

THE JUBILEE YEAR OF THE REFORMED APOSTOLIC FAITH MISSION OF SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Africans celebrate life just like Jewish people. They celebrate their religion, they dance it, they sing it and they act it. They have innumerable rituals and ceremonies. Some rituals are personal others are related to agriculture, health, homestead, profession and festivals. Through festivals, the life of a community is renewed. Hence the Reformed Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa celebrated its Jubilee in 1997. This church was founded in 1947, in Krugersdorp (Gauteng Province), after breaking away from the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, due to religious, social and political reasons.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Final year in a cycle of fifty years, consisting of seven Sabbatical Year periods, or forty-nine years, plus this fiftieth year, is called Jubilee Year. The basic role of the number seven in this reckoning of years and also the perfect parallelism between this fifty-year time and the pentecontad, consisting of seven weeks, or forty-nine days, plus an extra day — fifty days in all — suggest strongly that the Jubilee Year had its origin in the pentecontad calendar. Hence, the fifty-year Jubilee period was the ultimate unit of time reckoning of this primitive, agricultural calendar. If so, it would be a reasonable inference, that just as each fiftieth day was celebrated as a sacred day, the “concluding festival”, of its pentecontad, so correspondingly the Jubilee Year was also originally of sacred character and marked in fitting, festal manner, the close of the fifty-time unit (Buttrick 1962: 1001).

The Reformed Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa was officially founded in 1947 in Krugersdorp (Gauteng Province), after

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breaking away from the Apostolic Faith Mission, due to religious, social and political issues (Moripe 1991: 13-14). The church now celebrates Jubilee Year. The church attempts to find its roots in South Africa and also strives to capture the spirit of the early church. This church also acknowledges the role played by Ntsikana and Nehemiah Tile in indigenous Christianity in Southern Africa. The church can no longer sing to the Lord in a foreign language and a foreign thought.

2. THE MEANING OF JUBILEE

The specific name, "Jubilee Year"; (Year of the Ram's Horn) Lev 25; 27: 18, 23-4. This Horn was carried and blown only by priests, and it had some supernatural effect. A blast from which would inaugurate a new and happier era for the conquered and dispersed Israel. All this suggests cogently that the Ram's horn trumpet was of unusual character, used only upon extraordinary occasions and for some particular purpose. The loud trumpet would herald the commencement of the Jubilee Year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all its inhabitants.

The Jubilee Year in principle discharges two primary functions. It effected the automatic release or emancipation of a Jew, who for one reason or another had at some moment within the preceding forty-nine years become enslaved to a fellow Jew, and likewise the automatic release or return to the original owner or his family of property, whether fields or houses in unwalled — i.e. country-towns, which had been sold to a fellow Jew during the course of a similar forty-nine year period. Under any condition the Jubilee Year period persisted in Jewish usage only as the largest unit of time reckoning (Buttrick 1962: 1001-2). In brief, all imbalances have to be rectified and Israelites had to start from scratch, all over again.

Africans celebrate life just like the Jewish people. They celebrate their religion, they dance it, they sing it and they act it, for celebration provides inspiration. They have innumerable rituals and ceremonies. Some rituals are personal. Others are related to agriculture, health, homestead, profession and festivals. Through festivals, the life of the community is renewed. Hence, the Reformed

Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa celebrates its Jubilee year; and wishes to keep its identity.

3. BACKGROUND OF THE CHURCH

Christianity is a universal religion and also an adaptable faith. It was universalised on the Cross; and made adaptable to any situation on the first Easter Day. Our duty now is to make indigenous this universal religion. Egypt has indigenised it, Europe and America has westernised it, the Orthodox churches have Easternised it, here in most parts of Africa we must Africanise it. It belongs to the very nature of Christianity to be subjected to localisation, otherwise its universality becomes meaningless. For too long the church in most parts of Africa and in particular South Africa, has been content to live and act as though it were still in America or Europe. We should remember that Christianity is not a recent arrival on the continent of Africa, nor an European neither an American religion. As a matter of fact, Christianity first came to Africa before it could reach Europe or America. It is so old in Africa that it can be described as an indigenous traditional religion. Long before the start of Islam in the seventh century, Christianity was well established in Egypt, parts of Sudan and Ethiopia. It is believed that in Egypt, it was brought by Mark, one of the writers of the Bible, in the year 42 A.D. (Mbiti 1977: 182). It came to Africa shortly after the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The history of the modern African religious movements reveals a remarkably long list of movements that have fallen foul of the colonial and other governments in Africa. They have been persecuted and this resulted in their dispersion and subsequent expansion. It happened in the days of the New Testament Church and it also happened to the early church in North Africa. In South Africa these movements were explained chiefly in term of African opposition to colonial paternalism, preparing the way for political independence. Certain factors are known to have contributed to the rise of the African Initiated Churches in South Africa. These include religious, social, economic ethnic factors as well as the translation of the Bible into African languages.

