

Development and Mission in the Context of Botswana and the Changing Role of the National Ecumenical Council

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Whether under its pre-independence name of Bechuanaland or its post-1966 name of Botswana, you will not find a great deal in the history books about mission in Botswana nor about the work of development agencies. The reason for this is that while mission agencies were at work in Botswana, that work was usually seen as an off-shoot of work in South Africa or, for the north of the country, of Southern Rhodesia. For the London Missionary Society Botswana was a major area of activity with the Moffatts and Livingstone making forays from a base at Kuruman in the Northern Cape into what is now Botswana and establishing mission stations right across the country. For the LMS as for other denominations and churches which moved north across the Molopo River little distinction was made between Setswana-speakers north and south of that natural divide, which was, in time, to become a political divide.

Factors that placed Botswana at the margins of mission and development activity were its geography, low population and dependence upon its big neighbour to the south, South Africa. Botswana, as defined by its post-independence boundaries is a big country about the size of France and Belgium together yet much of that land area is inhospitable for human settlement. For much of the 19th and 20th centuries the population was less than 500,000 and people were concentrated along the eastern side of the country which was the better watered part and which had the communication link of the railway between Mafikeng and Bulawayo. All the main tribal capitals were located towards the eastern edge of the country with the exception of Maun on the edge of the Okavango Delta in the north west, another concentration of people and an LMS centre. Bechuanaland was probably unique in having its capital outside its physical boundaries. The so-called Imperial Reserve, an area of Mafikeng in the northern Cape of South Africa was the administrative headquarters from the founding of the Protectorate in the 1880s to Independence in 1966. That had a tremendous impact on the general development of the Protectorate or rather the lack of it and its impact was felt in church life, too. People spoke of protectorate governance as 'benign neglect' and for many of the churches that was pretty much the case too. By an unfortunate coincidence of history the Protectorate was declared at about the same time as gold was discovered in the Witwatersrand of South Africa and so resources were sucked away from the periphery to cope with the vast increase in population around Johannesburg.

All churches in Botswana were originally introduced along tribal lines. It was part of the 'Comity Agreement' (one ethnic group-one missionary society) which sought to minimise competition between the denominations. As the pioneer, the London Missionary Society had the lion's share of the tribal groupings – the Bangwato around Serowe, the Bakwena in their capital Molepolole, the Bankgwaketse around Kanye and the Batawana in their capital of Maun on the edge of the Okavango Delta. Although Methodism entered Botswana quite early, in the 1820s, it was confined initially to the Barolong area on the extreme southern border of Botswana close to Mafikeng. Later movements saw Methodism established in Francistown and Matsiloje 300 miles to the north of the Barolong area and administered as part of the Methodist Church in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) for some time.

Churches set up clinics, hospitals and primary schools as part of their outreach but because of the scattered and small nature of the Botswana population these were never numerous. Methodism being located right on the borders of the country never had schools or health facilities within Botswana. Mafikeng, the capital was close and was the tribal centre for Barolong and the place to which they naturally looked for leadership and services of all kinds.

Sadly much of the energy of the missionaries and churches in Botswana was directed to keeping out other churches – first of all the Anglicans and the Roman Catholics and then African Independent Churches and Pentecostal churches. Schools and hospitals were seen as much as tools of conversion and retention as of providing a much-needed service to the entire community in which they were set. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the control and planning for most of the Churches was in the hands of either foreign missionaries or of the Church hierarchy in South Africa. Those who paid the piper called the tune and the financing for Botswana churches came from outside.

For Methodism this can be seen in the fact that until the late 1970s the whole of Methodism in the southern part of Botswana (comprising some 25-30 congregations) was part of the Mafikeng Circuit in South Africa. The Methodist work in the north was part of the Bulawayo District of the British Methodist Church until the Church in Zimbabwe gained its autonomy and the northern Methodist congregations were handed over to the Methodist Church of South(ern) Africa. There was an interesting but short-lived struggle at that time, 1975, spearheaded by the late Rev Dr Gabriel Setiloane for Botswana to become an autonomous Methodist Church or at least, a District. That did not happen then and despite vastly increased resources of finance and personnel has still not happened up to this day.

