaking, come as a foreign imposition.

¹⁰ Joseph Wing, "Pilgrimage of Faith", 56.

¹¹ Briggs, "A Covenant Church", 29.

¹² Briggs, "A Covenant Church", 29.

¹³ Briggs, "A Covenant Church", 26.

Commitment to Ecumenism

The union of the three strands of Congregationalism in 1967 to form the UCCSA – true to the ecumenical principle of its founder, the LMS – proved not to be static. The Congregationalist impulse towards greater unity within the Body of Christ was further strengthened by the merger of the UCCSA, in 1972, with the South African Association of the Disciples of Christ. At the Covenant Service on 23rd September 1972 to celebrate this additional union, the Presbyterian representative introduced his fraternal greetings by saying: ‘You’ve done it again! The first church in Southern Africa to pull off two mergers in the space of five years!’¹⁴ Even before this latter union materialised, the UCCSA was in conversation with the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (PCSA) to move towards becoming a united church through merging the Congregationalist and Presbyterian denominations. Although this intended union at denominational level did not materialise,¹⁵ various schemes were embarked upon such as the establishment of new local churches which would be united and the mutual eligibility of members and ministers from the two churches concerned.

The Congregational churches’ passion for and commitment to ecumenism is reflected in the leadership the UCCSA has given to the ecumenical movement in Southern Africa. For instance, a Congregationalist, Brian Bailey was the first General Secretary of the Botswana Christian Council (BCC). Under his leadership the BCC soon took on joint action for mission, service and development in Botswana. In South Africa, John F. White, until his untimely death in 1960, was an ecumenical driving force, active in the work of the Christian Council of South Africa. Congregationalists were secretaries of the Church Unity Commission for the first twenty-one years of its life (1968-89). John Thorne, as president of the South African Council of Churches during the mid-1970s, led the church in South Africa prophetically and courageously during turbulent political times, being detained, tried and sentenced for his identification with the victims of apartheid. Although ecumenism, church unity and Christian co-operation in Zimbabwe were somewhat slow to get going, under the dynamic leadership of Congregationalists such as Joshua Danisa, James Pelling and Owen Lloyd, things improved significantly with the momentum that they provided.

The designation ‘united’ in the official title of the UCCSA represents an ongoing commitment of Congregationalism in Africa to unity, ecumenism and non-sectarianism. At the newly united church’s inaugural Assembly in 1967, John Huxtable, in his sermon, challenged the UCCSA towards greater union:

We are now more ready for unity, not less. The will of the great Head of the church has been made known in this matter. He wills for the church to be one...Our part is to understand how we can more perfectly express it...¹⁶

Commitment to Political Freedom and Justice in Society

Since the arrival of the early LMS missionaries in 1799, Congregationalism and Congregational leadership has aligned itself with the cause of the poor, the deprived and oppressed people in their struggle for justice and freedom. When LMS missionary John Philip, for instance, was accused by the authorities of meddling in politics, instead of confining himself, as a minister, to spiritual matters, he replied:

If a minister is guilty of dereliction of his duty in advocating the cause of the oppressed, or in relieving the necessities of the destitute, I plead guilty to the charge.¹⁷

¹⁴ Joseph Wing (ed), “Pilgrimage of Faith: Confirmation Training Handbook” (Cape Town, UCCSA, 1987), 62.

¹⁵ It remains a sad chapter in the history of the UCCSA that the union with the PCSA did not take place, especially as both constituencies had worked so hard to achieve union.

¹⁶ John Huxtable, extract from sermon preached at the Covenant service to inaugurate the UCCSA on 03/10/67, as quoted in D Roy Briggs and Joseph Wing, “The Harvest and The Hope: The Story of Congregationalism in Southern Africa” (Johannesburg, UCCSA, 1970), 316.

Throughout the long association of the LMS with Botswana, the missionaries had shown a concern for the political development of the country and had advised and assisted the chiefs in many ways, notably in the initiative which resulted in Bechuanaland being proclaimed a Protectorate in 1895. It was then just a matter of time before colonial rule would end, and with the advent of self-government, Seretse Khama's conviction that democratic structures based on universal franchise were the right form of government for his country Botswana, received full vindication.

In other Southern Africa countries, such as South Africa, the influence of Congregationalism has been clearly demonstrated within the leadership of the liberation movements, such as with the African National Congress (ANC). It is of no small significance that the ANC's first president was a Congregational Minister, in the person of John Dube. Of more international renown, another prominent leader in the ANC's early years¹⁸ and the first African Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Chief Albert Luthuli, was member and a lay leader in the Congregational Church at Groutville, KwaZulu-Natal. Chief Luthuli, whose name is enshrined in the UCCSA's Roll of Honour, is reported to have uttered these salutary words:

I only pray to the Almighty to strengthen my resolve so that nothing may deter me from striving, for the sake of the good name of our beloved country, to make a true democracy and a true union of all the communities in the land.¹⁹

Given the nature and thrust of political leadership within Congregational churches from its early years in Africa, the UCCSA had taken a clear and consistent stance against the racist and oppressive system of apartheid. Under the decisive leadership of people like Joseph Wing, Bonganjalo Goba and John de Gruchy the UCCSA played an important role in critical initiatives, such as the formation of the South African Council of Churches, the statement of the *Message to the Peoples of South Africa*,²⁰ the *Call to Prayer for the End to Unjust Rule*²¹ and the publication of the *Kairos Document*.²² Together with other churches within the ecumenical movement, the UCCSA positioned itself at the forefront of the struggle against apartheid right up until the time when South Africa, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, transitioned into a non-racist, non-sexist democracy in 1994.

