

Evaluating Educational Endeavours of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa

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Abstract

The significance of the educational endeavours of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa can fruitfully be demonstrated through the parable of the elephant and 'six blind men'. Each of the blind men was asked to define an elephant, and because they were blind each separately touched the head, the leg, tail, the tasks, the belly and ears. Each of the blind men concluded that what they had touched was the elephant. The meaning of this parable becomes apparent when applied to the Presbyterian missionary experience in South Africa. Critics of missionary work have lunched on one aspect of their work and prematurely concluded that the missionaries did little. This article approaches the endeavours of the Presbyterian missionaries from a holistic dimension by looking at their various aims, work on education and health among the Blacks in South Africa. The article concludes by critically evaluating the overall role of the Presbyterian missionaries in the establishment and consolidation of black education in South Africa.

Keywords: educational endeavours, missionary schools, mission hospitals, western civilization, christianization

INTRODUCTION

Much has been said and written about the missionary educational endeavours in South Africa in general but little is understood about the complex and sometimes contradictory endeavours of the Presbyterian missionaries in trying to educate Blacks in South Africa. It seems that only a historical perspective that focuses on the missionary aims, their role in introducing academic and health education can help us understand the magnitude of the missionary tasks. The Swiss Missionary work in South Africa was the concern of the L' Eglise Libre du Canton de Vaud, which was one of the three Swiss Churches in Switzerland.

From the earliest days the Evangelical Presbyterian Church was inspired by the Swiss missionary endeavours and it continued with the missionary policy of establishing self-governing and self-supporting mission stations all over South Africa.

The progress of the Missionary work

The following mission stations were established by the Evangelical Presbyterian Church Missionaries.

Valdezia Mission Station, 1875

The Swiss missionaries bought the farm Klipfontein (Spelonken) on the Rivubye (Luvubu) River in the Northern Transvaal. Later they changed the name of the farm Klipfontein (spelonken) into Valdezia Mission Station, in honour of their homeland Canton de Vaud in Switzerland (Brookes, 1925: 6-7). At Valdezia the Swiss Missionaries taught the Tsonga people modern methods of farming and even built a

primary school to teach them how to read and write. Better elementary medical facilities were also introduced. The work (the school and Catechism classes) started by Eliakim Matlanyane in 1875. He thus continued and developed with the healing of the sick and evangelization (Manganyi, 1992: 19 and Mabunda, 1995: 41).

Elim Mission Station, 1879

Another mission station was founded at Elim also in the Northern Transvaal, a few kilometers away from Valdezia under Reverend and Mrs. De Meoron. Elim Mission Station is situated about twenty-seven kilometers from the town, Louis Trichardt. Elim Mission Station became a famous centre for the Swiss Missionaries. It ushered in a new missionary enterprise in what is now called Mozambique (the then Portuguese East Africa). This endeavour was undertaken in 1882 by a new convert Joseph Mhalamhala who incidentally came from Mozambique, originally as one of Chief Joao Albasini's followers (Mabunda, 1995: 141).

Elim Mission Hospital played a vital health care role because it served both Black and White, for there was no hospital in Louis Trichardt area and during the Anglo Boer War (1899-1902) it treated both the Boers and the British soldiers (Baloyi, 1965: 54). Elim Mission Station also became famous as an educational centre, through, Lemana Training Institution established in 1906. Teachers as well as evangelists who served the Evangelical Presbyterian Church received their education at Lemana. Many people flocked to this centre and went back carrying

the light from this mission station to other places (Mathebula, 1989: 6).

Shiluvane Mission Station, 1886

In 1886 Reverend and Mrs Eugene Thomas established Shiluvane Mission Station in the district of Tzaneen in the North-Eastern Transvaal. The missionaries' hard work and dedication paid off because in 1889 the first church building was officially consecrated at Shiluvane Mission Station (Halala, 1986: 49).

