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From mission to ecumenism in mid twentieth-century Southern Africa

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By Dana L. Robert[1]

In December of 1998, the World Council of Churches commemorated its fiftieth anniversary by holding its eighth assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe. President Nelson Mandela of South Africa addressed the delegates of over 300 churches. In his speech, he thanked the ecumenical movement, embodied by the World Council of Churches (WCC), for its anti-racism work and support for human rights over many decades. He stated that the WCC helped voice the international community's insistence that human rights are the rights of all people everywhere: "In doing so you helped vindicate the struggles of the oppressed for their freedom. To us in South and Southern Africa, and indeed the entire continent, the WCC has always been known as a champion of the oppressed and the exploited."[2]

President Mandela's appreciative remarks to the World Council of Churches open a small but significant window into the important relationship between African churches and the global ecumenical movement of the mid twentieth century. Economic boycotts and shareholder resolutions, humanitarian aid,[3] lobbying western governments and the United Nations, study projects and theological commissions, dissemination of information on human rights abuses, grants for theological education, and sponsorships for educating younger leaders—all were part of the ecumenical outreach to support human rights in Africa during the mid to late twentieth century.

From within Africa, church leaders in 1963 founded the All Africa Conference of Churches, in support for "freedom and unity" as a pan-African, post-colonial Christian vision. When President Mandela thanked the missionaries, he was referencing an international network of largely mainline church leaders who stood in

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[2] Address by President Nelson Mandela at the 50th anniversary of the World Council of Churches, Harare – Zimbabwe.
http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1998/981213_churches.htm

[3] In noting the ways in which the WCC supported the mid-century African liberation struggles, President Mandela named the Programme to Combat Racism, founded by the WCC in 1969, as a key partner for human rights. He thanked the WCC for entrusting the priorities of the programme to its African partners. In this comment he was referencing its controversial move to award monies for humanitarian aid to liberation movements in southern Africa. The Programme to Combat Racism was opposed by conservative groups, both religious and political, and accused of providing guns for Zimbabwean revolutionaries. It was a chief reason some groups withdrew their support for the World Council of Churches.

solidarity with human rights and decolonization movements across the globe.

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* highlights some of the entries in the DACB that profile participants in the twentieth-century ecumenical movement in southern Africa. The overwhelming impression one gets of this subject is that of gaps: there is urgent need for more entries that address the myriad ways in which African Christian leaders engaged the ecumenical movement as a network through which to build social capital during the critical period after the Second World War. As African nations became independent of European colonial control, church-educated leaders often acted as global spokesmen for postcolonial visions of society. They cultivated international support structures and led regional independence movements. Ecumenical networks played crucial roles in maintaining structures for education and peace-building in conflictive situations. Nelson Mandela himself, for example, attended Healdtown, a Methodist mission that became the largest high school in the country and educated many of the most important black nationalist leaders at mid century. The entries highlighted in this issue are the tip of the iceberg of what needs to be researched and written. This issue, then, appeals for scholars and church leaders to step up and to provide biographies of "ecumenists"—those who located their commitment to the Body of Christ in an international vision of peace, equality, and justice, in collaboration with other Christians from across Africa and around the world, as well as those who worked at the local level of cooperative church movements.

Transnational Relationships: From Mission Organizations to Ecumenical Agencies and Beyond

The struggle to end European colonialism and to craft postcolonial church networks were inseparable from each other. The founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948 occurred the same year as the founding of the United Nations. 1948 was also the year that launched grand apartheid in South Africa. African countries began fighting free of colonial control, starting with an independent Ghana in 1957. The 1950s, therefore, were a crucial period for forming human rights networks. In the emerging global structures, church entities achieved a place at the table as INGO's, international non-governmental organizations. As African nations became independent of foreign control starting in the late 1950s, some missionaries and mission-educated Africans honed international connections that proved vital to supporting anti-colonial movements. Missionary organizations morphed into ecumenical agencies and began turning over control of their resources to African church leaders. These processes were conflicted and challenging.