It was a dynamic form of Christianity, producing great scholars and theologians such as Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Augustine. African Christianity made a great contribution to Christendom through scholarship, participation in church councils' defence of faith, movements like monasticism, Christian theology, translation and preservation of the Scriptures, martyrdom, the famous Catechetical School of Alexandria, liturgy and even heresies and controversies (Mbiti 1974: 229-230). Unfortunately Islam wiped out Christianity in North Africa with the exception of Egypt and Ethiopia. The ancient church in these countries kept its identity both as a universal faith and as an indigenous religion.

During the third century the Bible was being translated into the dialects of the indigenous Copt, with the subsequent emergence of a Coptic Christianity. Today 12% of Egyptians still belong to the Coptic church. The reason for this is mainly the ability of this form of Christianity to indigenise (Pillay and Hofmeyr 1991: 42,46).

4. PRELIMINARY DEVELOPMENTS

Janet Hodgson (1980: 36-37), suggests that Ntsikana, who died in 1818, may mark the beginning of the "independence or indigenisation" of the Gospel in South Africa. She admits that Ntsikana, officially, never became a member of a mission church, however, he was acquainted with the Gospel. As a boy, Ntsikana heard the Rev J van der Kemp preach, and as a result heard missionary-preaching with some frequency. As a result of two strange experiences on a particular day, Ntsikana inaugurated worship services in his home for non-kinship groups which consisted of singing hymns. Ntsikana composed prayers in which the emphasis was on the communion with God, and teaching concerning sin and repentance. In the life and work of Ntsikana we see the first black South African who attempts to indigenise the expression of the Christian faith, which is independent of the European mission.

The first successful secession from the European mission is that of Nehemiah Tile, a Tembu who was ordained by the Wesleyan church in 1868, who then broke away from the Wesleyan church and founded the Tembu Catholic Church (Oosthuizen 1986: 231). He

was fully supported by the paramount chief, who was then declared the visible head of the church. Nehemiah Tile quarrelled with the superintendent of the circuit because blacks were not able to express themselves within the mission church. This is true of many African Initiated Churches, including the Reformed Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa. These churches wish to be themselves and to be relevant in the changing world in which they find themselves, in particular in Africa.

The question of indigenisation ministry in Africa can no longer be ignored or shelved by the church. Hence, we see the rise of the African Initiated Churches in the twentieth century, in great numbers. Even the Catholic Church in Africa is taking this matter very seriously. The leaders of these churches took it upon themselves to indigenise the church, because the white missionaries failed to do so. The intention of indigenisation, is to order the essential aspects of Christian worship, to an African worshipper to understand and feel deeply as he/she worships.

5. THE FOUNDING OF THE REFORMED APOSTOLIC FAITH MISSION OF SOUTH AFRICA.

The beginnings of the Reformed Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa have some direct links with J A Dowie's church, namely with the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion in the United States of America and William Seymour, a black preacher in the Black Church in Azusa Street, Los Angeles, where the emphasis on "Baptism in Holy Spirit" (evidenced, initially, by the speaking in tongues) was propagated. The Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa is the oldest Pentecostal church in South Africa and among the oldest in the world. The Reformed Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, as a branch of the Apostolic Faith Mission, considers itself as part and parcel of the classical Pentecostal Movement worldwide which originated early in the twentieth century (Section C of 1947 constitution). It regards itself as a continuation of the church of Acts in spirit, doctrine and practice. It is a church towards the original purity and power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A church away from

dead forms, and into living vital truth, a church of the spirit of God Himself. It does not regard itself as a sect, but as a well-organised Christian body with a legally accepted constitution, and it is registered in the Republic of South Africa (P120/4/368).

