

# THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF MISSION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN

Delivered to the USPG Mission Conference, Southwark Cathedral, London, UK, on Saturday, 18 March 2017 by Dr Vincentia Kgabe.

## Introduction

The church in South Africa, particularly through the contribution of women, has been fulfilling God's mission in line with contemporary theologies of mission.

In my context, when you ask certain people about what the words mission and missionary mean, you get different responses, some negative and others positive, as these terms carry a lot of baggage. For many people, the word missionary elicits the response of person/people (i.e. missionaries), and the perceived work they were doing, rather than what mission work is. Almost everyone (Christian or not) has a perception of what mission is all about. Our home-grown comedian, now an international star, Trevor Noah, wrote in his book that,

"Before Apartheid, any black South African who received a formal education was likely taught by European missionaries - foreign enthusiasts eager to Christianise and Westernise the natives."

And this is evident, especially when you hear former students of these institutions reminiscing about the excellent education and life lessons imparted at these schools. And these institutions have produced prominent leaders in politics, business, academia, the arts, faith communities and organisations of civil society.

Theology only exists to serve the church in the mission of God.

Roger Bowen writes that,

"Mission is a relationship of movement",

that the idea of relationship should be in the front of our minds if we attempt to understand God, God's Kingdom, and God's mission. God sends Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit. This movement of sending out is revealed both in the creation of the World, and in the coming of the Son to live a human life on Earth. The church in its nature is missionary, it exists by mission, as fire does by burning. Theology only exists to serve the church in the mission of God.

## What is mission?

The word mission is derived from the Latin word, *mittere*, meaning to send. One of the major ways in which the church is apostolic (as we confess in the Creeds), is by being a community sent on its mission into the world, and not to be a navel-gazing church.

John Stott gives a definition of the Church's mission "as everything that the church is sent into the world to do." The statement may sound too general and vague to be of much help. It can be set in the context of two further negative statements which are:

“Mission is not a word for everything the church does” and, “Mission does not cover everything God does in the World.”

Karl Bath writes,

“as Jesus’ community the church is always free from itself, it is not churchy but worldly – the church with open doors and great windows, behind which it does better not to close itself in upon itself by putting up pious stained glass windows. Its mission is not additional to its being. It exists as it is sent and active in its mission.”

### **Mission societies and boards – the South African context**

The landing of Jan van Riebeeck, a Dutch colonial administrator, in Cape Town in 1652, marked not only the establishment of the first permanent settlement of westerners on the southern tip of Africa, but was, in fact, the start of the explicit Christianisation of the indigenous population of the region.

- 1737: 75 years after van Riebeeck’s arrival, the Moravian George Schmidt arrived
- 1799: The London Missionary Society arrived at the Cape
- 1816: The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society sent its first missionary to the then British Cape Colony
- 1824: The Scottish/Glasgow Missionary Society came to the scene with the Rhenish Missionary Society
- 1829: The Paris Evangelical Mission Society arrived
- 1834: The Berlin Missionary Society entered South Africa, and so did the American Board

of Commissioners for Foreign Missions

- 1844: The Norwegian Missionary Society was the last recorded arrival on our shores.

European missionaries who came to South Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries played a strangely ambiguous role in the history and affairs of the region. On one hand, they were driven by a strong desire to genuinely serve humanity and bring about material and social changes which would improve quality of life. On the other hand, they were possessed of a moral self-righteousness which led them to make hasty and uninformed judgements regarding indigenous traditions, norms and values which they were scarcely equipped to understand. The former manifested itself through involvement in local agriculture, irrigation and technology which, being environmental and hence independent of larger cultural issues, found a small measure of acceptance in rural society. The latter sought to impose an alien morality and work ethos upon the local people without realizing that these undermined their most basic social and cultural tenets, and which were therefore largely resisted. The dichotomy of this approach was not something which found separate expression.

### **My context – a woman and an academic/priest**

Missionaries did make some mistakes in the mission fields, and much of the documented history puts the spotlight more on male missionaries, and less on their female counterparts.

**We must acknowledge  
the efforts made by  
women missionaries, and  
those who supported**

their work to bring dignity  
and wholeness into  
people's lives, especially  
women and children.  
Their work and ministry  
have contributed to the  
theological journey of  
African women.

It is no secret that women were not invited to the eighteenth and nineteenth century missionary enterprises by male-led churches, the mission societies, and boards. Nonetheless, ongoing research on missionary enterprise has demonstrated that eventually women rose to the occasion and that some mission fields ended up with more women missionaries than men.

The same history shows that women created and led powerful mission societies and boards, contributed millions of pounds (GBP)/rands (ZAR), and carefully administered the money.

In brief, we find that  
women in big numbers  
asserted their God-given  
right to participate in God's  
mission against many  
odds.

These women awakened their God-given gifts and shared them with the World for the sake of the Gospel. As they undertook this task, these women discovered their ability to organise, strategise and network when the means of communication were remote. Most importantly, through mission work the women learned the art of recruiting, affirming, empowering and mentoring one another, which are fundamentals for nurturing our self-confidence, dignity, and fullness of life. The women learned to reach

out to one another as well as reaching out to their sisters in the home and mission fields to share the word of God.

