

A Brief History of Protestant Missions in Angola

"The Bible is political dynamite when translated into the vernacular of a suppressed, despised and exploited people"¹

Sid Gilchrist

Early History

The Protestant missionary endeavor began in Angola in 1878 with the arrival of English Baptists. The British were soon followed by Canadian and American Congregationalists, Brethern, Methodists and others. "Besides strictly religious activity, the early years of missionary endeavors emphasized literacy, educational and medical tasks."² These emphases were to continue throughout protestant involvement in Angola, up to the present. Efforts of Protestant missionaries "Provided the major educational facilities for Africans during the early decades of the twentieth century."³

One important contribution that Protestant missionaries made was to put African languages into print. This eventually caused conflict with the Portuguese colonial government: "becoming civilized in Portuguese Africa meant to become culturally Portuguese and religiously Roman Catholic."⁴ In 1921, through Decree 77, the colonial government forbade the use of African languages in mission schools. Protestant missions refused to cooperate with the decree, and as a result, over 200 mission schools were closed in Northern Angola alone.

A second important contribution made by Protestant missionaries was the development of African leadership. This began with the training of African clergy. Concern for indigenous leadership on the part of the Protestants has produced some of Angola's present African leaders.

For diverse reasons, including their insistence upon developing native cultures and leadership, Protestant missions have continually been at odds with the Portuguese colonial government. On more than one occasion when uprisings occurred among the Angolan people, Protestant missionaries were accused of collaboration.

In discussing the contributions made by Protestant missions, one cannot overlook the important work of medical missionaries. For the last eighty years, "the 'sent ones' of Western churches have made much greater contributions to African welfare than has been realized. Not only in recent days, with modern technical 'know how', but in simpler ways since the very beginning of the projection of compassionate Christian sharing into the life of Africa."⁵

The Angolan Revolt-1961

Pent up African grievances against Portuguese colonial practices of conscript labor, political repression, and social discrimination led to the Angolan revolt of 1961. Portuguese officials suspected Protestant missionaries of complicity in the uprising. Missionary societies were "suspect and subject to governmental criticism after the March 1961 African rebellion. Perhaps justly accused of having stirred up nationalist sentiment in the region, the five societies were forced to withdraw all missionary personnel and close eight of ten stations."⁶

There was some ground for Portuguese suspicion: African and white clergy were leaders in the campaign against Portuguese repressions. For this reasons, and because of Portuguese xenophobia, Protestant missions were turned upon with great violence.

Dr. Sid Gilchrist describes the situation in the area where he worked--far from the center of the storm: "twelve of my intimate African friends and fellow workers...were tortured to death or committed suicide to cheat their sadistic captors when human flesh could stand no more. They were nurses, ministers and teachers." Later in his book, he paints this agonizing portrait: "In 1961, when the Baptist missions were accused of fomenting the rise of Kikongo people against their Portuguese masters, the Protestant church was wiped out; or rather, it went underground. The missionaries had to leave...All over Angola innocent Africans, especially Protestants with complete primary schooling or some high school education, were harassed, beaten, imprisoned or killed. Any African who dared to carry a briefcase was almost sure to be beaten."⁷

Recent Developments

Harrassment of missionaries by the colonial government. In June, 1967, a missionary serving in Angola wrote the following in a letter: "The month of May was the worst--persecution and harrassment wise--since 1961 for us here."⁸ Specific incidents alluded to in this missionary's report include: refusal of permission for missionaries to visit posts in their region, threats and harrassment by army patrols and the police, raids, closing down of adult classes, taking into custody of mission personnel--in some cases beatings and imprisonment of these persons and even confiscation of prayer booklets.

On Sept. 15, 1967, an article appeared in the New York Times: "The number of Protestant missionaries in Angola has dwindled to about 65 today from over 250 in 1961. at the time of the nationalist uprising....Portuguese authorities in Angola hold the Protestant missions largely responsible for the nationalist insurrection, which has been waged in limited areas, particularly in the north, for the last six years." Reasons for the decrease of mission activity are linked to the colonial suspicion of Protestant missionaries. Protestants are accused of working for the denationalization of the population, for fostering terrorist chiefs, using African languages and writing books and articles critical of the Portuguese.

