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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Kapere, Maria
Publisher	Regnum Books International
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Download date	2026-06-28 13:01:31
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166392

(80) CHRISTIANITY IN NAMIBIA

Maria Kapere

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	2,002,000	91.2%	2,764,000	92.1%	2.2%
Independents	268,000	12.2%	343,000	11.4%	1.7%
African initiated	247,000	11.3%			
Protestants	1,457,000	66.4%	1,910,000	63.6%	1.8%
Lutheran	1,134,000	51.7%			
Reformed, Presbyterian	151,000	6.9%			
Anglicans	70,000	3.2%			
Pentecostal	32,200	1.5%			
Adventist	24,700	1.1%			
Roman Catholics	420,000	19.2%	510,000	17.0%	1.3%
<i>Pentecostals/Charismatics</i>	348,000	15.9%	445,000	14.8%	1.7%
<i>Evangelicals</i>	296,000	13.5%	357,000	11.9%	1.3%
adherents of traditional African religions	129,000	5.9%	130,000	4.3%	0.0%
Baha'is	10,500	0.5%	14,500	0.5%	2.2%
Muslims	7,500	0.3%	11,000	0.4%	2.6%
Jews	2,500	0.1%	3,800	0.1%	2.8%
people professing no religion	42,100	1.9%	78,800	2.6%	4.3%
Total population	2,194,000	100.0%	3,002,000	100.0%	2.1%

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

Introduction

Namibia is situated in the south-western corner of Africa. It shares borders with Angola in the north, South Africa in the south, Botswana in the east, Zambia and Zimbabwe in the north-east and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. Its total land area is about 824,295 sq km. It has a population of 2.4 million according to the population census of 2012.

The country is predominantly arid, a desert or semi-desert country, of which the Namib Desert in the west stretches the full length of the coastline from the Kunene River in the north to the Orange River in the south.

Namibia was occupied by the Germans from 1884 to 1915. During World War I, the South Africans took over from the Germans and administered the country as a mandate, until after World War II when it annexed the country.

The repressive apartheid laws were also enforced in Namibia by the South African government, and this led to discontent among the black and coloured populace, which eventually led to the formation of the

liberation movement, the South-West Africa Peoples Organization (SWAPO) in 1961. Namibia gained independence from South Africa on 21st March 1990. Religious freedom is enshrined in the constitution.

The history of Christianity in Namibia started when a certain group of Namibians, mostly the Nama and Coloureds, crossed the Orange River from present-day South Africa and brought Christianity with them, having learned it from the Dutch.¹ They crossed the Orange River after 1652, settling in southern and central Namibia. The London Missionary Society (LMS) arrived in the area in 1812 and formed an interdenominational organization that included Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists.

Their biggest achievement was the translation of the Bible into one of the Namibian languages, Khoekhoengowab (Damara-Nama). Lack of supplies and trouble with Namibians over grazing land led the LMS to request the Rhenish Mission Society (RMS), which consisted of various Lutheran and other Protestant churches in Germany, to take over their work.

The RMS had arrived in 1842 with the first German colonists and was carrying out an aggressive campaign to convert Namibians, dismissing African indigenous religions and culture as inferior to Christianity and western culture. Anglican mission work in Namibia can be traced back to 1860, while the Roman Catholic Church arrived in 1882. Both these churches encountered many difficulties, including German government prohibitions against working in the existing Lutheran mission fields. The first congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church was established in 1898 at Warmbad in southern Namibia.

From the 1920s, Namibian Christians began to create self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating and self-theologizing churches. In 1946, the African Methodist Episcopal Church was established in Namibia as one of the African Initiated or Independent Churches (AICs). A variety of larger and smaller independent churches were established in Namibia. Examples are the messianic tradition of Chief Hendrik Witbooi (1890), the Ethiopian Church secessions (1923, 1955), and Zionist Prophetic Churches after 1955. Most of these groups are characterized by features typical of African Independent Churches (AICs). They were founded by means of a dynamic process of secession from mainline churches (Ethiopians) or Pentecostal churches (Zionists). Most of them centre on a specific leader or at times two leaders, and can thus be termed 'messianic' or 'prophetic'. The leaders of Ethiopian churches tend to be messianic while the leaders of the Zionist churches tend to be prophetic. Some of these churches are quite close to their mainline counterparts and have become strong and well-respected denominations in Namibia.

The first efforts of independent Christian leadership in Namibia are to be found in the work of catechists and evangelists who continued their ministries, after the departure of the missionaries (lay preachers and lay church planters). Several churches were built by indigenous leaders and tribal chiefs. Jonker Afrikaner built the first church in Windhoek in 1840, and preached to the Herero community. Some other Orlam chiefs followed his example in establishing the churches within their tribal areas, e.g. Chief Hendrik Hendriks of the Velskoendraers in 1846, and the Herero Chief Zeraua in 1864 at Otjimbingwe, who contributed 10,000 bricks for a new church building. This was a trend that resulted from Commando Church of Chief Hendrik Witbooi of Gibeon after 1890.

