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(105) THE CONTRIBUTION OF AFRICAN STUDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENTS TO AFRICAN ECUMENISM

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Introduction

African Christianity highlights the significant Christian student organisations which have contributed greatly to the development of Christianity. These organisations serve to buttress faith principles among young people at a stage marked by numerous life challenges. They are also powerful examples of political movements which influenced black politics and contributed to independence in many African countries. The aim of this chapter is to describe different Christian student organisations working in different parts of Africa and to assess their contribution to African Christianity with regard to strengthening ecumenism in Africa.

Denominational Christian Student Associations

Catholic Student Associations

The Association of Catholic Tertiary Students (ACTS)¹ is a movement for tertiary students, which exists at institutions for higher education within South Africa. Each ACTS branch has to be affiliated to the local School Representative Committee (SRC) and is to be a prophetic presence, challenging the life of the institution. It is a student-driven organisation, empowering students to lead within the church, within institutions of higher education and within society as a whole. Only full-time students may be members; however, this requirement does not apply at Universities which offer distance learning such as UNISA.

The Nigeria Federation of Catholic Students (NFCS)² is an association that forms an umbrella for all groups, societies, faculty associations, etc. of all Catholic students in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The motto of NFCS is 'Living the Faith'. NFCS also affiliates the Catholic Law Students Association of Nigeria (CALSAN), covering all Nigerian universities, and the Catholic Law Students Association (CLASA) of the University of Benin.

These Christian student organisations provide spiritual, academic and social welfare and fraternity to the Catholic student population of Africa. They are also involved in youth structures within various dioceses, thus contributing to the development of youth in the local church.

*Seventh Day Adventist Tertiary Student Ministry*³

The Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDASA) is a voluntary, faith-based organisation of students established in 1967. Its vision is to empower students and mobilize professionals for the healing of the nations through engagement with students in universities and other tertiary education campuses in Africa. The SDASA is registered in South Africa as a nonprofit organisation under the Social Development Act of 2001. It covers the geographic area of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. The SDASA empowers students through facilitating their growth and development. In addition, the association mobilizes

¹ acts.sacbc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/ACTSidentity.pdf (accessed 5 October, 2015).

² <http://nfcsaganunn.org/home/#> (accessed 5 October, 2015).

³ www.sdasa.co.za/about.html (accessed 5 October, 2015).

professionals and entrepreneurs to use their skills, abilities and expertise for professional contributions in order to enhance best practice within the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

Chi Alpha Campus Ministries (XA)

The Chi Alpha Campus Ministries (XA) (usually known as Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship on campus, but sometimes University Christian Fellowship or ‘Schoolname’ Christian Fellowship, and occasionally Christians in Action) is an Assemblies of God USA Christian ministry for college students around the world. It began as a ministry to college students in 1947 through the inspiration of J. Robert Ashcroft. The Fellowship does not seem to have made headway in Africa with the exception of Zambia and South Africa. Students from Assemblies of God in Zambia (POAG) at the University of Zambia, and from Assemblies of God Churches (AOG) in South Africa at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, have formed Chi Alpha.⁴ XA’s mission is to reconcile students to Jesus Christ, thereby transforming the university, the market-place, and the world. The fellowship functions with a fivefold philosophy: being a community of worship, prayer, fellowship, discipleship, and mission.⁵

Ecumenical Student Movements

The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) – Africa Region

The WSCF is an association of sovereign national Student Christian Movements (SCM) forming the youth and student arm of the global ecumenical movement, and at the same time the oldest form of Christian student movements in Africa. It is non-governmental organization (NGO) which has working relationships with UNESCO and consultative status with the United Nations. The ecumenical movement was very much initiated by pioneers rooted in the ecumenical Christian student organizations which in most cases include Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic and Anglican students. The Africa Region with a regional office in Nairobi, Kenya, consists of thirty Student Christian Movements in over 27 countries.⁶ Having started as a movement in 1895, ‘WSCF has been uniting and promoting co-operation among Christian Movements and Associations of students and members of the academic community throughout the world.’⁷ The movement provides opportunities for Christian formation, witness, ministry and ecumenical dialogue across cultures, gender, ethnicity and race – through engaging students in Bible study, theological reflection and social analysis of the political and economic situation in Africa, and enabling them to formulate action from Christian perspective. Its mission is to empower students in critical thinking and the constructive transformation of our world.

