
# Anabaptist churches in Africa (35)

## (35) ANABAPTIST CHURCHES IN AFRICA

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### Introduction

The story of those who were pejoratively called 'rebaptizers' or Anabaptists in Swiss, German and Dutch parts of Europe during the sixteenth century is characterised by 'believers' churches' which practised Jesus' love of one's enemy, with some exceptions, during a century of sectarian violence and civil wars.[1] The first Anabaptists understood the gospel message and how to be the church as *one calling and way of life* because of Jesus Christ and Christianity's *beginnings.*[2] Anabaptists continue to interpret Jesus' message of peace and Jesus' cruciform way of making peace, as *one* experience in the apostles' witness to Christ at the *beginnings* of the New Testament Church. Anabaptists' strong rejection of magisterial involvement in or control of the church, or missionary activity – our clear separation from state powers – also expresses an understanding of *the ending,* the *eschaton*, the *goal* of time and history. For Anabaptists, the church actively anticipates this time, when the crucified Lamb finally brings to submission all earthly powers and *ends* sin, war, death and sorrow, when the new creation, already come, is finally accomplished in Jesus' eternal healing of all nations. This essay first surveys the century of *beginnings of Anabaptist witness* on African soil.[3] The discussion then skips to the present, to consider the ecclesial and missiological challenges being faced by African Anabaptists today. The essay concludes with the Anabaptist invitation to peace-making as the heart of Christian witness, *in between* our very distinctive *beginnings* and *the Ending,* the goal of history, whose 'today' all Christians everywhere may live out together as we pray, 'May your Kingdom come…'[4]

### Beginnings in Matabeleland and the Congo Basin

After four centuries of western missionary endeavour in Africa, Anabaptists were among the last arrivals, coming at first in 1898 to southern Matabeleland, Southern Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe). This area had been twice-conquered, once by King Lobengula of the amaNdebele[5] in the 1880s, and then after the death of Lobengula, by the British in 1896. In July 1898, Brethren in Christ (BIC) missionaries from Pennsylvania, Jesse and Elizabeth Engle, Hannah Frances Davidson and Alice Heisey, took up 3,000

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[1] Three experiences have formed my growing commitment to the Anabaptist tradition: discovering Anabaptist role models who helped me object to conscription in the South African Defence Force, on grounds of conscience, during P.W. Botha's national state of emergency in 1986, conversations with Alan and Eleanor Kreider in Manchester, and participating in Mennonite worship and church life in the London Mennonite Centre till 1991. As a Mennonite Church does not exist in South Africa, my Anabaptist commitment continues in membership of our neighbourhood Methodist Society, and in the Anabaptist Network of South Africa. An introduction to the Anabaptist story is Walter Klaasen's *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001).

[2] Theology presented in this essay has been shaped by essays on Anabaptist missiology and history in Wilbert Shenk, ed., *Anabaptism and Mission* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984).

[3] For simplicity I have adapted all historical narratives in this essay from John Lapp and Arnold Snyder, eds., *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts: Global Mennonite History Series: Africa* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006).

[4] An introduction to peace-making as the missional heart of the Church's witness is Alan Kreider, Eleanor Kreider, and Paulus Widjaja, *A Culture of Peace: God's Vision for the Church* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005).

[5] The Northern Ndebele people (Zimbabwean Ndebele: *amaNdebele*) are a Bantu nation and ethnic group in Southern Africa, who share a common Ndebele culture and Ndebele language.

hectares of land given by Cecil Rhodes as part of his drive to settle the British colony with white farmers and missionaries.

Deep mistrust was felt by the now leaderless amaNdebele for the host of incoming Protestant, Catholic and Anabaptist settlers, but this did not deter the BIC missionaries from quickly identifying with African people through *ilimo*, a Nguni village tradition of sharing manual labour. After working with the people, missionaries would preach, pray or invite the amaNdebele to Matopo Mission (today Matobo) to attend a Sunday School. In October 1898, Miss Davidson and Miss Heisey opened their first school for boys at Matopo, which taught Bible literacy and agricultural skills. Ten Matopo school boys committed to follow Christ in the first year. Together with Mlobeki Moyo, the first African BIC evangelist, these boys were baptized in the Ginqa River in August 1899.