It is also interesting to note what a rearguard action was mounted by the different denominations when the 'comity agreement' of one-tribe-one-church began to break down under the impact of increased migration. One of these instances concerned the Methodist Church and the LMS in the

area of Southern Botswana where the LMS considered it had a monopoly. During the building of the railway from Mafikeng to Bulawayo at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century Xhosa-speaking workers from South Africa had been recruited. Some stayed in Botswana only for the duration of the employment but others saw that Botswana was a land of potentially greater freedom and opportunity and stayed and settled. One group of these people were staunchly Methodist and set up a Methodist congregation in a place called Manyana. The LMS demanded that they become LMS, the Methodists refused. There ensued a great deal of rancorous correspondence between the two competing 'mother' bodies which resulted in the case being taken to the International Missionary Council for arbitration in 1918. The Methodists of Manyana are still Methodists and worship in Xhosa to this day.

This incident exemplifies the preoccupations of the churches – very much concerned with their own 'patch', antagonistic to other churches in the main and involved in development work only at a very minimal level and then through the relatively few schools, clinics and hospitals that were built. The animosity was even greater towards African Independent Churches as they spread with Botswana migrant labourers from the mines in South Africa, returning home with new allegiances. Some of these churches, especially the Zion Christian Church, in its early days were evicted from tribal land and whole villages squatted along the railway reserve in Gaborone.

As the late Rev J. T. Liphoko, a Methodist minister and later President of the Christian Council has noted, 'church members were passive objects of the missionary enterprise, the church was seen as an end in itself and the people not helped to respond to the needs of the community.'

So what changed the situation in Botswana? What prompted the churches to work together? What helped the Botswana Christian Council to become a force in the land and a major agent with government for the development of the whole country?

Well the answer is certainly not a theological one, nor an ecclesiological one. The answer is that relief and development work by the churches began in response to the severe drought in the early 1960s. Botswana is a drought-prone area and there have been recognisable cycles of more serious drought conditions ever since meteorological records have been kept and even before from anecdotal evidence.

Botswana has always been cattle country with little arable agriculture. Cattle can move to water and a system of free range grazing has operated in Botswana for generations. In the early 1960s over a quarter of a million cattle died in the drought – about an eighth of the national herd. Other cattle had to be slaughtered because they were in too weak a condition to sell or to move. For a nation with little industry, cattle and goats were the Savings Bank on legs for many people. By 1964 over 100, 000 people were registered as destitute – almost a quarter of the population. This coincided with the run-up to Independence in 1966. The Government received food relief from

the World Food Programme and some of the churches managed to get aid sent from partners overseas.

In 1965 the Anglicans, Roman Catholics and the LMS set up the Northern Bechuanaland Christian Council in Francistown, financed entirely by funds from overseas in order that they could receive money from agencies around the world to help with feeding schemes for the people of northern Botswana.

Then Prof Z K Matthews, a Setswana-speaking South African, who was the Secretary for Inter-Church Aid at the World Council of Churches in Geneva came on a visit to Botswana. He advised the Church leaders that they could receive aid from the World Council of Churches if they worked as a Council of Churches and not as individual denominations. The key players in Botswana at this time were all expatriate missionaries but when five churches met to form the Botswana Christian Council in May 1966, four months ahead of Independence, it was a wider group which included black South Africans and some 'indigenous' Batswana. So the Botswana Christian Council was born with those first five member churches – LMS (United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, Anglican Church, United Free Church of Scotland and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

Sandy Grant, the first director of relief and development for the Council describes what happened: 'Born out of the North Bechuanaland Christian Council – itself largely a response to the drought of 1965 – the new national Council acted quickly to help alleviate the hardships of the following years. Combining with the government Community Development Department, the BCC was able, through the magnificent support of agencies abroad, to make a notable contribution, in the first place for relief work then to self-help village projects.'

