

Unlike the other regional groups, Africans went to Bangkok with no reports or formal studies on the salvation theme. The explanation for this silence was twofold:

Some delegates said the ecclesiastical and ecumenical structures in Africa are still basically action-oriented, there is little time for reflection. Unlike the older churches of the West, now concerned primarily with their internal life, the African Church is still reaching out excitingly to the world around it.

'Salvation', said Bena-Silu of the Kimbanguist Church in Zaire, 'is not a matter of reflection and definition. It is a reality that changes your life and the world around you.'

'Here in Bangkok we can reflect on and discuss salvation; but in Zaire, we celebrate, and proclaim it—not the other way around.'

Africans therefore came to Bangkok with open minds and their contributions to the Salvation Today debate were original and spontaneous.

### Call to Action

Culturally, Africans are relatively free of the guilt complexes of the Eastern and Western cultures. For us, therefore, salvation is not static liberation from guilt but a call for action. The salvation of Christ means a war against evil.

As Solomon Lediga of the South African Council of Churches put it, 'Come to South Africa and see my people. See if you can tell them that God has forgiven them. For my people forgiveness is a constant battle and love at times may be against the law'.

But it was not only in situations of racial conflict where salvation had a different meaning. There were also situations of political oppression, of utter material poverty, of debilitating diseases, where salvation must also involve the attempt to make and keep man's life human.

This is not a new message for Africa, but the African churches will receive it with greater confidence than before. Christian churches helped to develop and humanise life in tropical Africa. The difference this time is that they are involved in humanisation uniquely and consciously as Christians.

The Church came to Africa as part of a foreign history and as an agent of that history. It shared, not only the tremendous achievements, power and glory of Western civilization, but also in its shortcomings—colonialism, oppression and white racism. It helped to destroy the African cultural heritage and identity.

To be an effective agent of Christ's salvation today, the African Church must this time live beyond history. African churchmen are obsessed with a sense of history and purpose. They see themselves standing precariously on the brink of a tremendous Christian age.

As the All Africa Conference of Churches (A.A.C.C.) General Secretary Burgess Carr explained in Bangkok, the pendulum is swinging 'from the North Atlantic world, from the Western, the white, the rich world, to Africa, where we have today a Christian population explosion. We are about to become the centre of Christianity'.

Most of the African delegates viewed with suspicion the dialogue approach to evangelism. 'To work for church growth

and renewal is', according to Pastor Seth Nomenyo, 'the chief abiding and irreplaceable task of Christian mission'.

The second message from Bangkok to Africa was the call that the Church in Africa must now become a full partner with others in Christ's total mission in our world today—a world characterised by profound closeness and oneness through sophisticated communication systems and yet equally profoundly divided politically, economically, culturally and racially.

The CWME Assembly in Mexico City in 1963 called for 'mission in six continents'. Bangkok went beyond this to mission in one world.

Africans pleaded passionately for this new concept, but they found themselves in the ambiguous position of having to affirm their self-hood and identity more vigorously. 'We refuse merely to be raw materials used by other people to achieve their own salvation', declared Burgess Carr.

John Gatu, General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa and Vice-Chairman of AACC, proposed a moratorium on the sending of missionary personnel and funds 'to allow us to develop our own resources, define our own priorities, fully and creatively utilize our own genius in witnessing for Christ in our own country, in our own situation, among our own people'.

Bethuel Kiplagat, Kenya's most celebrated missionary who is now working for the Sudan Council of Churches as director of a mammoth rehabilitation and resettlement programme, spoke of the problems of the transfer of power and scathingly criticized the power elites and structures of the Third World.

'These are often very bad imitations of the power elites and structures of the colonial powers', he said.

Of the African delegates, only Bena-Silu of the Kimbanguist Church welcomed whole-heartedly the call for world mission. 'I came here from the depths of isolation to seek our common Christian identity', he said.

Bena-Silu was speaking from a different background from all the other delegates. He represented an independent church which had gone through an identity crisis, had been forced (by government) into accepting a 'moratorium' on foreign missionaries and funds, and lived for nearly half a century on Black theology—the only African church, perhaps, now ready to join the World Council of Churches and speak there with an authentic African voice.

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### RELEVANCE FOR SOUTH AFRICA

For South African churches in particular, Bangkok is of special importance. This is so even though no plenary debate was devoted to South African problems in isolation from world problems.