Certain factors are known to have contributed to the rise of the African Initiated Churches in South Africa. These include politics, social, economic, ethnic and some theological factors, as well as the translation of the Bible into African languages. The policy of segregation was verbally confirmed and sealed by Cecil Rhodes, the Premier of the British Cape Colony, and this policy caused more harm than good in South Africa. No church other than the Dutch Reformed Church accepted segregation in principle. The Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa accepted this policy in practice (Burger 1987: 200-216), and other English-speaking churches in South Africa. The Executive Council of the Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa met on November 1908, and took the following resolution concerning baptism: "Baptism of the native shall in future take place after the baptism of the white people". A few months later the Executive Council took another resolution on baptism "In future the baptism; of white, coloured and natives shall be separated²". This was because a majority of the Council members were Afrikaners, who propagated apartheid. This line of action was taken further, whereby, all other congregations were established according to race.

It is a well-known fact that in South Africa then most of the African Initiated Churches, originated from the Apostolic Faith Mission, because of obvious reasons. Some reasons brought forward by the co-founders of the Reformed Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa are: some white ministers did not have congregations and they came to black congregation to give orders, and they also took money; the white ministers with their wives refused to wash feet during the Holy Communion. The main reason why they left was because the church was no longer interested in uniform. According to the black

2 Minutes of the executive council of the Apostolic Faith Mission — 6 November 1908.

congregants, uniform was important. This new church also wanted to free itself from the white dominated Apostolic Faith Mission.

According to the minutes of the executive committee of the then Bantu Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, this new church held its first Annual General Conference at Premier Mines, in the district of Pretoria, in 1946³. The people who organized the conference were: P C Mosito of Krugersdorp, J Boshomane - Benoni, E Mokoena - Bethlehem, M Selo - Johannesburg, S Mahlungu - Middelburg, J Phehla - Pretoria, J Schoeman - Klerksdorp, A Sathekge - Ladysalbourne, T Taupedi - Lichtenburg, A Nhlapho - Meyerton, J M Moropa - Lydenburg, A Masilo - Boksburg and J Shirinda - Mamelodi West. All these men were ordained ministers in the Apostolic Faith Mission. They also decided upon the name of this new church. The name of the church for the purpose of unity, co-operation, service, fellowship and discipline was the Bantu Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa. The term "Bantu" was used in order to comply with the political situation of the time. They also wanted to identify themselves with the mainstream of the African Initiated Churches.

The second Annual General Conference was held at Krugersdorp, whereby the church was formally constituted. The legal constitution of the church was adopted. Chief executive officers were appointed; P C Mosito was appointed President General, J Boshomane Secretary General and A Masilo Treasurer General. All other co-founders of the church formed the executive of the church.⁴ They did not regard themselves as a sect, but as a well-organised Christian body with a legally accepted constitution. It is registered in the Republic of South Africa, and it enjoys all privileges and facilities that any other organised church enjoys. This church also regard itself as part of the classical Pentecostal Movement which originated in the 20th century.

3 Minutes of the executive committee of the Bantu Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa — 6 April 1946.

4 Minutes of the executive committee of the Bantu Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa — 3 December 1947.

The Church expanded into Botswana through Rev E T L Mориpe of Meadowlands, Johannesburg. The Church experienced some problems with the Botswana government on the term "Bantu". The Botswana government could not recognize the church due to this term. Then the Annual General Conference of 1978 took a decision to change the name of the church from Bantu Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa to Reformed Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa. The Department of Plural Relations and Development was duly informed about the change of name. The Department confirmed the change of name and the registration of the church. The government of Botswana was also duly informed about the change of name, and the church is now legally constituted in Botswana.