It is interesting to note that the formation of the Botswana Christian Council has been hailed as one of the most significant events in the history of the churches of Botswana. Walls of hostility and suspicion began to break down through working together, more and more Batswana were drawn into the work of the Council and a far greater respect and understanding of different theological approaches was promoted. The membership of the Council has grown steadily over the years and includes para-church bodies such as the YWCA, the Dutch Reformed Church (1967), the first two African Instituted Churches also in 1967 the Roman Catholic Diocese in 1973. All significant denominations in Botswana are now members of the Council and good fraternal relations exist with those Pentecostal churches which are not members.

It is also interesting to note that another unforeseen circumstance brought the churches of the Council into even closer cooperation in development work and for the first time into mission, too. In the late 1960s and early 1970s as a result of the war in Angola and the scorched earth

policies of both the Portuguese government and the freedom fighters, a lot (3-4000 over a period of years) of Hambukushu people fled down the Okavango River into north-west Botswana. These people were the poorest of the poor in their homeland and arrived in Botswana destitute. Once again with the aid of the WCC and other partners churches, practical help was given to these people so that they could settle and begin farming. The Botswana Government allocated an area of land that has recently been cleared of tsetse fly and the Council and its partners overseas helped with tents, cooking utensils, tools. Clothes and food rations.

As the BCC worked in the area they came to realise that these refugees from Angola had had little or no exposure to the Christian Gospel. The Executive Committee comprising church leaders asked themselves if it was sufficient to provide just material aid, was there not need for spiritual aid, too in the form of the preaching of the Gospel. The story of the development of the church in Etsha (as the area came to be known) has been told elsewhere, in *The Pool that never dries up* by Canon Ronald Wynne. Ronald Wynne, an Anglican, was sent to Etsha with an ecumenical mandate – to bring the Gospel but not the divided church to the Hambukushu. That story is too long to tell here but suffice it to say that from the development work in Etsha there arose a discussion among the churches of Botswana about their understanding of ‘church’ and ecumenical cooperation.

For many years the Botswana Christian Council’s Development Department worked very closely with Government and as Botswana became a much richer nation as a result of the discovery of diamonds there was a robust discussion about the degree to which the Council should just take up the slack in areas of development in which government was not yet able to cover the demands upon it. For example, the BCC was a major provider of water from boreholes to villages which had relied upon erratic wells. Gradually the Council was able to move far more towards working on its own priorities rather than filling the gaps for government.

This has meant that some of the priorities of recent years have been concern for Basarwa(Bushmen) and attempts to get the disparate groups to work together, work with street children, advocacy for those groups marginalised by the constitution of Botswana and a great deal of work with refugees and asylum seekers. HIV/Aids which is decimating Botswana has also come to the fore as a major concern.

1993 was a critical year for the Council. Grants from WCC, overseas churches and development agencies were drying up both because income was getting less and because Botswana was seen to be a relatively rich country it was no longer prioritised by many churches and agencies. This provoked a financial crisis for the Council which had relied for so long on external funding not only for its relief and development programmes but also for its administration. Although there was so much work to be done, the Council had to take drastic action and cut the staff from 32 to 4 persons. It was during this period that the writer of this paper was called upon to be Acting

General Secretary of the Council to try to put its finances and programmes onto a sustainable basis. Ideally the churches of Botswana should have been able to contribute more to the budget of the BCC but that was just not feasible in the short term and so there was an increased effort to fund the Council by investing in property for renting. It was a difficult time when there was always the possibility that the project would not be achievable and when so much time had to be given over to securing finance rather than to serving the community needs of Botswana.

It is gratifying to say that the Council has gone through that testing time, has the resources of its own to cover its core budget and is now able to respond to the needs of the nation. From very inauspicious beginnings the churches of Botswana are now able to serve the nation – practically through development work and advocacy and by setting a prophetic challenge to the churches and the people.

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