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(44) PARA-CHURCH MISSION NETWORKS AND ORGANIZATIONS IN AFRICA (IFES)

Kuzipa Nalwamba

Introduction

This is a descriptive outline of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) and its contribution to mission as a para-church mission organisation. I begin by outlining, broadly, the founding history and missional impetus. Secondly, I present the mission ethos and strategy of IFES and its subsequent spread to and development in Africa, highlighting the opportunities and challenges presented by some public issues in Africa. Finally, I conclude by offering what I consider to be the specific contribution of IFES to the shaping and development of African Christianity, specifically highlighting its ecumenical contribution and its contribution in public life.

A Brief Historical Background and Overview of IFES

Kenneth Latourette attributes the inspiration that led USA churches' engagement in foreign missionary activities to student-initiated activities.¹ Their impact on foreign missionary endeavours lay in their provision of personnel. David Howard also credits student-initiated groups with influencing foreign missionary activity in American churches, beginning with the 'Haystack Prayer Meeting' that began in 1806. He also recounts the work of the 'Cambridge Seven' in Britain and the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM) of 1886-1887 and the Student Foreign Missions Fellowship (SFMF) which later merged with, and became, the missionary department of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) in America. The mission impetus of the IVCF has become enshrined in a mission conference that has been held at Urbana University since 1948. A parallel commission conference takes place under the auspices of the Fellowship of Christian Unions (FOCUS) in Kenya and has been held tri-annually since 1988.²

The Founding of IFES, its Missional Strategy and Ethos

IFES was founded in 1947 at Harvard University in the USA by leaders from ten Christian student movements in the world, namely, Australia, the Netherlands, the UK, Canada, China (a newcomer at the time), France, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland and the USA. They met to confer on the draft constitution at an international conference. The Chinese evangelical student fellowship suggested the formation of a worldwide student movement that became IFES. The dream of those gathered at the conference was to see a clear evangelical witness established in every university in the world. That commitment is still at the heart of IFES ministry and is the basis of its '2020 Living Stones' vision which galvanises the worldwide fellowship around its four distinctives, namely:

1. IFES is an international, interdenominational fellowship of national movements.
2. IFES is an evangelical movement.
3. IFES is committed to student leadership.
4. IFES is committed to the objectives of evangelism, formation and mission.³

¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *These Sought a Country*, New York: Harper & Bros. (1950), 46.

² See, www.intervarsity.org/bible-studies, <http://intervarsity.org/bible-studies/inductive-bible-study-hints>. See also <http://commission2014.info/>.

³ See, <http://intervarsitylink.org/about-us/what-ifes>.

IFES in Africa: Its Development and Spread on the Continent

IFES in Africa can be said to have developed on the wave of enthusiastic missionary initiatives from America and Europe. To that effect, we can surmise that IFES in Africa has its roots in the nineteenth-century missionary movement inspired by the missionary-oriented student groups that emerged in America and led to the advance of strong inter-college contacts that became the international fellowship that became IFES.

In Africa, IFES exists in two regions, divided along colonially defined linguistic lines: the first region covers both English- and Portuguese-speaking Africa (IFES-EPISA) where IFES is present in twenty-four countries and at a pioneering stage in four others, namely, São Tomé, Somaliland, Somalia and Cape Verde Islands and Principe. The second region is French-speaking Africa, where IFES is present in thirteen French-speaking countries. The only French-speaking African countries that remain unreached by IFES are Djibouti, Seychelles and the Comoros Islands. The Africa region does not include North African countries which belong to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The year 1955 saw the beginning of evangelical student work in Africa. At the beginning, British graduates from the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship went to many parts of Africa. In Nigeria, Freddy Crittenden, a former Oxford student leader who had served as a missionary in Africa returned to Britain to enthuse African students who were studying there to return and serve student ministry in Africa. He also mobilized British Christian academics to go and teach in tertiary institutions in Africa to encourage the growth of student witness on the continent.

In Ghana, Tony Wilmot, an Oxford graduate who had worked in both Ghana and Nigeria as a businessman, was keen about the vision of establishing student groups in English-speaking Africa. Wilmot travelled extensively, visiting universities and tertiary institutions to bring that vision to fruition. Students who became active members in turn spread the vision to other campuses. Students were mobilised through annual camps that nurtured student leaders and infused the vision to spread evangelical student work continent-wide. IFES work spread on the wave of this enthusiasm to East and West Africa.

The gradual spread on the continent led to the formation of the Pan-African Fellowship of Evangelical Students (PAFES) in 1958. Members include the University of Kumasi and University of Legon in Ghana, Nairobi University in Kenya, University of Monrovia in Liberia, University of Fourah Bay in Sierra Leone and the University of Salisbury (now Harare), Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and the University of Ibadan, in Nigeria.