It is important to note that a number of renowned church leaders, and leaders in ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches, the All Africa Conference of Churches, the National Council of Churches, and some renowned political leaders, were themselves members of certain ecumenical student movements unified by the WSCF. Some of the notable personalities in this case are: Stephen Bantu Biko, an anti-apartheid activist in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s and a student leader who founded the Black Consciousness Movement; Oliver Reginald Tambo, a South African anti-apartheid politician and revolutionary who served as President of the African National Congress from 1967 to 1991; Samuel Kobia, a theologian who served as the first Kenyan General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, 2004-2009; Edouard Chivambo Mondlane, the founding President of the Mozambican Liberation Front (FRELIMO); Kwame Nkrumah, who led Ghana to independence from Britain in 1957 and served as its

⁴ David M. Gordon, *Invisible Agents: Spirits in a Central African History* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012).

⁵ www.chialpha.com/About-XA/worldwide-chi-alpha.html (accessed 5 October, 2015).

⁶ http://wscfglobal.org/?page_id=11039 (accessed 5 October, 2015).

⁷ www.wscf-africa.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19&Itemid=27 (accessed 5 October, 2015).

first prime minister and president; Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, a Tanzanian statesman, who served as the first president of Tanzania; Isabel Apawo Phiri (Associate General Secretary of WCC); Fulata Mbanjo-Moyo (WCC's Programme Executive for Women in Church and Society); Mercy Amba Oduyoye, an African theologian from the Methodist Church known for her work in African women's theology and the founding of the Circle of Concern African Women's Theologians (and former Associate General Secretary of WCC); André Karamaga (General Secretary of All Africa Conference of Churches) and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the 24th of President of Liberia and the first elected female head of state in Africa, among others

Youth for Christ Africa (YFC)

Youth for Christ is a worldwide Christian movement working with young people round the globe. It works with local churches and other like-minded partners for evangelism amongst young people in order to develop them as lifelong followers of Jesus characterised by godliness in lifestyle, devotion to the word of God and prayer, boldness in evangelism, and commitment to social involvement. YFC is found in over 39 African countries and its primary focus is on 'Generation 21' (or G21 – those aged below 21). The movement has its regional office in islands of the Indian Ocean – which include Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion, Seychelles, the Comoros Islands, Mayotte and Rodrigues; East Africa – which consists of Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda; Francophone Africa – which consists of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo; Southern Africa – which consists of Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Angola, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe; and West Africa (Anglophone) – which consists of Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

YFC believes that G21 is the generation that will bring transformation in Africa. YFC is implementing G21 through a variety of ministries, such as prayer triplets, abstinence programmes, children's homes, radio and television programmes, and many others. G21 is a call to be God's catalyst in faithfully developing a pan-African generation of young people who will be characterised by prowess in spiritual warfare, boldness in evangelism, passion in social involvement, and godliness in leadership, thus reflecting an exemplary Christian life. The following two examples can be given:

In South Africa,⁸ YFC bases its ministry activities on the following 'four pillars':

- Godliness in lifestyle
- Devotion to the word of God and prayer
- Passion for sharing the love of Christ
- Commitment to social involvement

All YFC centres in South Africa are similar but not exactly the same. This is primarily due to the felt needs of the different communities and town centres which exist. The outreach endeavours and social involvement initiatives are tailored specifically to the young people in each locale. This means that some centres may have ministry projects, other centres do not, while some centres may run similar ministry projects differently. The ministry activities include but are not limited to: spiritual development (evangelism and discipleship), camps and conferences, equipping youth leaders and workers for effective youth ministry, schools and prisons ministries, children and youth at risk, which include equipping leaders and young people with skills for HIV / AIDS prevention and awareness, life skills, peer education and job creation.

In Kenya, YFC has a vision to evangelize and disciple young people to become Kenya's godly future leaders. Their current ministries include weekly Berean Bible clubs in schools, music teams whose main focus is evangelism, and the Taraja Home for former street boys which focuses on discipleship, education and vocational training.

⁸ <http://yfc.org.za/ministries-projects> (accessed 5 October, 2015).

*Youth Alive, where everyone is somebody and Jesus is Lord*⁹

Youth Alive Ministries (YAM) is an interdenominational Christian youth development organization that communicates the gospel message to young people in Southern Africa. It is one of the oldest and most successful youth organizations in Soweto that has played a major role in character and leadership development of young people since its establishment in 1959. Youth Alive provides discipleship, leadership development and community outreach through its various projects and activities, including youth clubs, camps, training, mentorship, educational support and seminars. Youth Alive celebrated its fiftieth Anniversary in 2010 which brought renewed energy and vision to both former and current members to take it to the next level. The urge to revamp the currently dilapidated Dube Centre building to suit future youth needs, more focused programmes and staff capacity-building is a key priority in taking the organization forward.