Commitment to Education and Medical Work

Congregationalism boasts a rich legacy of the establishment of educational institutions and medical facilities in Southern Africa. The school at the Kuruman Moffat Mission, for instance, which was started by Moffat in 1829, represents the 'mother of all educational work of the LMS among the Batswana, Kalanga and Matabele peoples'.²³ Over a hundred primary schools were established in the old Rhodesia

¹⁷ John Philip, quoted in Joseph Wing (ed), "Pilgrimage of Faith", 123.

¹⁸ Chief Luthuli became President of the ANC from December 1952.

¹⁹ Albert Luthuli, quoted in Joseph Wing (ed), "Pilgrimage of Faith", 123. See also Luthuli, "Let My People Go: The Autobiography of the Great South African Leader" (Glasgow: Fontana, 1987); and Scott Couper, "Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith" (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010).

²⁰ In the wake of the Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa in 1960, the English-speaking churches voiced their opposition and protest through, amongst others, the *Message to the Peoples of South Africa*. In many ways, the *Message*, which declared apartheid a 'false gospel' anticipated the declaration in 1982 of 'Apartheid is a Heresy' by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

²¹ Issued by the South African Council of Churches in 1985.

²² The *Kairos Document* was published in 1985 (Braamfontein, Skotaville) by an activist group dubbed as the 'Kairos Theologians'. The Document, which described its purpose as a 'Challenge to the Church', sharply critiqued 'State Theology' and 'Church Theology', calling for a decisive move towards 'Prophetic Theology'.

²³ Joseph Wing, "Water from the Rock", in *Gales of Change: Responding to a Shifting Missionary Context: The Story of the London Missionary Society, 1945 – 1977*, ed. Bernard Thorogood (Geneva, WCC Publications, 1994), 31.

and South Africa together with four institutions of higher learning, namely at Tiger Kloof²⁴ (South Africa), Inyati, Hope Fountain and Dombodema (all in the former Rhodesia).

With regard to medical establishments, the Scottish Livingstone Hospital at Molepolole, Botswana which was staffed and maintained by the United Free Church of Scotland in association with the LMS and the UCCSA had begun a period of expansion when its new maternity wing was opened in 1951. This hospital became renowned throughout Botswana as a place of healing and evangelism, with a special ministry among the Bakwena tribe and the remote villages of the Kalahari. The Livingstone Hospital was subsequently transferred to the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Botswana, but the institution has retained a Christian ethos which had been such a marked feature of its life and work.

Other Features of Congregationalism

All the other theological, ecclesiological and ecclesiastical features of Congregationalism in its original design and purpose remain present within the life, work and witness of Congregational churches in Africa. These are, inter alia:

LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST IN CHURCH AND WORLD

The confession of faith, namely 'Jesus is Lord', is the only essential condition for membership within a Congregational Church. There is the clear understanding within Congregational circles that though we are amenable to other credal statements and articles of faith, once they are made conditions of membership, the local church which insists upon them ceases to be Congregational.

AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

Scripture is the primary witness to God's revelation – the only basis on which we can know God's will in Christ. Scripture rightly understood and interpreted in the Church and in the individual Christian's life leads to faith, obedience and practice. Within Congregationalism, each member of the Church has the right and responsibility to study Scripture, and the mind of Christ is revealed as the Christian community gather together for prayer, reflection and action.

THE NONCONFORMIST CONSCIENCE AND INDEPENDENCE FROM ANY STATE OR EPISCOPAL CONTROL

In Congregationalism, the roots of the 'Nonconformist Conscience' is, according to Joseph Wing, 'to be found not in a kind of negative attitude which is always against the government, but in the great principle enunciated by St Paul in his letter to the Romans 12:2: "Be not conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, what is good and pleasing to him"'.²⁵

RELATIVE AND TRANSIENT AUTHORITY OF CREEDS, CONFESSIONS AND AFFIRMATIONS

The authority of creeds, confessions and affirmations in Congregationalism is never absolute or definitive or without need for further explanation. This is partly so because, at every critical stage in its history, the Church encounters new situations to which it has to respond. As such, the church is compelled to

²⁴ The Tiger Kloof Institution counts among its alumni Sir Seretse Khama and Sir Ketumile Masire, the first two Presidents of Botswana.