In 1971, during the struggle for liberation from South African administration, the country's churches rejected apartheid and the South African occupation of Namibia in the famous 'Open Letter of 1971'. Addressed to the South African Prime Minister, John Vorster, the letter demanded that South Africa co-operate with the United Nations to make Namibia an independent state.

The publication of the Open Letter broke the silence of the church on social and political issues and sparked a wave of protests throughout the country, including strikes by workers in Walvis Bay, Windhoek and Tsumeb, and brought Namibia to international attention. The letter clearly stated: 'If we, as the Church, remain silent much longer, we will become liable for the life and future of our country and its

¹ Paul John Isaak, *The Story of the Paulinum Seminary in Namibia*. Windhoek: Namibia Publishing House, 2013:pp. vii-xv

people.’ Thus, the churches committed themselves to ‘see to it that the Human Rights (Charter) be put into operation, that South West Africa (Namibia) may become a self-sufficient and independent state’. Church newsletters spread the message to the country and beyond. Thereafter, the churches provided institutionalized resistance to the South African regime: church buildings offered sanctuary, and pastors and laity formulated an ideology and action plan for liberation.

The Spread and Existence of Christianity in Namibia

With one of the world’s biggest gemstone diamond deposits, large quantities of copper, zinc, uranium and salt, vast tracts of land ideal for cattle farming, and fish-laden coastal waters, from the 1840s Namibia attracted European settlers. With the coming of European settlers, the Germans in 1884 made the territory a colony known as South West Africa and began a sustained drive to subdue the indigenous communities through ‘protection treaties’, which granted German companies the right to ‘develop’ the area economically. The settlers grew rich, but the indigenous people became impoverished. Lutheran missionaries who arrived with the Germans attempted to Christianize Namibia based upon the strategy of the four Cs: Commerce, Christianity, Civilization and Conquest.

Such a history of the four Cs was brought its climax when, in 1904, Kaiser Wilhelm II sent a German commander, General Lothar von Trotha, to crush the liberation struggle in Namibia by fair means or foul.

However, the Africans were conscious of the strategy of the four Cs and started to employ their own discourse based on African spirituality with its anthropological core value of *Ubuntu* (‘I am because we are and, since we are, therefore I am’). Instead of rejecting Christianity outright, however, Namibians Africanized the religion by contextualizing the gospel, for example, by holding onto their faith in the Triune God.²

Recent Major Trends and Developments at a National Level for Christianity

Namibia remains a predominantly Christian country. The three Evangelical Lutheran churches – the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN) and the German Evangelical Church (GELC) – have the largest Christian membership. The Roman Catholic Church with 340,000, the Anglican Church with 200,000, the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Caprivi with a membership of about 30,000, the African Methodist Church with 80,000, and the Dutch Reformed Church with 35,000. There are about more than 200 Pentecostal and Charismatic churches with membership varying between two hundred to five thousand members each. The Namibian Christian Apostle and Prophet Association also applied for membership.

Christianity in Namibia is growing. New Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are being established daily, even to the despair of mainline and other Pentecostal churches.

However, the main challenge for the church in Namibia remains its prophetic mission. Before Independence, during the Liberation War and the struggle against colonialism, unity among the major churches in Namibia was solid, vibrant and prophetic. Leaders of the six member churches of the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) formed a united front and expressed themselves against oppression, discrimination and racial segregation with the contempt that it deserved.

The issue of social economic justice remains complex, challenging and critical. Issues like poverty, unemployment, especially youth, land, gender justice, HIV/AIDS, ethnicity, racism and tribalism are on the rise. Political tolerance is not practised. Many people are asking why the Voice of CCN has become quiet. CCN started a dialogue forum in late 2014 which became more vocal and visible in 2015. Reconciliation,

² Isaak, *The Story of the Paulinum Seminary in Namibia*, vii.

peace and reconstruction should be seriously reflected upon by the church and relevant strategies, with plans and actions mapped out and implemented.

Membership of CCN churches has grown from six at Independence to seventeen. Even the Association for Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in Namibia has become a member.

The Christian Leaders in Namibia are challenged to give direction, and it becomes inevitable that collaboration and co-operation amongst the denominations is enhanced.

Relations with Other Major Faith Traditions

According to the Constitution, Namibia remains a secular state (Article 1) where all persons shall have the right to freedom to practise any religion and to manifest such practice (Article 21). Historically, through the determined efforts of its people, Namibia gained its independence and immediately implemented a model constitution, guaranteeing fundamental human rights and freedoms as a sovereign, democratic, unitary and secular state.

By definition, a secular state is a concept whereby a state or country purports to be officially neutral in matters of religion and to treat all its citizens equally, regardless of religion, and claims to avoid preferential treatment for a citizen from a particular religion over other religions. Thus, in Namibia we have a very peaceful co-existence of the various faiths.

