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Sangaya, Jonathan Douglas

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This biography, received in 2018, was written by Dr. James Amanze, General Secretary of the Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa (ATISCA), Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana (Gaborone), and DACB Advisory Council member. These stories were written as part of a collection documenting the history of the ecumenical movement in Botswana, an unpublished manuscript entitled “Heroes and Heroines of the Ecumenical Movement in Botswana: Celebrating Great Lives, Celebrating Past Leadership.”

Sangaya, Jonathan Douglas

1907-1979

Church of Central Africa Presbyterian

Malawi

Jonathan Douglas Sangaya was an outstanding Presbyterian churchman who factored significantly in the twentieth-century evolution of the missionary Christianity of colonial Nyasaland to the indigenous church of independent Malawi.

Sangaya was born in 1907 in the shadow of the Blantyre Mission, the original mission site of the Church of Scotland in Nyasaland, founded in 1881, which by the turn of the century had become the hub of a presbytery of congregations in the southern part of the country. His mother was Yao; his Ngoni father had fled the toilsome life of a *mtengatenga* (porter) to take refuge at the Blantyre Mission, subsequently converting to Christianity. Sangaya grew up in the new settlement of Blantyre as one of Malawi’s second generation of Christians, attending primary school at the Blantyre Mission before training there to become a teacher. A hint of future prominence appeared in 1926 when he became the very first Malawian to qualify to teach English at a secondary school level. He spent the next 22 years teaching and administering schools affiliated with the Blantyre Mission, along the way marrying Christian Mtingala with whom he raised seven children. During the Second World War, he enlisted as a chaplain in the King’s African Rifles. This was a formative experience: he would later recall fighting against Italian colonists in Ethiopia as “an African army fighting to free an African country.”

Shortly after the war ended, Sangaya resigned from teaching to prepare for ministry in the Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). Ordained in 1952, he briefly served a congregation in Ntcheu district before taking up a relatively prestigious position as associate minister at the Presbyterian “cathedral” located on the Blantyre Mission site, the Church of St. Michaels and All Angels. In 1961, the all-Scottish mission council that oversaw the Blantyre Synod selected Sangaya to deputize the Synod’s General Secretary, the missionary Andrew Doig.

With political independence in the air in the early 1960s, and the handover of leadership in the Blantyre Synod from Scot to African inevitable, Sangaya was clearly

marked for leadership and being groomed for future responsibility—at this time he was even sent to Scotland to study administration. Accordingly, in 1962 the mission council recommended him to become the first Malawian General Secretary of the CCAP Blantyre Synod. In fact, this appointment made Sangaya one of the very first Malawian leaders of any of his country’s major churches. He served faithfully as General Secretary until his death in 1979, exerting wide and lasting influence on Malawian Christianity in general, and the CCAP Blantyre Synod in particular. For his labours, Sangaya was honored in 1977 with an honorary doctorate in divinity from Emory University in Atlanta.

Sangaya’s legacy for Christianity in Malawi can be traced (1) institutionally and (2) socio-politically. Regarding the first, under Sangaya’s long tenure as General Secretary, the Blantyre Synod expanded considerably, growing in membership and planting congregations throughout its synodical jurisdiction (roughly equivalent to southern Malawi). To this day it remains the single largest Protestant church in Malawi; along with the other synods of the CCAP, it forms one of the largest Reformed churches in Africa. Silas Ncozana considers Sangaya to have performed as General Secretary in an almost chief-like capacity, “a father figure, whose authority was recognized by all.” As such, he set the tone for his denomination, strongly encouraging congregations to engage in evangelism, charity, and service to the community. He also aimed for the financial self-sufficiency of the Blantyre Synod—no small feat given the withdrawal of foreign funding upon the termination of Scottish control of the church—by encouraging accountability and efficient management of human and material resources at both congregational and denominational levels. Sangaya remained committed to the classic Presbyterian insistence on an educated and well-equipped ministry: to that end, he worked with leaders of other CCAP synods to erect a joint seminary in Nkhoma. At the same time, his ecumenical proclivities and concern for the public place of Christianity in the nation made him strongly support both the inclusion of the Anglican Church in Malawi in this new seminary as well as its move to Zomba—there, prospective ministers at Zomba Theological College could study in close proximity to the University of Malawi. As his many sermons reflect, Sangaya was personally devout and deeply spiritual. Yet his leadership shows that he was no “spiritualist”: Christianity had an important role to play in the growth of the new nation of Malawi toward maturity.

Sangaya’s ecumenical commitment took form in several important ventures during his tenure as General Secretary such as: the Chilema Lay Training Centre, the Private Hospital Association, and Theological Education by Extension Malawi. These latter two ventures, as laity-oriented institutions, indicate well how Sangaya understood the necessity of “Africanizing” the church, i.e., not simply spreading Christianity wide in Malawi through evangelism and church planting, but also rooting it deep through discipling the laity. Similarly, Sangaya encouraged congregations to support youth and youth led initiatives, even courting controversy by endorsing the use of more typically African styles of music and singing in worship. Along with joining the Blantyre Synod to the Malawi Council of Churches, Sangaya also took a prominent

and lively role in the new All African Council of Churches, where he served on the executive. Finally, mention should be made of Sangaya's instrumentality in redefining the Blantyre Synod's relationship with Western churches from one of missionary paternalism to one of partnership in mission. In the 1960s and 1970s, Sangaya forged strong partnerships with Reformed/Presbyterian denominations in Scotland, Ireland, America, and Canada which still exist and have proved mutually fruitful for all churches involved.