The Most RT. Rev P C Mosito died in October 1967. The executive committee of the church met at Krugersdorp on the 3rd December of the same year, to appoint the next President General of the church. E J Mokoena of Kroonstad was appointed new President General, Rev E T L Mориpe of Johannesburg as Secretary General and A Masilo retained the office of Treasurer General. The Annual General Conference which was held in Sharpeville the following year approved the appointment of the said persons. Unfortunately during August 1990, President Mokoena passed away, and immediately Rev P L Matlakeng of Johannesburg was appointed as acting President General. During the Annual General Conference of 1993, which was held at Mmabatho, he was formally appointed as the President General, Rev L S Mokonyane of Roodepoort as Secretary General and Rev E Mbhipha of Klersdorp as Treasurer General. In September 1996, President Matlakeng was involved in a car accident and he died instantly. The Annual General Regional Conference of the church met at Meadowlands from the 12th to the 13th of October 1996 to decide upon this matter. This Regional Conference recommended Rev L S Mokonyane of Roodepoort as President General and Rev Dr. S Mориpe of Pietersburg as Secretary General. The 50th Jubilee Annual General Conference of the church met at Meadowlands during the Easter Weekend of 1997, and approved the recommendations of the Annual General Regional Conference.

6. MEMBERSHIP

"Go, then, to all people everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt.28: 19-20). In this parting injunction of the risen Lord to His disciples, is given for the first time the office of the Christian church. It is significant that in His teaching, He mentioned the church twice but only towards the close of His ministry.

The distinctive feature of His teaching is the setting up among humankind, the Kingdom of God. A Kingdom not of this world but a spiritual kingdom into which he/she can enter who has been born from above. Being spiritual, this Kingdom is invisible, but it has an outward manifestation. That manifestation is the visible church, the ecclesia, those who are called out from the world and gathered into a society whose aim is the extension of God's Kingdom.

The Reformed Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa desires to manifest God's love for sinners and to call them to repentance, pointing them to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The church seeks to trumpet as loudly and forcibly as it can, the fact that the latter rain is falling and the harvest is at hand. It seeks to reach every man, woman and child of every nation with the glad Gospel message. Any person who shall be a member of this church, shall first be questioned whether he or she shall denounce the worldly pleasures in preference to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. On the church being satisfied by his or her replies, they shall arrange or cause to be arranged that he or she be confirmed in terms of the constitution (Section D of 1947 Constitution).

The church is well represented in five Provinces in South Africa i.e. Gauteng, Free State, Northern Province, Mpumalanga, and North West. In 1995, the church divided itself into five regions i.e. Gauteng, under Rev A Moloko of Pretoria, Free State under Rev J Mofokeng of Bethlehem, Mpumalanga and Northern Province under Rev J Moropa of Graskop, North West under Rev E Mbipha of Klerksdorp and Botswana under Rev R Moilwa. According to the recent statistics of the church (by the former Secretary General, Rev

L S Mokonyane), the roll membership is 159 879. There are 287 ministers and 112 Evangelists. The church has erected 16 church buildings in the following regions: Gauteng - 4; Free State - 3; Northern Province - 2; North West 2; Mpumalanga - 4; Botswana - 1.

The urban congregations of this church cut across ties of kinship, language and residence. They usually meet for important services, as on Christmas, New Year's Day and Ascension Day. An invitation may be sent to other African Initiated Churches. Usually some considerable effort is made for all congregations to be represented at the most important days in the church calendar, in particular the Annual General Conference which is normally during the Easter weekend. Ordinary members in the church have the opportunity to meet with other congregations to participate in this important service.

7. CHURCH POLITY

The polity of the Reformed Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa is described in full in the official constitution of the church. Much of what is recorded in the constitution represents aspirations rather than achievements. There is the Methodist influence to be seen in the church. It appears in many other ways such as the Annual General Conference, District conference, circuits, and the role of laity in preaching and prayer. Thus, the church incorporates a variety of Western mission churches influence into a single system, to adapt to indigenisation.

According to the former President General (E Mokoena), the African features are therefore not expressed through the structures that closely mirror traditional society, but rather through a polity that continues the hierarchical system inherited both from the traditional society and from the mother church, namely the Apostolic Faith Mission and modifies it by the addition of elements from the Methodist form of government. It should be regarded as a mixed Western polity operating in a characteristically African way.