In 1960, IFES appointed Alonzo Fairbanks, an Afro-American as PAFES's first travelling secretary. Although Fairbanks was based in Ibadan, he travelled across Africa. John Holmes, once a lecturer in Ghana, joined the PAFES staff team in 1962. Tony Wilmot continued to serve as a volunteer support as a kind of adjunct staff.

In 1962, the first PAFES conference took place in West Africa at Winneba in Ghana. Delegates were drawn from the University of Ibadan, Zaria College of Arts and Science and Lagos University. In 1965, an elected committee took over the affairs of PAFES from IFES. Daniel Jonah, a lecturer from Sierra Leone, was the first chairman of PAFES. In 1966, David Gitari of Kenya was appointed as the first general secretary of PAFES. Gottfried Osei-Mensah from Ghana was appointed PAFES travelling secretary for West Africa.

The first student conference for West Africa under the auspices of PAFES was held in Nigeria in September 1966 at Ijabcol Teachers' Training College in Shagamu. Delegates were drawn from Sierra Leone, Ghana, Senegal, Tchad, Congo, Kinshasa (now Democratic Republic of Congo) and Nigeria. It was during this West African PAFES conference that the need to form national student fellowships was first mooted. Ghana Fellowship of Evangelical Students (GHAFES) was born in 1966 and Nigeria Fellowship of Evangelical Students (NIFES) closely followed in 1968.

The work of IFES in Africa was therefore born out of the missionary zeal of young Africans and European and American graduates inspired by their leaders to opt for professions according to a concern for the missionary contribution they could make through them. From these efforts, a number of national movements emerged, many of which were initially funded using the IFES pool fund.

IFES: A Catalyst for Ecumenism in Africa?

Anecdotally, many graduates who have been in IFES fellowships confirm that they were afforded an opportunity to consider their denominational tenets of faith in the light of other denominations. In some cases, though, groups splintered because of doctrinal differences and new groups emerged. Despite that, the interdenominational character of student groups has made meaningful fellowship and mutual accountability possible in the Church in Africa. The camaraderie developed during student days has potential to galvanise the church as an agent of change in society.

Because denominations were imported into Africa, they can be transcended.⁴ Mission stations that determined denominational affiliation in Africa were often determined by colonial jurisdictions. It is not unusual to have a campus fellowship with members ranging from Roman Catholic to mainline Protestant to Pentecostal and newer charismatic churches. In recent years, however, the proliferation of church-based groups on campuses has tempered the interdenominational character of IFES.

IFES and Public Life in Africa

Evangelicalism's world-denying character has often excluded social action.⁵ The post-colonial context compelled IFES to reflect on issues of poverty, governance, corruption, and ethnicity among others.⁶ The 1980s and 1990s saw the changes that ushered in multi-party democracy in many African countries. IFES graduates were among political candidates and others inspired some civil society movements that shaped some of those changes.⁷ In the wake of HIV/AIDS and the recent Ebola crisis, IFES rallied together and pooled resources. On the issue of gender balance, IFES has a long way to go. That said, female students, who are mainly sidelined in many churches, take some leadership roles, albeit still somewhat confined in campus fellowships.⁸

⁴ See Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1998), 183. See also John Weller & Jane Linden, *Mainstream Christianity to 1980 in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe*, Gweru: Mambo Press (1984) and Joseph M. Kapolyo, *The Human Condition: Christian Perspectives through African Eyes*, Downers Grove: IVP Academic (2005).

⁵ See John Stott, *Ibid*, p.28, 29. See also www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant.

⁶ The IFES-EPISA and Francophone Africa IFES regions published topical Bible Studies and Essays on Poverty, Christian political involvement in societal issues alongside other 'regular' materials. See, <http://ifesworld.org/en/regions/epsa-english-and-portuguese-speaking-africa>.

⁷ See Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1998) and see also, Isabel A. Phiri, President Frederick Chiluba and Zambia: Evangelicals and Democracy in a 'Christian Nation', In Ranger T.O (ed), *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2008), 197-206.

⁸ See Kuzipa Nalwamba, "'For Such a Time as This': My Reflections on Serving as First Woman General Secretary of Zambia Fellowship of Evangelical Students", In Isabel Apawo et. al., *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002, 371-388. See also Kuzipa Nalwamba and Aggrey Mugisha, *Champions of Change: Making a Difference Where you are*, Nairobi: IFES-EPISA, 2005.

Conclusion

In this reflection, I present IFES as a student ministry that came to Africa on the wave of the nineteenth-century missionary surge. Its growth and development in Africa has been linked with the founding values and ethos as an evangelical, interdenominational and student-initiated ministry committed to evangelism, mission and *formation* within a worldwide fellowship of those committed to sharing its resources. I have presented a qualified account of the contribution of IFES' work to ecumenicity of the church in Africa, and outlined its efforts to grapple with societal issues from a Christian standpoint. The adaptation of western models of mission and ministry and the dearth of female leadership remain developmental issues in IFES in Africa.

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