Second, measuring the social and political legacy of Sangaya's leadership is unavoidable for a career that overlapped the heady transition from colonial rule to political independence as well as the emergent dictatorship of Malawi's "Life President," Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Here, Sangaya's impact appears ambivalent. On one hand, his early career reveals a radical streak not unlike that of the fiery founder of Presbyterianism, the sixteenth-century reformer, John Knox. Sangaya's voice was one of many in the Blantyre Synod strongly condemning the 1953 Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. African Nyasalanders rightly suspected the white settlers in North and South Rhodesia of aiming for a dominion with minority rule. When the Federation's legislature introduced measures in 1958 to further limit black African representation in government, widespread unrest and agitation erupted across Nyasaland, with growing calls for outright independence from Britain.

Blantyre Synod leadership urged peaceful but forceful protest, writing in a pastoral letter that same year:

The Synod is deeply concerned at political developments which have taken place in Nyasaland since Federation was instituted... There is no gainsaying that the Federation imposed against the will of the majority of the people here has produced a deep and widespread feeling of unrest which is like a poison among the people, destroying race relations and leaving bitterness and hate where trust and love prevailed before... Nyasaland became and has remained a Protectorate by the free choice of chiefs and people. Christian foundations have been laid. Trust and goodwill have been established between African and Government officials, missionaries, traders, and settlers. Respect for the laws and justice of British rule has been built up. There was a common assumption that British protection would continue until the indigenous people were capable of taking control over the government of their own country... Federation has reversed all that. It is now widely felt that Nyasaland has been betrayed by the United Kingdom.

As such, members of the CCAP Blantyre Synod were thick in the struggle against Federation and for Nyasaland's independence. Sangaya too was an early supporter and member of the pro-independence Malawian African National Congress (MNC), which the colonial authorities sought to repress. Andrew Ross, then a Church of Scotland missionary to the Blantyre Synod and later a professor of divinity at the University of Edinburgh, recalls serving with Sangaya as chaplains to prisoners detained in Kanjedza Camp for political agitation, where almost seven hundred of the thousand inmates were CCAP members.

Sangaya rejoiced at Malawi's independence in 1964 and the accession of the MNC

to power. But the rapid slide to one party rule under Kamuzu Banda bitterly disappointed him. His personal disappointment, however, did not translate into open criticism of Banda's regime on the one hand or even the widespread use of repression and violence to maintain one-party rule on the other. It would seem that the CCAP Blantyre Synod's considerable involvement in the pre-independence MNC left them "ideologically captive to the Banda regime" once the MNC enjoyed exclusive rule under Banda from 1964 to 1993. In fact, as General Secretary of Malawi's largest Protestant church, and with a president who played up his status as a Church of Scotland elder for political gain, Sangaya sometimes functioned as chaplain to the regime, offering prayers and sermons at key public events and occasions. This is not to say that Sangaya condoned Banda's dictatorship: he personally opposed the regime and on a few occasions was imprisoned and even tortured for communicating with individuals whom the government had blacklisted. In fact, a popular rumour tells that Sangaya was murdered in 1979 on Banda's direct orders for daring to suggest to the life president that he should wed his long-time mistress, "the Mama," Cecilia Kadzamira. The Malawian poet and professor Jack Mpanje, who had been famously incarcerated under Banda in the late 1980s, has recently gave new life to this old rumour in his memoir, *And Crocodiles are Hungry at Night*. While this story is almost certainly false, the truth is that Sangaya remained privately opposed but publically silent to the Banda dictatorship. And his church again followed his lead. As his friend and student, Silas Ncozana, has noted:

Sangaya's socio-political concerns changed to the tradition of silence. The basis for this approach is fear and the instinct for survival... Now his main concern was to uplift the spiritual well being of the new nation of Malawi and his position as the first Malawian General Secretary gave him the power to do so. Though Sangaya stood his ground when it was necessary to do so, he did like a prophet. He carried the burden alone without involving the Church that he led.

It is curious that Sangaya's otherwise deliberate and determined efforts as General Secretary to see his church bear public witness to the gospel in the new nation of Malawi is here conspicuously absent.

Jonathan Sangaya wholeheartedly served his church denomination for over fifty years, first as a teacher and superintendant at mission schools, then as a minister in the Blantyre Synod, and finally as the first African leader of a major Malawian church. His ecclesiastical career was thoroughly entwined with the development of the CCAP from a foreign-controlled to an African-led church. Indeed, his leadership played no small part in this evolution. The CCAP Blantyre Synod's first indigenous General Secretary left behind him at his death a large, influential denomination that was deeply (if ambivalently) involved in the life of the nation; cooperating with denominations within Malawi and Africa and partnered with churches in the majority world that shared its Reformed heritage, it was increasingly "giving expression to Christianity in a uniquely African way."

Todd Statham

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This article, received in 2013, was written by Todd Statham, a missionary of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, seconded to the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian as lecturer at Zomba Theological College in Malawi.

Dodge, Ralph Edward

1907 – 1908

Methodist

Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe

Ralph Edward Dodge was a Methodist missionary, mission board executive secretary, and bishop in Angola, Mozambique and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), hardly the life one would foresee for a farm boy in northwest Iowa. Ralph was born on January 25, 1907, in Milford, a small farming town in northwest Iowa. He was the fourth and last child of Ernest Ira and Lizzie Longshore Dodge. Delivered in his parents' bedroom on a cold