BIC missionaries, like all nineteenth-century westerners, shared such paternalistic ideas of the Victorian age as the 'heathen' and 'winning souls'. However, the missionaries' practice of *ilimo,* their decision not to build missionary compounds but to welcome Africans into their homes, and their agricultural assistance, in an area devastated by recent wars, fostered trust and increasingly easy partnerships with African evangelists and amaNdebele communities. By 1908, Mlobeki Moyo, together with the Rev. Harvey, Mrs Emma Frey and the Rev. Henry Steigerwald, had established a second mission station at Mtshabezi. The centre included a church, a school for fugitive girls escaping arranged polygamous marriages, a boys' day school, vegetable training gardens and a poultry-raising project. In 1923, the pastor and teacher Manhlenhle Kumalo was sent south-west from Mtshabezi, where he was joined in 1924 by Bishop and Mrs Steigerwald, to pioneer a third mission centre at Wanezi. Martha Kaufman was to pioneer the first BIC community health services here, and the Rev. J.H. Frey established the Wanezi Bible Institute here in the 1930s, which was to train thousands of BIC pastors and lay workers.

BIC missionary work spread to Chief Macha's region north of the Zambezi (today Zambia) in 1907 when Miss Davidson, Miss Adda Engle, Ndabambi Moyo and Gono Sibanda left Matopo to pioneer schools and clinics among the baTongo people north of the Zambezi. *Nkosazana Debison,* as Hannah Frances Davidson was affectionately called, the pioneer nurse at Matopo, was now instrumental in starting nine outstations and schools from Macha, and for translating the New Testament into siTonga. She is remembered for tireless medical service that would eventually come to fruition in 1951 in the birth of the Macha Mission Hospital. Her fluency in siNdebele, siTonga and biblical Greek and her obvious love for the people meant that by the 1930s and 1940s the churches of the Macha Region were full of followers of Christ whose lives 'did more preaching than what they were able to say about their love for God and His saving grace'.[6]

Whereas Dutch Reformed and Anglican church-planters of Southern Africa were closely identified with colonial establishments, BIC missionaries laboured at first almost entirely free of colonial patronage. This allowed for an early devolution of power to national leadership, so that in 1919 at Mtshabezi, African leaders were first invited to attend the annual Council of the BIC Board. In the following year African pastors, deacons and evangelists asked for an African representative to sit on the Council Executive. The missionaries responded by inviting *two* African representatives to serve the Executive as the first BIC African Overseers under the Bishop. Thus, Manhlenhle Kumalo and Nyamazane Dube began serving the Executive immediately as Overseers of the churches East and West of the Mzingwane River. In 1930, when the BIC council demarcated three church districts with Matopo, Mtshabezi and Wanezi at the centre of each, Ndebenduku Dlodlo was elected as third Overseer to the Executive Board, instead of a missionary, to oversee the founding District of Matopo.

Anabaptist presence in the Belgian Congo (today Democratic Republic of Congo) commenced in 1911 when Mennonites from the USA, Lawrence and Rose Haig, and the Congolese evangelist, Mutombo from

[6] A quote from R.M. Sichala's *Keep the Light Burning* cited in *Anabaptist Songs,* 55.

Luebo in south-western Congo, established 'chapel farms' for orphaned children at Kalamba Mukenge and Djoko Punda along the southern Kasai tributary of the Congo River. Two Anabaptist denominations from the USA, the Central Conference of Mennonites and the Defenseless Mennonite Church supported this work because the people of Kasai had been displaced by Arab slave traders one generation earlier. A joint mission committee of these two Mennonite conferences, the Congo Inland Mission (CIM), was established in January 1912. By 1917 the first seventeen Christians, mainly Mennonite school matriculants, were baptised at Djoko Punda.

In the early 1920s, Aaron Janzen, a Mennonite Brethren missionary with CIM working at Nyanga among the Pende people of East Kasai, moved away northwest to pioneer a strictly Mennonite Brethren mission centre at Baphende in the Kikwit area of the Kwilu River. He established farms and schools. So, by the mid-1920s there were two branches of Anabaptist presence in the southern Congo basin, one supported by CIM and the other an indigenous Congolese Mennonite Brethren initiative of the Janzens and their African colleagues.

By 1930, CIM reported 800 Mennonite church members and 6,675 scholars, with translation work for a Bible in Giphende underway. In the same year a Congolese team working with Ernestina Janzen of the Mennonite Brethren published Matthew, Luke and Acts in Kituba, a labour that continued after Janzen's death in 1937, until the New Testament was completed in 1943.