As an outcome of this long journey, of paving their own way into male-dominated institutions, which were neither welcoming nor accepting of their ministries, women discovered their own voices in sharing the word of God and created a strong platform for their activities. In churches, this platform for action became the well-known churchwomen organisation or Women's Manyano, the name given to women's associations in a South African context, meaning to join or unite. They have been a strong foundation for women's contributions to the life and ministry of the church and society.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, this platform gave women space to network on the social-economic issues of their day that led them to create movements such as the World Day of Prayer (1887) and the World Young Women's Christian Association (1894). Among their earliest endeavours was the sending of letters, gifts and comforts to the wives of missionary ministers who lived far away from home and/or in centres of commerce.

This quest for cooperation in prayer and on social justice for the marginalized paved the way for women's consciousness for unity, which gave them entry to the twentieth century's ecumenical movement. Women used this platform to train and develop women's leadership, without which they could not have participated in the emerging ecumenical movement, theological education, church leadership and the ordained ministry.

In many cases, the missionary wives and/or their daughters provided leadership, and consequently missionaries introduced a similar pattern into mission churches for the ministers' wives. Even

leadership positions or serve as their patrons, since it was (and is) believed that ministers' wives can guide them, regardless of whether or not they have the right temperament or skills to lead.

Our theological voices, evangelism and missionary work are incomplete without the contributions of pioneering African Christian women, the unsung heroines (most with limited basic, never mind theological, education), who, after hearing and knowing the word of God from missionaries, went out on their own to become missionaries among their own people, retelling gospel stories around the fire and at the marketplace. And some of them paid with their lives to make sure that God's word and work is known throughout their generation and beyond (some are today's martyrs, following Perpetua and Her Companions, and Manche Masemola).

### **The Church's mission today and how it is lived out in the Anglican Church of South Africa**

The following points that I make constitute the mission of the church. They don't function in isolation but overlap and are intertwined. Their common bond is Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the dynamic of the whole mission so that every single mission activity is three-dimensional.

#### **The three dimensions of mission**

##### **Kerygma (preaching)**

The extent of church affiliation is used as the measure of evangelisation. For example, the Growing the Church and Anglican Ablaze Bi-annual Conference and its movements have revived the passion in young people to become active participants in the life of the church, after years of losing them to other churches.

##### **Koinonia (fellowship)**

The striving for unity and neighbourly relations is part of this dimension of

mission. For example, Provincial Guilds (i.e. the Mothers' Union, Bernard Mizeki Men's Guild and Anglican Women's Fellowship) and the work/ministry of the Anglican Students Society, both diocesan and ecumenical.

During and after the apartheid era in South Africa, churches found strength to live out their theological imperatives by working not as individual churches, but as an ecumenical movement. And as Bishop Michael Doe wrote,

"Mission is of its very essence ecumenical in both method and goals."

### **Our peculiar Third World situation poses new challenges to the church and theology.**

Mission theologians cannot continue to ignore these challenges as articulated by Third World theologians who have announced an epistemological (theory of knowledge) rupture with dominant European-American theologies. They must ask themselves seriously what these challenges are, for their way of engaging in mission, as well as for their theology. What hermeneutical changes should be made and what kind of framework will facilitate their new theology?

##### **Diakonia (service)**

Deeds of charitable service are basic, but that doesn't go far enough if the cause (structural as well as personal) of the needs are not also addressed. The task of Diakonia, therefore, should also venture into difficult economic and even political issues. For example, HOPE Africa, from a diocesan portfolio to a provincial social development programme, has helped the church and empowered the leadership to engage meaningfully with the economic, social and political issues of the day. And continue to bring along the poor and marginalised.

### Mission work is still in my context

1. The sharing in the spreading of the gospel (evangelism). It is that non-negotiable aspect through which people are called to faith in, and a personal relationship with Christ as Saviour and Lord and to be incorporated into the fellowship of believers. Where a church or organisation doesn't have this as a conscious element of its work, then the church is not engaged in Christian Mission.

2. If a church engages in evangelism without being renewed, then it is probably not evangelising but propagating itself. In the same way, a church is not really undergoing renewal if that renewal doesn't lead to genuine witnessing. Such a church is not growing fit, but fat.

3. The sharing in creating a society based on gospel principles is a necessity for our church. God is not only interested in the church, but primarily in the world, and society at large. The church and her members should be involved in the issues of justice, peace, development and charity which influence family, community, the nation and the world.

When evangelism is only a calling out of the world without a sending back into the world, then it is not evangelism but escapism. When church renewal isn't channelled towards ministry in the world, then it is nothing more than the building of its own kingdom.

### Recommendations

- The use of technology can assist in mission work
- Sharing of mission work in other parts of the world
- Sharing resources
- Connecting mission fields and missionaries
- Innovative and creative ways of conducting missions in this rapidly changing world (two-way, no longer one-way)

- The church playing an active role in education and health (i.e. in South Africa, Mantsunyane Hospital in Lesotho and the historical (mission) schools restoration project are led by Archbishop Emeritus Njongonkulu Ndungane).

### Conclusion

Missionary work is still relevant in the twenty-first century, especially as our countries are becoming more individualised rather than communal, secular rather than religious, and as our countries' budgets are weighed down with increases on military spending and maintaining politicians' lifestyles rather than housing, free accessible education, and healthcare for the masses.

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## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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Mission forum

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