Mhinga Mission Station. 1897

In 1897 Reverend and Mrs P. Rosset founded Mhinga Mission Station in the far Northern-Eastern Transvaal. Their work flourished and Mhinga grew into a fully fledged mission station. The major aim of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church Missionaries was to spread the Gospel and values of Western civilization to far reaching outstations such as Mafarana, Mariveni and Khudwana (Nwandula, 1987: 14).

The Educational Aims

The missionaries had two main aims: firstly, to spread Christianity and a Western way of life among the "heathen" Blacks. These goals and aims were anchored in certain principles. The Theological aim attempted to bring the fact of greatness of God's work to indigenous people so that converts may recognize the Lordship of Christ and worship Him. Evangelization was therefore the most important thing for the church to do. It was considered to be the primary means towards exaltation of the Lord (Hlatswayo, 1989:110).

The Salvational aim was complementary to the theological aim. It was a greater concern of these missionaries that every black person in South Africa could learn more of God's will for himself/herself if he/she could read the Bible, especially the Gospels (Kgware, 1961: 14). The Christian converts were to be educated to believe in the omnipotence of God and the saving grace of Christ.

The antagonistic aim in missionary endeavours was directed towards undermining indigenous people's way of worship. The converts were discouraged from what the missionaries conceived as heathen practices and evil customs, such as, believing in the powers of superstition, witchcraft, worshipping of ancestors, relinquishing essential community bonds such as polygamy, initiation schools, beer drinking, lobola (dowry), the laws regarding the inheritance of a deceased's estate (which often included the wife in the case of a man being the deceased) and reliance of the Mungoma (Soothsayer) (Maluleke, 1995: 212).

The main intention of the missionaries was to teach the converts to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and

Saviour. Converts had to be prepared for the coming of the Lord 'Jesus Christ at the end of this life and especially at the judgement day when the righteous will be duly rewarded by eternal life. The sinful on the other hand had to face condemnation (Mphahlele, 1972: 95-96 and Hlatswayo, 1989:110).

The Educational Achievements

The development of Black education in South Africa was largely the work of missionaries who regarded education as an essential part of their Christianizing and evangelizing work. In order that the good news might spread to those whom the missionaries themselves were unable to reach, Black teachers, evangelists and other literate people were trained to preach the word of God and teach others to read and write. Thus education became an essential element in evangelization and nurturing Christian leadership. Missionaries realized from the beginning that their mission schools were powerful agencies for evangelizing the Blacks and or giving them rudiments of education.

Primary School Education

The primary school education was regarded as a means to an end, a gateway to Christianization and evangelization of pupils through literacy. It was to help the pupils to develop into civilized adults with a well-balanced personality and a sense of responsibility. Primary school education was to provide the basis for literacy and a knowledge of a subject, as well as certain skills and personality traits on which secondary school education can be build (Neill, 1964: 177-178). All pupils are given an introductory education geared more specifically to developing the basic skills of literacy and numeracy (Behr, 1988).

Secondary School Education

By providing secondary school education, the aim was to improve the students academically. It was further to establish a complete continuity between the primary and secondary school education. The aims were set down as to nurture the body, mind and character. Teachers were required to instill the professional skills, the insight of the scholars and to mould the character of the scholars. Secondary school education is in reality the "open sesame" to the students' progress and prosperity (George, 1955 and Fihla 1962).

Teacher Training Institutions

The primary aim of teacher education was still primafacie to Christianize and civilize the student teachers. Secondary aims were to provide teachers with knowledge of teaching their subjects and to imbue them with skills, teaching techniques and approaches necessary to present them in practice and to give them a broad professional training that will equip them for working in the primary schools (Department

of Bantu Education Primary Teachers Course 1952 and George, 1955).

Control and Administration of Black Education

Missionaries pioneered, founded, financed, maintained, controlled and administered black educational ventures initially without any moral or financial support from the state (Mphahlele & Mminele, 1997: 60). The attitude of the missionaries had been determined by their desire to impact religious ideas in the Black people and to convert them to a Christian way of life. The development, control and administration of mission schools from primary to secondary school level were mainly of a high standard as the missionaries did not want their converts to move to another better developed mission school. It is due largely to the efforts of the missionaries that blacks received any education at all. The success of the missionaries in educating Blacks in South of Africa has been invaluable in the sense that many of Southern Africa's leaders studied at mission schools.

