

## Is Africa Ready To Do Missions?



Peter Vumisa

In her introduction to the article "Answering the Call," subtitled "African Americans Needed on the Mission field," in the World Christian Magazine (Volume 14, Number 4, December 2001), Carla D. Bastos, an African American serving in Angola wrote, "Africa cries out for help in its struggle against the ravages of spiritual darkness, war, corruption, the AIDS epidemic, drought, flooding and lack of health care.

Thankfully, help is pouring in from Christians and humanitarian groups world-wide. But those who have answered the call of God to minister to the continent through evangelism and mercy ministry are often overwhelmed with the work, finding it difficult to keep up with increasing challenges and demands. Why? Because *someone is missing from the team, leaving those on the field to do more than their share.* The missing link in both African and world-wide missions, is the African-American Christian."

In as much as I agree with her on the fact that Africa still faces many challenges, the article takes a view which I do not agree with on the issue of Christianity in Africa.

Firstly, the view that Africa is still a mission field eliminates the African church itself as part of the missing link in the global Mission enterprise. Secondly, the article paints a gloomy picture of the spiritual climate of Africa. This purports the view that Africa is still very much unevangelised and ravaged by spiritual darkness.

Such views give a misleading pic-

ture about the church in Africa. It is this distorted view of the African church that causes Africans to think that they are still unable and too immature to participate in global missions.

**How old is the African Church?** Is Africa still a mission field? Is the church too immature to do missions? A lot can be debated on this topic. First and foremost I would like to state that it is a false assumption that the church in Africa is small and immature. The view that it lacks roots and a history of experience and growth to reflect upon is untrue.

The Coptic church in Egypt dates back to the early church fathers; the city of Alexandria in North Africa boasted of a prestigious seminary where scholars of the stature of Origen taught and wrote. *In North Africa Tertullian (c.160-c.225) wrote that 'the blood of Christians is seed,'* often misquoted as 'the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.'



Icon of Perpetua and Felicity in the arena at Carthage (North Africa) Martyred for their faith.

Christianity was established in Ethiopia during the third century. By the sixth century, the church had spread through Europe, North Africa, Persia, China and India. This church in many instances was weak or diminished by the influence of Islam, but in many places a flicker of life remained. Thus, *the church in Africa existed for hundreds of years before the Pilgrims landed in the New World,* and is, in reality, historically much older.

Though the present Church lacks knowledge and experience in missions. Studies show that only towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century did the church in Africa really begin to be seriously exposed to cross-cultural missions. There hasn't been a significant cross cultural mission effort numerically among African Evangelical churches, but perhaps there have been numerous outstanding individual missionaries.

Those familiar with the African church know that Africans are incredibly under-represented in cross-cultural Christian missions. While we thank God for the outstanding individual Evangelical missionaries who have represented Africans, the numerical depth has never been great and much still needs to be done.

### The Hindrances

In my interaction with pastors during mission workshops, seminars, Mission/evangelism conferences, in Bible and Mission Schools, the following has been identified as some of the main hindrances to the Church in Africa participating in world evangelism:

- No or little awareness on the subject;
- Financial problems;
- Church Constitutions and traditions;
- Missions is for White people;
- Inferiority complex;
- No vision for missions;
- Lack of mission structures in the church;
- Lack of teaching on missions in the churches;
- Missionaries never taught missions to the churches;
- Wrong priorities in the church programs;
- Selfishness on the part of Pastor;
- Resistance to change, etc.

The Black Evangelical Leaders Consultation on Missions held on 14 -16 July, 1999 in Johannesburg, South Africa, identified almost the same obstacles: inferiority complex, dependency syndrome, black underdevelopment, weak missiology, identity crisis, fragmentation, etc.

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### Igniting the Passion

It is true that African evangelical mission theology has been inadequate. Inadequate not only because of the strong Western influence, but also because it lacks the vision for world evangelisation. For change to take place regarding missions, both the churches and Bible schools need to put more emphasis on mission development in Africa. *One of the weaknesses of the early missionaries in Africa is that they never sowed a vision for missions.* Missionaries did not pass on their vision for missions to the churches they started. Probably missionaries felt that African Christians were incapable of doing what western missionaries were doing. As a result their vision for world missions ended with their own work.

It is high time that the Church in Africa was sensitized and mobilized for missions. We must train and prepare the local churches to send out and support cross cultural Christian workers. Experience shows that many churches in Africa do not have much knowledge on how to run mission programs. It is a big frustration to train missionaries while the sending churches remain untrained. Many young people have been frustrated by their churches because despite the fact that they have a clear call into cross cultural mission work, local churches are in no way ready to send and support them.

Giving for missions is also another serious area of concern. The Evangelical church in Africa suffers from lack of adequate resources. This is because giving for cross-cultural missions is extremely low. Therefore due to this impoverishment, *the African church finds itself unable to be an agent of development and transformation in its own context.* Dependence syndrome is another demon crippling the church in Africa. Due to the economic poverty on the continent, there is a tendency to depend on the patronage of those with resources abroad. But little do we realise that this leads to the inability of self-definition.

My prayer is that the African Church should have a global vision. Our missionary efforts should not just focus on our small local areas, but Africa and the whole

world. Youth as well as adults should enter into missionary endeavours.

The African Church is able to take up the mantle in bringing the whole Gospel to the whole world. As we seek to overcome self-imposed hindrances and bring missions to the forefront, we will witness an increasing harvest force of effective short-term and long-term global workers.

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