More recently, the following report came from Rev. Joyce Myers, who teaches at the Seminario Emanuel in Dondi mission, Angola: (dated June, 1970) "For the average Angolan, disease, persecution, poverty, imprisonment, death are daily realities. The war goes on, with no end in sight, and although 'on the surface' things may have eased up a bit, exploitation and harrassment continue. People are picked up, accused of "subversive activities"...some are released; others end up in prison, or worse...As ever, villagers are ordered to repair roads, etc with no pay...How one ministers to future ministers, in this situation, is indeed challenging and rewarding!"

The future of Protestant missions in Angola looks bleak. There will most likely be a further reduction of Protestant activity in Angola during the next few years. In its annual report for the Board for World Ministries in 1970, the United Church of Christ made the

following report: "during 1967 the UCBWM voted to join the Board of World Missions of the United Church in Canada in suspending recruitment of missionaries for Angola until the Portuguese government is willing to provide reasonable assurances it will permit missionaries to live and work among the people of Angola."¹⁰

There remains, however, an important mission to be undertaken by Protestants here in America. Christians must learn the truth about the situation in Angola. Sid Gilchrist writes: "I have spoken with many self-exiled African patriots and their plea is always the same: 'Let them know how Africans are suffering. Let the people in your churches know the evils of colonial rule. Tell them to use their prestige, moral influence and political power to enlighten and persuade your government to see that all of Africa must become free from foreign domination.'"¹¹ All American Christians, clergy and lay, are called upon to participate in this important mission.

Footnotes:

1. Sid Gilchrist, Angola Awake, p. 86086.
2. David M. Abshire, Portuguese Africa, A Handbook, p. 79
3. James Duffy, Portugal in Africa, p. 128
4. Abshire, p. 79
5. Gilchrist, p. 90.
6. Ronald H. Chilcote, Portuguese Africa, p. 59
7. Gilchrist, p. 54
8. Anonymous letter from an missionary in Angola
9. Gilchrist, p. 71
10. United Church Board for World Ministries, 160th Annual Report, p.
11. Gilchrist, p. 6.

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One of the most distinguished leaders of the Protestant Church in Central Angola was the Reverend Mr. Jesse Chipenda. The Rev. Mr. Chipenda had been a pioneer missionary in the coastal region of Angola as a young man before he was ordained to the Christian ministry in 1938. After serving in various capacities, Pastor Jesse was chosen to be the first General Secretary of the Church Council of Central Angola. Although he was a faithful disciple of the Prince of Peace, he too was arrested and imprisoned in 1968. The last letter which was received from Pastor Jesse was to thank the friends who had sent presents. He wrote:

This letter has the purpose of thanking you for the Christmas presents. We were also happy with the precious remembrances. My health is pretty good; just my swollen feet which are not fully recovered. But I am not worried about this. I consider my coming here as a blessing from God. If I had continued always at Dondi, I would never have had the privilege of contacting Christians from all parts of Angola. Here there are Christians from Cabinda in the North to Cuanhama country in the South, and from the Atlantic Ocean on the west to Dilolo on the frontier in the East. Here God is worshipped by all the tribes. Here one can appreciate better the extent of the church in Angola. Morning prayers are held in the barracks daily at 5:30 a.m. We recite a Bible verse, sing a hymn and finish in prayer. Mondays and Thursdays after supper we have services of worship with preaching. Saturday afternoon we have a prayer service. Sunday morning we have Holy Communion and in the afternoon a big outdoor service of worship. We held the Week of Prayer January 2nd-9th. During this week, many who had left the Church were received again into the fellowship. We used the theme of the Prodigal Son. Here neither Bible nor hymn book entre, but God performs miracles even today. It is by the will of God that I am here. In spite of my weak health I am immensely joyful through my communion with God. Here I "enlarge the place of my tent." (Isaiah 54:2) Faith, confidence and hope in God dissolve all bitternesses of the present life.

Your brother in Christ,

(Jesse Chipenda)

Later in 1969 Pastor Jesse died in prison camp. No member of his family was allowed to be with him during his final illness.

(Taken from Background Information, Ohio Conference United Church of Christ, 1970)

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