Evangelical Student Movements*International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) – Africa Region*

IFES is a confederation of evangelical Christian student movements in Africa which encourage evangelism, discipleship and mission among students.¹⁰ The fellowship promotes and unites collaboration among evangelical associations of students throughout the continent. IFES has local autonomous student movements in over forty African countries. To mention few, such include in Benin: Groupe Biblique des Elèves et Etudiants du Bénin; Cameroon: Groupes Bibliques des Elèves et Etudiants du Cameroun; Ethiopia: Evangelical Students' and Graduates' Union of Ethiopia (EvaSUE); Ghana: GHAFES Ghana; Kenya: FOCUS Kenya; Malawi: Student Christian Organisation of Malawi (SCOM); Madagascar: Union des Groupes Bibliques de Madagascar; Zambia: ZAFES Zambia; Angola: GBECA Angola and South Africa: Students' Christian Organization of South Africa. The vision of IFES is to build students into 'communities of disciples, transformed by the gospel and impacting the university, the church and society for the glory of Christ'.¹¹ The IFES promotes an interdenominational approach to evangelism, and has six strategic priorities: communicating the good news of Jesus Christ, strengthening leadership and formation, promoting student-graduate integration, building sustainable support, and engaging with the university.

Campus Crusade (CRU)

Campus Crusade Christ International (CCCI), which changed its name to Cru (a shortening of 'Crusade') in 2011, is an interdenominational evangelical Christian organization which was started in 1951 by Bill and Vonette Bright. They pursued their passion for ministry by starting Campus Crusade for Christ (in the USA) at the University of California in Los Angeles. From its humble beginnings working among college students, Cru has since grown into one of the largest international Christian ministries in the world, reaching beyond students to serve inner cities, the military, athletes, political and business leaders, the entertainment industry, and families.¹² The Brights spent more than half a century building and leading Cru to its current size of more than 27,000 staff members and 225,000 volunteers working in 190 countries worldwide and over 37 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.¹³ Africa is divided in three regions, each with its

⁹ www.youthalive.co.za (accessed 5 October, 2015).

¹⁰ Douglas Johnson, *A Brief History of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students* (Lausanne, Switzerland: IFES, 1964): <http://ifesworld.org/en> (accessed 5 October, 2015).

¹¹ <http://ifesworld.org/en/our-vision> (accessed 5 October, 2015).

¹² John G. Turner, *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelicalism in post-war America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

¹³ www.cru.org/about/our-leadership/our-founders.html (accessed 21 October, 2015).

area leaders: Southern and Eastern Africa, West Africa, and Francophone Africa. Cru is referred to by a different name in different African countries. For example, in Ghana, it is called Great Commission Movement of Ghana; in Nigeria, it is called Great Commission Movement of Nigeria; in Kenya, it is called Life Ministry, and in South Africa, it is called Campus Crusade for Christ South Africa.

Cru helps members to fulfil the Great Commission in the power of the Holy Spirit by exposing people to the claims of Jesus Christ, winning people to faith in him, building them up in their faith and sending them to win and disciple others, and helping the Body of Christ through evangelism and discipleship. Cru movements aim to multiply, build and send Christ-centred disciples who launch spiritual movements in faith, growth and fruitfulness.¹⁴

Conclusion

There are many more other Christian student organisations in Africa which are not mentioned in this brief chapter which has assessed the contribution of African student Christian movements to African ecumenism. These movements prioritise the welfare of young people and their future. They take joy in training young people in professional skills for sustainability and faith-based values, transcending denominational parameters. Notably, some – such as Youth Alive, Youth for Christ and Scripture Union (discussed in previous chapter) – value the integral development of all their members, irrespective of their denominational affiliation. More especially, Catholic organisations, such as ACTS and NFCS, have cautiously embraced students from other religious traditions though they still limit leadership to baptised Catholics. Further, it is important to note that ecumenical student associations are not as popular as they used to be. Many students prefer their denominational student movement, causing some of these associations to lose their ecumenical flavour.

To this effect, we have made the following observations regarding these associations: first, they usually use the approach to ministry based on their denominational orientation. This means that if the association is evangelical, its objectives and mission will reflect the broader framework within which evangelical churches function. Second, many of these organisations seems to be struggling to remain socially relevant in the different contexts of Africa as some still function with the colonial missionary paradigm despite the fact that they are led by Africans. Third, some of the African Christian student movements like WSCF and SCM have strong impact and a historic role in building up a new generation of African Christians engaged ecumenically and beyond their own denominational borders; however, the SCM type of ecumenism, has often reached beyond the historical mainline churches. Fourth, it seems to us that there is a need for some of these organisations to strive to transcend their parochialism and begin to find ways of co-operating with one another without losing their uniqueness. These may enable them to introduce a new discourse, one that can allow for ecumenical reinterpretation of the role of the Bible in student formation in the current African context.

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¹⁴ www.cccsa.org.za/about-us (accessed 21 October, 2015).

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