Control by Church and State

The South African Act of 1909 laid down the clause 85(iii) which stipulated that the Provincial Administration would be entrusted with education other than higher education including Bantu (Black) education, for a period of five years and hereafter until Parliament otherwise decides (Behr, 1988: 59). In 1922 the Union Government, through its Department of Native Affairs, joined hands with the missionary societies and the provincial government by way of providing funds for Black education. While the Provincial Administration retained their powers to legislate for Bantu (Black) education, the Union Department of Native Affairs, through its permanent Native Affairs Commission, maintained some measure of indirect control by means of the subsidies which it allocated annually to the provinces (Kgware, 1961: 14-16). The Presbyterian ministers automatically became superintendents at the mission stations and the outstations they founded. The superintendents were recognized as managers of schools with special duties, powers and responsibilities. The missionary superintendent was the highest local authority of the school. He alone had the power of expelling a teacher. Mphahlele (1972: 182) concurs and adds that until the advent of Bantu Education in 1953, it would seem that the superintendents wielded too much power and authority over their schools, teachers and students.

Achievements in Health Education

Medical work became an integral part of the evangelization process. The missionaries who were in the process of preaching the Gospel, found it necessary and unavoidable to heal the indigenous people. The introduction of medical ministry was meant to be a means of establishing the early

converts in faith, and the realization that salvation for the soul and health for the body were inseparable. It was to serve as an open door opportunity for the message of full salvation (Bedwell, 1953: 117). The Evangelical Presbyterian Church Missionaries believed that the curative work of the mission hospitals and clinics could be the most effective available means of undermining the influence of the traditional healers. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church Missionaries realized that the zeal power of the traditional healers stemmed from their ability to treat common ailments.

Elim Mission Hospital, 1898

Elim Mission Hospital near Louis Trichardt commenced its beneficial work in 1898. Elim Mission Hospital catered for both Europeans (Whites) and Blacks of the Far Northern Province. At first Elim Mission Hospital concentrated on treating the sick, later it reached out to the community in order to promote good health and prevent diseases. With the aid of conscientious nursing assistants, and other hospital helpers, hospital services were being laboured indefatigably winning the confidence of both white and non-white in medical treatment as they travelled the areas on horseback or on foot attending to the sick (Fihla, 1962 and Gelfand, 1984).

Elim Mission Hospital did not only bring relief of physical pains and suffering, but it has also been a prominent force at work against the enslavement of the mind which comes from belief in witchcraft (Brookes, 1925: 12 and Manganyi, 1992: 42-43). The small Elim hospital was the first hospital service to be provided by Evangelical Presbyterian Church. It later paved the way for other mission hospitals in South Africa.

Douglas Smith Mission Hospital 1886

Douglas Smith Mission Hospital was a general hospital serving the Shangaan and Pedi peoples. The hospital developed into a fully flashed hospital with X-ray facilities. A school was started in 1950 to train African (Black) nurses for the Transvaal Provincial Diploma and in 1862 the South African Nursing Council recognized it as a nursing school for auxiliary nurses (Gelfand, 1984).

Masana Mission Hospital 1952

Masana Mission Hospital started as a clinic in mud-hut. Masana clinic was subsidized by a few progressive farmers, storekeepers and Native Affairs Department through valuable donations, considerable help and encouragement. Hospital buildings increased and consisted of a general ward, an isolation ward, an outpatient department (OPD) combined with a workshop and stores, nurses and probationers quarters. In 1952 Masana Clinic became Masana Mission Hospital (Manganyi 1992).

Content and Organization of Health Education

During their training at mission hospitals, the probationer nurses received both informal and formal health education and training. Some informal education and training preceded and supplemented the format type for many years. The nurses were taught some basic nursing skills and housekeeping duties. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church mission hospitals also employed some local people to help with the daily hospital routine. Prior to the formal training of nurses, the mission hospitals made use of nurse aides who undertook simple nursing duties.