Such an atmosphere of peace and religious tolerance is illustrated by the fact that Namibians have adapted Christianity and African indigenous religious rituals by means of indigenous music, songs, artwork and forms of worship. Drumming, singing and dance have attracted people to Sunday services and church-sponsored youth gatherings. Such integration has particularly motivated Christian youth.

Furthermore, despite the fact that more than 90% of Namibians claim to be Christian, other major religions such as African Traditional Religion, Islam, Judaism, etc. are given equal status in Namibia.

Key Instruments which Churches in Namibia have Developed to Contribute to Christian Unity

At the outset, one must state as clearly as possible that, in Namibia, any discussion on unity has to be linked with ecumenism. Let me briefly explain. The story of Namibia as the product of unity and ecumenism must be told from both a political and a religious perspective. In modern history, since the twentieth century, the first steps that were taken for the birth of the Namibian nation as the product of ecumenism and the nation's coming together in unity is both religious and political.³ From the beginning, Namibians have looked to and found solidarity from the broad ecumenical movements, namely, the World Council of Churches, other ecumenical church bodies and organisations, the United Nations and, in Namibia, from the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO). These broad ecclesiological and political ecumenical bodies have been courageous enough to support the liberation struggle and challenge the churches to redouble their efforts to seek unity among themselves and to ensure that Namibia would be free.

The search for unity and ecumenism started the process of conscientizing Namibian Christians as well as offering a window of opportunity for ecclesiological and political bodies to play a major role in the liberation of Namibia – and they have made a decisive contribution which in the end culminated in the UN supervised elections and, as a result, the long-awaited Namibian independence became a reality. The culmination of all these developments can be summed up in one sentence: ecclesiological and political

³ Isaak, Paul John, 2012 “Cultural Dominance and Mental Slavery: The Role of German and African missionaries in Colonial Namibia” in *The German Protestant Church in Colonial Southern Africa: The Impact of Overseas Work from the Beginnings until the 1920s*. Edited by Lessing, Hanns, Bester, Julia, et al. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2012, 578-579.

unity and ecumenism made its day in Namibia because of the upholding of the biblical principle in Galatians 3:28: ‘There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’

The key instrument that the Namibian Churches developed to promote and participate in Christian unity and ecumenism was the establishment of the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN). In the early 1970s, the Namibian churches entered into a loose alliance, the Christian Centre, which had a dual role: to speak with a united and ecumenical voice against injustice on behalf of the voiceless, and to initiate enabling projects for the poor. This initiative was later revamped and its scope broadened and, as a result, CCN was formed in 1978.⁴ CCN provided further opportunities for the various church denominations to come together to share their experiences and make joint statements on matters of common interest. CCN is an ecumenical organization, a reconciling, healing and caring fellowship of Christian churches, united in service to society with the objective of broadening ecumenism in Namibia.

CCN is an ecumenical body whose concerns extend from religious to social and educational matters. Core values of CCN include:

- Upholding the dignity of all people as created in God’s image
- Being committed stewards of resources entrusted to them
- Networking and partnership with other stakeholders
- Promoting study of the Bible and obedience to Christ
- Standing for accountability, transparency, Christlike leadership and unity in diversity
- Commitment to reconciliation
- Advocating for justice, peace, fundamental human rights, freedom and human dignity for all, and
- Aspiring to be a sustainable Council

Currently, CCN is encouraging its member churches to establish ecumenical committees round the country. These forums are intended to enhance stronger relations among the churches at a local level to address social and economic challenges like moral and ethical decay in our societies – to help communities to help themselves through projects.

Common Instruments of Social Work

Churches and faith-based organizations (FBOs) play a critical role in the lives of Namibians. They shape and influence spiritual, social, health, cultural and the economic development of the individuals, families and communities they serve. Ninety per cent of the Namibian population is regarded as Christian. This implies that the churches have a ready audience, willing to attend church services. This indicates that the Namibian churches do have a niche to reach out to, positively influencing the behaviour and attitudes of its followers for the promotion of more equal and inclusive rights-based development. The church also reaches the rural and remote areas where other institutions do not.

The Council of Churches in Namibia started the Ecumenical Social Community Action Programme (ESCA) funded by the Helsinki Deaconess Institute in 2012, its mandate being to empower vulnerable and marginalized communities for self-reliance and engaging in activity for sustainable national development.

ESCA is initiated as a means through which the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) mobilizes Namibian domestic resources for more equal development through the application of participatory methods in vulnerable communities. It is raising awareness about the socio-economic challenges facing the Namibian people; and the role of the church in mobilizing resources for transformation through advocacy

⁴ “The Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) is an umbrella of all major churches in Namibia with 18 member churches representing about 1.5 million Namibians constituting 90 % of the population. (See www.ccnamibia.org)

(Prophetic Voice) and community development. Training of clergy, youth, and women had been the focus for the past two years.

The Council has also signed a memorandum of understanding with the government. This enables communities to be supported to establish community projects for self-help.

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