In 1933, a second independent Mennonite Brethren centre of activity commenced with the Rev. H.B. Bartsh in the Bologo and Dengese regions, and these, together with Mennonite Brethren stations on the Kwilu River, were amalgamated under the administration of the North American Mennonite Brethren (ABMB) in 1943. CIM and ABMB missionaries deliberately settled in areas that lacked basic services, so as to practically demonstrate the good news of Christ. 'This spirit of self-sacrifice is embedded in the collective memory of Congolese Christians.'[7]

As in Matabeleland, the beginnings of Mennonite witness in Belgian Congo centred on winsome partnerships with African evangelists, translators and teachers, with a focus on practical demonstration of Jesus' message, through agriculture, education and health. A perception of 'psychological dependency' by the Congolese on CIM and ABMB missionaries would only arise between the 1940s and Zaïre independence in 1960 when North American and Belgian state subsidies were increasingly used to fund Mennonite hospitals and schools. Nevertheless, as in Southern Africa, the beginnings of Anabaptist witness in the Congo basin bears a resemblance to the earliest Anabaptist tradition of the Radical Reformation, because Christ's socially transforming message of peace was gladly accepted by people previously displaced in internecine wars.

## Anabaptist Beginnings in East Africa

After travels in Northern Tanganyika (today's Tanzania) with Emille Sywulke of the Africa Inland Mission, Orie Miller of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and Elam Stauffer of the USA's Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (EMBMC) decided to commence church planting at the village of Shirati in the Mara district, between Mt Kilimanjaro and Lake Victoria – the far north-western corner of Tanganyika. Elam and Elizabeth Stauffer and John and Ruth Moseman commenced in 1934 with Zedekiah Kisare, a local interpreter. Their vision matched the remoteness of their location, and reflected EMBMC's goal, to establish churches that would support local people through education and health care as independently as possible of the colonial administration. Between 1935 and 1938 five missionary stations including Bukiroba, Mugango, Bumangi and Nyabasi, with two hospitals, were already at work in this

[7] Erik Kumedisa, "Mennonite Churches in Central Africa" in *Anabaptist Songs,* 59.

remote lowland and midland region, directed by EMBMC missionary couples, the Stauffers, Mosemans, Shenks, Festers and Hursts.

Tanganyika's remote Mennonite mission centres resembled those of Congo and Matabeleland – churches, schools and medical clinics surrounded by networks of satellite outstations supporting scores of small churches, schools and agricultural demonstration farms. These African Mennonites and their North American missionary partners welcomed the 'East African Revival' which swept through the Great Lakes region during the 1940s. By 1954, Shirati Hospital was well established and started its pioneering leprosy work and research among the region's most marginalized people.

In Ethiopia, Mennonite presence began with an offer of economic assistance by the Mennonite Relief Committee (MRC) when Ethiopians had defeated an Italian army of occupation in 1945. At a time when Emperor Haile Selassie prohibited missionary activity in all Ethiopian Orthodox regions of the country, he invited former United Nations relief workers, Paul Hooley and Samuel Yoder of MRC, to Nazareth, south of Addis Ababa, to convert an abandoned cotton gin establishment into a hospital and community development centre. By 1947 MRC's 40-bed Haile Mariam Mambo Memorial Hospital, named after an outspoken outpatient, was fully functional, with an outpatient facility and nurses' training school.

After an audience with the Emperor, Mennonite missionaries Dorsa Mishler and Daniel Sensening received permission to evangelize a non-Ethiopian Orthodox area, and were assigned to the Muslim region of East Ethiopia near Deder. They built a school and clinic there in 1950. Meanwhile, at an MRC-established school at Bedeno near Nazareth, a group of ten Ethiopians converted to follow Christ and were taken in secret to Addis Ababa to be baptised, to avoid attention regarding the Imperial ban. Bati Ensermo and Badi Tessew, among this first group of 'rebaptized' Ethiopians, became two of the most fearless and fruitful Ethiopian evangelists, despite censure from the authorities. Thus the beginnings of Ethiopian Anabaptist witness conformed to the 'believers' church' pattern of missionary practice in place since the Radical Reformation. The Mennonites clothed the message of Jesus Christ in their labours of practical assistance, this time to a nation devastated by military occupation and civil war.

## Most Recent Beginnings in the West and South

A Ghanaian baptized in the London Mennonite Fellowship, George Thompson, began church planting in southern Ghana in 1956, assisted by US missionaries. One generation later, mission work by maturing Ghanaian congregations led to the birth of three Mennonite churches in neighbouring Togo, between 1993 and 1996. Mennonite partnerships with other denominations have also resulted in a growing Mennonite presence in Nigeria, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Senegal and Mali. This intentional commitment to partnerships in beginning Anabaptist witness in new parts of Africa has shaped work from the 1960s in South Africa's former Transkei region, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, and in South Africa itself since 1994. Because of the saturation of missionaries and churches in the region, and the challenge of avoiding complicity with the apartheid regime, MCC, Mennonite and Brethren in Christ conferences from North America consciously decided *not* to plant new churches there, but to work alongside or within established churches in service or support roles. Thus an Anabaptist presence in Southern Africa has steadily grown, through relief work, agricultural development, advocacy for refugees and vulnerable women and children, pastoral ministry in churches, Bible training for African Independent Church pastors, and most recently, through MCC's peace education programme and the Mennonite Church Canada-initiated Anabaptist network in South Africa.[8]