²⁵ Joseph Wing, "The Nonconformist Conscience", in *Jesus in Lord in Church and World: Studies in the Nature of Congregationalism* (Braamfontein, UCCSA, 1980), 37.

reformulate its faith statements and confessions which again in time became outdated and in some cases irrelevant. For this reason, the Congregational Church is, in this sense, not a confessional but a covenantal church.

THE CHURCH'S EXERCISE OF A MINISTERIAL AND NOT A MAGISTERIAL AUTHORITY IN ALL MATTERS OF FAITH, ORDER AND DISCIPLINE

In Congregationalist polity and practice, the 'courts' of the church have a responsibility, just as the gathered church, to discern the mind of Christ in order to enable faith and obedience among its members and adherents. The biblical promise 'where two and three are gathered in my name' means, in Congregationalist understanding, that Christ is present through the Word and Spirit to guide the church according to God's will. Accordingly, church government in Congregationalism is not democratic – in the sense of the Westminster System – it is church government under the guidance and authority of Christ. Authority in the church is Christ's authority. Consequently, the church cannot exercise *lordship* – which belongs rightly to Christ alone. Therefore, the church exercises ministerial and not magisterial authority.

FREEDOM OF INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE AND THE RIGHT TO DISSENT

Congregationalism was born in dissent, when the founding members refused to accept the authority of the state as expressing the mind of Christ for them. At the same time, Congregationalists believe in tolerance and respect for others who hold diverse and even conflicting views.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GATHERED CHURCH, AND THAT EACH LOCAL CHURCH IS A GATHERED COMPANY OF BELIEVERS WHO DISCERN THE MIND OF CHRIST AND THE WILL OF GOD

An understanding of the church as a group of believers who have acknowledged Jesus Christ as Lord, and have covenanted with God and with one another to walk in the ways of the Lord made known and yet to be made known, undergirds Congregational ecclesiology. In addition Congregationalists universally hold to the principle of the independence and autonomy of the local church from external control in all matters of worship, witness and governance. At the same time, there exists a creative tension of independence and inter-dependence in the relationship between all church constituencies.

African Congregationalism and African Congregational churches, locate themselves very firmly within the global family of reformed churches, and within the ethos of the international ecumenical movement as represented especially by the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the World Council of Churches and the Council for World Mission. Theologically and ecclesologically, African Congregationalism traces its roots back to the Reformation teachings of John Calvin, in conjunction with the radical Anabaptist tradition that developed on the European continent and in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Epilogue: A Brief Critical Appraisal

It is universally recognised that the LMS was a pioneering and ground-breaking nineteenth century Christian missionary organisation. As shown in the chapters above, the passion, commitment and enterprise demonstrated by the organisation's missionary personnel are second to none in that era. However, like all other colonial mission bodies, the LMS approach, understanding and practice of mission and evangelism were not free from the influences of colonialism, cultural imperialism and paternalism. The

negative impact and consequences of colonial-era mission, and the criticisms of the mission bodies and missionaries are well documented in a whole body of literature.²⁶

The features of Congregationalism exported by the LMS and the ABCFM to Africa therefore came with the inevitable global North's ideological and ecclesiological baggage. For instance, in terms of its polity, Congregationalism is rather prone to defacement, whereby freedom under Christ so easily degenerates into freedom 'to do and to believe as we please'. This negative tendency is, almost inevitably, also ingrained within the fabric of African Congregationalism, resulting all too often in the undermining of unity within Congregational churches on the continent. In the same way, an over-emphasis on local church autonomy leads to self-imposed isolationism.

On the challenge of 'voice and voicelessness' within global mission, Mokhele Madise and Itumeleng Mothoagae observe that 'the African continent continues to be an echoing voice amidst the dominant discourse'.²⁷ Ashley Smith, a Caribbean missiologist, poses a sharp question about the rootedness of Christianity in the Caribbean in his seminal text entitled 'Potted Plants or Real Roots?'.²⁸ Smith argues that the modern missionary movement bequeathed to the Caribbean context churches that are schizophrenic, because they were not allowed to be themselves. Does this same critique apply to African Christianity and African Congregational churches? Western Congregationalism seems to have found a comfortable home in Africa. Only time, however, will tell whether this home becomes a permanent dwelling place!

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²⁶ The full list is too numerous to mention. For related publications during more recent decades, see Jesse Mugambi, "Christian Heritage and Contemporary Christianity" (Nairobi: Nairobi University Press, 1989); Kwame Bediako, "Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience" (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004); David Bosch, "Transforming Mission" (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); Ogbu Kalu, "African Christianity: an African story" (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007); Desmond van der Water, "Postcolonial Mission: Power and Partnership in World Christianity" (Charleston: Sopher Press, 2010); Jonathan Ingleby, "Beyond Empire: Postcolonialism & Mission in a Global Context" (Milton Keynes: Authorhouse, 2010).

²⁷ Mokhele J.S. Madise and Itumeleng D. Mothoagae (Guest Editors), "Editorial", *Missionalia: South African Journal of Missiology*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (November 2012): 188.

²⁸ Ashley Smith, "Real Roots or Potted Plants" (Jamaica, Mandeville Publishers, 1984).

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