The early 1960s saw great strides in Christian cooperation and increasingly visible African roles in it. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) brought Roman Catholic bishops from around the world to update the relationship between the church and the modern world. Among the delegates were nearly 300 African bishops, whose time together was transformative for their shared vision of a rapidly growing Roman Catholic Church in Africa. Among Protestants and Orthodox, in 1963, representatives from several hundred churches met in Ibadan to launch the All Africa Conference of

Churches, the result of five years of planning. By the mid 1960s, therefore, a new age of African ecumenism was dawning. The Rev. José Chipenda, General Secretary of the AACC, wrote in his introduction to Dr. Efiong Utuk's history that its contours revealed a "continental Christian identity."[4]

Many challenging problems faced African Christian leaders in the mid twentieth century, including the transition from colonialism to independent nations, the devolution of foreign Christian mission to African control, critique of foreign theologies and church structures, the need to craft African Christian identities, economic crises, and the question of how to relate to newer Christian movements arising across the continent. The umbrella term "ecumenical movement" thus included a wide range of partnership relationships. International networks were strengthened with sister denominations in other parts of the world (e.g. Lutheran World Federation, Anglican Communion, World Alliance of Reformed Churches), and with global student movements and the World Council of Churches. The All Africa Conference of Churches sponsored continent-wide reflections on urgent issues, including a 1974 call for a "moratorium" on western missionaries. Regional and national Christian councils strove for post-missionary ethnic and denominational unity. Grassroots ecumenism, at the local level, included efforts at collaborative social services and church mergers. Further complicating the picture was the growing presence of nondenominational parachurch revival movements, including the growth of indigenous churches and of Pentecostalism.

Ecumenism in Africa, by definition, consisted of a series of transnational networks. At one level it represented the morphing of what had been colonial mission organizations into ecumenical structures under African leadership. At another level it represented the flourishing of postcolonial Christian pan-Africanism. The problems and challenges of the multiple levels of African ecumenism compose a vast story waiting to be told, far beyond the capacities of this edition of the JACB. Given that by 2018, Africa had become the largest Christian continent, histories of the ecumenical infrastructures of African Christianity in the mid twentieth century—and the biographies of individual leaders—require urgent attention.

The Stories in this Issue

This issue of the JACB highlights several clusters of biographies related to ecumenical relations in mid twentieth century southern Africa, beginning in the period of nationalist struggles and independence after the Second World War. We include the stories of prominent leaders who in the 1950s mobilized international Christian support for human rights. The Rev. Michael Scott was an Anglican missionary who connected human rights struggles in India, South Africa, Namibia, and the U.K. He

[4] José B. Chipenda, Foreword to Efiong Utuk, *Visions of Authenticity: The Assemblies of the All Africa Conference of Churches 1963-1992* (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1997): ix. Contained in Utuk's volume is an insightful essay written by Prof. Jesse Mugambi, "Some Lessons from a Century of Ecumenicism in Africa," pp. 11-28.

was the first petitioner before the United Nations, delegated by the Herero people to expose genocidal atrocities against them in Southwest Africa (Namibia), and to advocate for their independence. Dr. Z. K. Mathews was a noted educator and leader in the African National Congress, who in 1953 drafted the Freedom Charter, a bold grassroots statement for racial equality. A committed internationalist, Mathews moved seamlessly among South African, Botswanan, and global church bodies, including serving as Africa Secretary of the Division of Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service of the World Council of Churches. The Rev. Trevor Huddleston was an Anglican missionary in South Africa, who in the 1950s brought international attention to the issue of forced migration to so-called homelands, when he defended the people of Sophiatown and publicized their plight in his best-seller *Naught for Your Comfort*. A supporter of African socialism (*ujamaa*), he served bishoprics in Tanzania, England, and Mauritius. A previous issue of the JACB considered Africa's first Nobel Prize winner Chief Albert Luthuli.[5] He was a devout Christian from a Zulu missionary family, was educated in mission schools, and lived on Groutville mission station in South Africa. As president of the African National Congress in 1952, he went on to lead protests against pass laws and was accused of high treason. These 1950s biographies reveal the importance of global church connections for the protection and support of African Christian leaders and visionary missionaries who advocated for equal human rights during the launching of liberation struggles.

At a structural level, the World Council of Churches had limited tools against the economic and political power of western colonialism and settler economics; nevertheless, it strengthened resistance to injustice. Prayer and interracial worship undergirded ethical reflection and peacebuilding among churches. In 1960, for example, the World Council of Churches, along with global student movements and denominational support, hosted the Cottesloe Consultation in South Africa. The Cottesloe Consultation succeeded in mobilizing individual church representatives against the injustices of apartheid, but its findings were squelched by the South African government and the Dutch Reformed Church withdrew from the WCC. On a local level, networks of Christians refused to accede to separate worship, provided lodging for black workers, and raised grants for future African leaders as they went into exile. The strength of the ecumenical movement, then, lay in individuals who held conferences, signed petitions, hosted guests, and organized mass actions for social change. The ecumenical movement provided critical support at the human and spiritual level for social change.[6] During the 1960s churches worked from the bottom up, educating one potential leader at a time, and launching one information campaign at a time.