Constraints Facing Medical Missions

Problems which contributed to the slow development of medical services were many and varied. Medical missions faced formidable problems of inadequate supply of staff and medical needs. Another major shortcoming in medical missions was the lack of psychiatric help for mental patients. This vacuum strengthened traditional beliefs that mental illness was the result of witchcraft and that Western medical services could not cure it. This also promoted the practice that all patients were taken to hospital when the traditional healers and their friends or relatives thought that they were about to die. (Mellish, 1985: 4 and Nkuna, 1986: 166-167).

It was common for the missionary doctor to be called into some remote kraal, only to find that the "patient" refused missionary help (Nkuna, 1986). Sometimes, the indigenous people were not prepared to receive medical treatment at the hospital because a lot of false and fearful information concerning hospital treatment had been spread by returning migrant labourers.

The relatives of patients refused to allow their sick to remain in the hospital unless some of the relatives were permitted to stay with them, for they feared that the helpless patients would be exposed to their enemies through poison in food, witchcraft or assault. These relatives acted as unpaid nurses and custodians of the patients under the direction of the interpreters who in turn got their instructions from the doctors. The relatives cooked the food for the patients, attended to their toilet needs, helped with laundering of the hospital linen, and assisted with the general cleaning.

Achievements of Medical Missions

One of the most important successes achieved by the medical missions was the considerable increase in the number of patients treated in the hospitals and outstation clinics. Fihla (1962: 31) contends that hospitalization and the use of medicine has been one of the most potent factors that have helped to break down the influence of superstition among the indigenous people. Patients came to realize that diseases did not occur as a result of the willful doings

of the gods, but it could be prevented or even cured when certain rules of health were observed and if the illness was attended properly. Another valuable service rendered by the medical missions was in the field of nurses training. The need to train Black women as nurses was soon realized. The local training of "Black" women as nurses made it possible to staff more and more mission hospitals each of which started to contribute to the training programme. Training of Black women as nurses led to further expansion of nurses' services.

A further innovation attributed to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church Mission Hospitals, was the idea of training male persons as nurses. At first Black men were appointed as interpreters and hospital attendants because of the meager schooling opportunities which existed in South Africa at that time.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The primary aim of the missionaries was to spread the Gospel and Western values and attitudes with the belief that Western civilization would improve the Black society. Missionary education was based entirely on the Bible which prepared candidates for baptism and confirmation so that they should become fully-fledged members of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa. But, the education provided by the Evangelical Presbyterian church Missionaries was selective in the sense that it reached those who wanted to be converted or those who lived in the vicinity of the mission stations. Missionary education has been fundamentally divisive in nature because it divided the educated from the non-educated. It was authoritarian, influenced strongly by Christian National Ideology and marked by strong, often arrogant bureaucratic control with little freedom granted to parents, teachers and students. The involvement of parents in the provision and control of education was minimal.

Though the Evangelical Presbyterian Church Missionaries, efforts were mainly concentrated on the conversion and moral growth of the Blacks, they were also able to establish the foundation for the contemporary education system in South Africa. They empowered the Blacks to play a worthy part side by side with members of other races (Whites, Coloureds and Indians) in the development of the country they shared. Missionaries also introduced western medicine; this helped to cure some diseases that African medicine could not cope with. But the introduction of medicine also made it possible for missionaries to 'force' their gospel to the indigenous African people. On the whole, western medicine and healing practices penetrated the remote areas of South Africa. The healing methods helped to discourage and suppress superstitious beliefs in witchcraft. Medical institutions played an important role in

curbing sickness and loss of life. Mission hospitals and their outstation clinics attracted many patients because medical doctors and nurses cured the diseases which could not be cured by traditional healers.

The Blacks advanced individually and collectively in religious, social, political, technological and economic fields, without untiring efforts, energy, determination and Christian spirit, the Black people would have not achieved the progress they made in Education. Most of the leaders of the new Southern Africa went to mission schools and they were equipped for their future roles such as teaching, ministry, politics, clerical work, radio announcing, nursing and medicine.

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