1. The need for a reinterpretation of the Gospel is a matter of extreme urgency. The majority of white Christians, who are at the same time architects of a social and political system that, to say the least, betrays the heart of the Gospel, have yet to learn the implications of the Gospel in matters of race relations, for instance. The whites in so far as they have

incarnated their spiritual genius in the South African economic and political institutions have sabotaged and eroded the power of Christian love.

While professing to be traditional custodians and last bulwarks in Africa of all that goes under the name of Christian values, the whites have unilaterally and systematically rejected the black man as someone to whom they can relate with any degree of personal intimacy in daily life and ecclesiastical situations. They have virtually rejected the black man as a brother. Love can never be said to exist where normal fellowship is banned.

The significance of Bangkok in such a situation was that it sought a comprehensive understanding of salvation which did not leave any sphere of life unaffected.

2. Bangkok will also serve as an inspiration in another respect. For the sake of the survival of the Christian faith in South Africa, it is urgently necessary that the black man should cease playing the passive role of the white man's victim.

It is now time for the black man to evangelize and humanise the white man. For the black man's side this will mean the retrieval of Christian love from the limitations of the white man's economic and political institutions.

For this to be a reality, it is imperative for the black man to reflect upon the Gospel out of his experience as a black man, in order to discover its power as a liberating factor for him as well as for the white man. The black needs to be liberated from the white's rejection and discover his human worth and potential. He needs to see his own blackness as a gift of God instead of the biological scourge which the white man's institutions have made it. Then the white man will be liberated from the urge to reject the black man because his rejection will be irrelevant and inconsequential.

The black theologian must therefore discover a theological framework within which he can understand the will and love of God in Jesus Christ outside the limitations of the white man's institutions. He is the only one equipped to interpret the Gospel out of the depths of the groanings and aspirations of his fellow black people.

The future of evangelism in South Africa is therefore tied to the quest for a theology that grows out of the black man's experience. It will be from this theological vantage point that the black man will contribute his own understanding of Christian love and its implications in evangelism.

Bangkok was an inspiration in that it did focus strongly on the question of racial and Christian identity. We only hope it will be widely discussed in South Africa.

#### THE CHURCH IN AFRICA (from page 145)

character training, not merely academic success, compounded of mental discipline, mental honesty and moral courage, which are stalwart bulwarks against graft and corruption in public service.

Be this as it may, the record of the church during the colonial days, in terms of dealing with human beings, was not a proud one. Often the church was in direct conflict with the forces of nationalism and the individual clergy could not understand

the deeper yearning for human dignity that lay beneath the Christian beliefs of Africa's new converts.

This was an extremely difficult period for Christian periodicals and the other systems of communication for while the increased standards of education brought by the efforts of the church opened new horizons for the local population the mission was not ready for that psychological break with the home church which could make it truly indigenous in its outlook. The result was that while the times called for a clear stand on the part of church publications in the great debate on colonial freedom, the church was in no position to authorise such a stand.

Left with no message to carry, the Christian periodical, at least in this part of Africa, did not during the period we are talking about leave any mark on the advance of Christian work. Indeed, the Archives reveal very little about Christian periodicals in this country before independence. The newsletters that did exist were often poorly produced and had no circulation to speak of.

This was the period of the great vacuum, which was created by the church's own inertia in the face of developments for which it was not prepared. These periods of church indecision always place those in charge of Christian mass communications in an extremely difficult position.

Periods of intense nationalism bring about changes in values, which call upon the church not only to minister to the spiritual needs of a people but also to its physical well-being. The oppressed always look towards the church for support against a system which denies the teachings of the Bible. When the church fails to provide this support, the task of those whose responsibility it is to spread the message of Christianity through mass publications becomes extremely difficult.

In Africa, these periods bring about an awakening on the part of the indigenous people to the fact that the church is still foreign in its approach to the universal message of Christ, in its personnel, in its theological understanding and in its language. The church has during such periods, (which are reminiscent of the great silence on the part of some churches at the time of Hitler's massacre of the Jews in Germany's gas chambers) always lost considerable respect and following.

It was not until the late sixties and the early seventies that the Christian churches in Africa started to take a stand on the real issues that concern their folk and to boldly declare that "no member of our human family can claim authority before God to deny human rights and social justice to another member of that human family on the grounds of race, colour, tribe, religion, political views or conditions of life in any country".

#### New Roles

Indeed, the Reverend Canon Carr, Secretary-General of the All Africa Conference of Churches, recently defined the new role of the church in Africa as that of ensuring 'that we keep the initiative at this critical moment in the development of our peoples as they struggle for complete liberation'. And he defined liberation in the broadest sense as 'not only the liberation from economic slavery but the liberation from all the human indignities that we suffer across the continent in