[8] These insights come from working alongside MCC colleagues, James and Joan Alte and Mennonite Church Canada colleagues, Karen and Andrew Suderman. For in depth discussion of South African Mennonite witness see Andrew G. Suderman, "Mennonite Experience in South Africa: An Alternative Imagination", *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (April 2015): 253-274. Also see www.anisa.co.za for more on the work of ANiSA.

## In Between *Beginnings* and the *Ending*

African Anabaptists have been sorely tested in our commitment to Jesus' message of peace by our Radical Reformation tradition of living peaceably in the church. The African Anabaptist story *between* our distinctive missionary *beginnings* and *the Ending* we live towards in Jesus' in-breaking Kingdom of peace has also challenged us to introduce peace in many violent conflicts. Our continent's liberation from colonial powers was marred by millions of deaths though debilitating liberation wars. During that period, trust with African Mennonites was sometimes broken as mission boards suddenly recalled missionaries, for example on the eve of independence in Belgian Congo and Rhodesia. In the early post-colonial era, there were sometimes destructive conflicts between rebellious African Anabaptist leaders and national and global Anabaptist structures. More recently, bloodshed has flared up again in Rwanda, Burundi, South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in the Horn of Africa and in North, East, Central and West Africa.

Between our beginnings in Jesus, the Radical Reformation and African missionary beginnings and where we stand today, African Anabaptists have often been tempted to look away from Christ who we believe is ever-present through the Holy Spirit in situations of conflict. African Anabaptists have sometimes failed but more often succeeded in responding peacefully in these situations.

Since 2006, Mennonite and BIC church membership in Africa has passed half a million members in sixteen countries. Today, Mennonite Churches are found mostly in Central, East and West Africa, while BIC churches are grouped more in the south. The present challenge of Anabaptists throughout Africa is to stand where Jesus stands: to feed the hungry and bring restorative justice to perpetrators and victims of violence, especially prisoners; to rescue child soldiers and child brides; to bring hope to refugees, for example in Kenya; to grieve with the sole survivors of genocide or to create a home and livelihood for street children and prostitutes, for example in Lagos, Accra or Cape Town; to change the hearts of South Africa's wealthy white elites through Jesus' compassion so that restitution for the homeless, hungry and destitute poor can be made; or to bring peaceful interventions into situations of xenophobic violence. There is also the growing challenge to future Christian witness and mission in Africa of increasingly authoritarian government regulation, backed by self-serving hegemonic global corporations.

African Anabaptists' distinctive *beginnings* in the Radical Reformation require us also to renew our understanding of *our ending,* Jesus' finally accomplished eternal reign of *peace,* which comes forward to meet us on African soil in the *present,* each 'today', as we continue in Jesus' prayer, 'Your kingdom come…' When Jesus' message, example and continuing presence enable us, beginning in our churches, to resist violence and so discover surprising possibilities that Jesus opens up through love of enemies, we will be best equipped to face these present and future challenges. African Anabaptists, together with our Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and African Initiated Church brothers and sisters, welcome Jesus' reign of peace to break into our churches. They like to be the church *together,* turning violent history into the sacrificial witness of *peace-making.* In this way we will all be true to our *beginnings* and we will be living truly 'today' towards our one eternal peaceful *ending*.

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*Further Reading*

For general introductions to Anabaptist faith and mission see Gerald J. Mast and J. Denny Weaver, *Defenseless Christianity: Anabaptism for a Nonviolent Church* (Pietermaritzburg: Anabaptist Network in South Africa, 2013) and C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* in the *Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series,* Philip Sheldrake, ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004). A more substantial introduction to Anabaptist history, theology and mission is C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995). For in depth studies of Anabaptist presence in Africa see Jim Bertsche, *CIM/ AIM: A Story of Vision, Commitment and Grace* (Elkhart, IN: AIMM, 1998) and *The Jesus Tribe: Grace Stories from Congo's Mennonites, 1912-2012,* Rod Hollinger-Janzen, Nancy J. Myers, and Jim Bertsche, eds. (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2012). Winsome Anabaptist perspectives on the contemporary challenge of post-Christendom to Christian mission worldwide are found in Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission After Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster: 2009).