Entries in the DACB highlight regional ecumenical leaders from the 1960s. From

[5] JACB issue 2.4 October 2017:

[6] A powerful and important collection of stories about individual actions and networks connecting human rights in Africa and the United States is William Minter, Gail Hovey, and Charles Cobb, Jr., *No Easy Victories: African Liberation and American Activists over a Half Century, 1950-2000*, Foreword by Nelson Mandela (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2008).

South Africa, we include the biography of Lutheran bishop Dr. Manas Buthelezi. Working with the Rev. Beyers Naude in the Christian Institute, the South African Council of Churches, the All Africa Conference of Churches, and the Lutheran World Federation, Buthelezi was a pioneer black theologian who brought black consciousness into global ecumenical conversations, and brought international church support into the fight against apartheid. Another Lutheran who worked with the SACC was the Rev. Wolfram Kistner. Kistner was from a German missionary family and in the late 1960s supervised the Hermannsburg Mission in South Africa. His most important post was as Director from 1976 to 1988 of the Division of Justice and Reconciliation of the SACC. This strategic position put him in the center of anti-apartheid work among South African churches. He and Beyers Naudé founded the Ecumenical Advisory Bureau that cultivated relationships with overseas church leaders.

In Botswana, missionaries Rev. and Mrs. John and Joan Jones, and Anglican Fr. Alan Butler, were leading ecumenists in the 1960s. In the context of forming a united and independent Botswana, they led merger movements of Botswana churches and facilitated ecumenical relationships at the local level. Butler was a founder of the Botswana Christian Council. The effort to move beyond ethnically separate churches, founded under antiquated colonial mission comity agreements, was an essential component of national unity during the 1960s. From Malawi, we include a biography of the Rev. Jonathan Sangaya, who exemplifies the transition from mission to ecumenism during the period of independence. Trained as teacher in the Presbyterian Blantyre Mission, Sangaya became the first Malawian General Secretary of Blantyre Synod during the 1960s. In that role, he centered efforts for self-determination among Malawian churches, including the founding of ecumenical theological education. From a position with the All Africa Conference of Churches, he was a key bridge figure with Presbyterian partners abroad.

Another cluster of Protestant ecumenical leaders whose biographies are featured in this issue were active during the 1960s and early 1970s in the independence movements of Portuguese colonies Angola and Mozambique. Given the close relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Portuguese colonial government, Protestants in Angola and Mozambique occupied a liminal space, dependent on outside support for their survival against discrimination and even persecution. A key missionary leader who supported the independence struggles in Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe was United Methodist Bishop Ralph Dodge.[7] Among the hundreds of young men he mentored, and for whom he found church scholarships to study in the west, were Dr. António Agostinho Neto, founder of the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), and Dr. Eduardo Mondlane the first president of Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO). Dodge used his ecumenical connections to support indigenous clergy, and he was honored by the Rhodesian Christian Conference. His influence in Rhodesia was widespread, especially

[7] A graduate of the Boston University School of Theology, Bishop Dodge was one of its notable alums, as was Dr. Norman Thomas who wrote the DACB entry on Dodge, and was himself expelled from Rhodesia for his anti-racism work.

as a mentor to numerous Methodist leaders, including Bishop Abel Muzorewa, the first prime minister of an independent Zimbabwe.

Dr. Eduardo Mondlane provides one of the most interesting examples of how missionary and ecumenical networks overlapped to support a major leader of the independence movement in Mozambique. A product of mission education and the recipient of ecumenical scholarships, Mondlane was a brilliant intellectual who studied in Switzerland and the United States. He met his American wife Janet at a Christian youth movement camp. Elected president of Frelimo in 1962, Mondlane left academia and became the public organizer of Mozambican independence movements until his assassination in 1969.

The focal point of this issue of the JACB is the new profile of the Rev. José Chipenda. Noted ecumenist and DACB elder Prof. Jesse Mugambi contributed to the writing of his "living biography."[8] From his home in Angola, Rev. Chipenda was active at all levels of twentieth-century African ecumenism, including the global (World Council of Churches), the pan-African (All Africa Conference of Churches), and local evangelistic and human rights work. Forced into exile mid century, José and Eva Chipenda worked through the World Student Christian Federation and advocated for Angolan independence. After the independence of Angola and civil war, Chipenda took on the leadership of the AACC, and then later played a central role in peacemaking in Angola. This inspiring biography of the Chipendas illustrates the transnational interconnectivities of African ecumenism, and embodies its importance for future research.

[8] Rev. Chipenda is still alive, as of the publication of this journal issue (October 2023).