8. WORSHIP

The content of Christian worship is Jesus Christ. His fulfillment of the Old Testament, His birth, life, death, resurrection, Ascension and His coming again. The context in which worship takes its place in the Christian church, called by God to worship, in which each member plays his or her part and in which God speaks and the worshipper responds. The Christ event is central to Christian worship, it also gives meaning to worship.

In some African languages there is no word for worship as such, instead we find other words like to pray, to sacrifice, to perform rituals, to make an offering and so forth. These words describe things and actions which are directed towards God and Spiritual being.

The worship service in the Reformed Apostolic Faith Mission in Africa is quite simple and flexible. A typical order of service consists of prayer, sermon, divine healing, offerings and benediction. It is an African type of service. The purpose of Africanization does not mean the abandonment of worship which is Christo-centric in all its essential aspects, in its language, prayer, hymns and rituals. But simply the use of more homely means of expression or ordering the essential aspects of Christian worship so that the African worshipper can understand and feel deeply as he or she worships.

9. THE JUBILEE YEAR — 1997

The greatest expression of the unity of this church in Christ takes place each year at Easter time, when all the communities or congregations come together, to commemorate the death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ. This is the most outstanding activity of the church life. Here this church remembers Jesus Christ, who is God made flesh and suffered for our sins. The church is reminded that through His suffering He saved us from sin. The Christians are reminded that He conquered sin and rose again from the dead. It is through Him that the Christians today have the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a happy occasion for the church, a great festival, much more than Christmas. The Annual General Conference makes a deep impression upon the members of this church, just like the members of the Z C C when they attend the same conference in Moria.

The 50th Jubilee Annual General Conference of 1997 was held in Meadowlands, Johannesburg, from the 27th till the 30th of March, to celebrate the amazing grace of God to us as a church during these past fifty years. The theme of the conference was reconciliation (Leviticus 25: 8-17). The guest speaker for the conference was His Worship I Padi of the Western M S S structure. Other important guests were Bishop Dr. I B P Mokoena, the founder of the Reformed Independent Churches Association (R I C A) in 1970, who is now the Life President of this Association.

The business of the conference was as follows: Thursday, the 27th, was the arrival day. The following day, the acting President, Rev L S Mokonyane opened the conference officially with Scripture reading and prayer, and he also welcomed all the delegates who attended the conference. On the evening of the same day, the church celebrated Holy Communion, under the leadership of Rev J Moropa, one of the co-founders of the church. Saturday was a special day because the church marked its 50th year celebration. The Acting President General (Rev L S Mokonyane) and the acting Secretary General (Rev Dr S Moripe) were installed into office by Bishop Dr I B P Mokoena. His Worship I Padi delivered his speech on reconciliation. The day was well spent by singing and dancing. On Sunday morning, the conference was officially closed by the President General.

Other business of the conference was the sittings of various committees to elect those whose term of office would end at the end of the conference, namely the Ordination Committee and the Financial Committee; to receive the following reports: those of the acting President General, the acting Secretary General, the Treasurer General, and Synodical and regional reports. They also dealt with other special business, of which due notice was given and also other business of a general nature falling within the scope of the Christian Church. There will be a series of regional conferences, continuing the Jubilee Year celebration.

10. THE ROAD AHEAD

Indeed the Reformed Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa has completed 50 years in existence. It has attempted and continues to

synthesise African traditional culture and Christian beliefs, and formulate a truly indigenous Christianity which gives Blacks an African identity, thus making a minute contribution into the wealth of Christian theology. This church must not be regarded as a sect or as a bridge back to traditional religion. It must be seen rather, as an African church in existence, for it has contributed to the truly indigenised Christianity in South Africa. This church has never allowed African religion to be Christianised, rather it has Africanised Christianity. This church faces the future in full confidence in the Lord and is ready and willing to increasingly fulfil its calling in this part of the world.

Unfortunately, this church is like a motor vehicle which has not been serviced. It should be taken to a garage for service, repairs, fuel and oil. It is not meant to stand in a garage, but to be on the road by day. The majority of ministers are not men/women of letters, and this is a major drawback for the church. Nevertheless, the leadership of this church must not 'park' themselves in their separate garages all the time but brave the dirt roads of everyday life, for the greater part of their available time.

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