

# An African Indigenous Church.

(A plea for its establishment in South Africa).

By D. D. T. JABAVU.

## I. THE PRINCIPLE.

(i) The principle of the founding of an indigenous church is not a new thing. It is to be found in several countries in Asia, America, Europe and Africa. It is chiefly concomitant with national homogeneity. Sometimes it is found connected with elevating racial aspirations; sometimes it is bound up with groups of people organised under specific territorial unity. We hope to make this clear in the following passages.

(ii) In Edinburgh, 1910, an epoch-making World Missionary Conference was held which stirred the thoughts of the religious world to consider questions of closer co-operation among church denominations. The result was that there was founded, ten years later, the International Missionary Council comprising associations of missionary boards and societies in the western countries or National Christian Councils in the countries of the East, Africa and Latin America. At Jerusalem in 1928 there was held an enlarged meeting of this International Missionary Council (which we shall refer to as the I.M.C.) under the chairmanship of Dr. J. R. Mott, who had been associated with the movement right from Edinburgh 1910. On this occasion the delegates were about 250 representing over 50 languages and all human hues and colours. There were indigenous churches or

groups of such, from Argentina, Brazil, China (National Christian Council), Egypt, India (embracing the National Christian Council of India, Burma and Ceylon), Japan (N.C.C.), Korea (N.C.C.), Mexico (N.C. of Evangelical Churches), Philippine Islands (Evangelical Union) and Syria (C.C.). A feature of this meeting was the large number of delegates from what had come to be called "the younger churches," the aftermath being that, ten years later at Tambaram it was recorded that "the number of new Councils has increased until there are now 26 national organisations contained within the I.M.C., and of these 14 are groups of missions in the 'sending' countries and 12 are councils of churches (sometimes of missions also) in the 'receiving' countries."

There were frequent references during the discussions to the desirability of establishing more and more indigenous churches elsewhere in the world, whilst the book *Christ of the Indian Road* by Dr. Stanley Jones was much in vogue and quotation, suggesting a similar document on Africa by some capable African. The discussions were illuminating to those of us who had never given thought to the subject. The eight volumes embodying the findings of this Jerusalem meeting strike one today as being highly relevant to the circumstances of 1942 in our religious world. Many official statements on devolution policy were registered by various churches with general acceptance by the conference. For example, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, in its memorandum on the transference of responsibility from its organisation to bodies representing an indigenous church, stated that "The chief duties of the foreign missionary on the field will be: the general oversight of the Native church; the understanding being always that the oversight in detail should be transferred as rapidly as safety allows to an indigenous ministry and to duly constituted local courts; etc." This theme recurs in sixty pages of close print in Volume Three.

(iii) In 1913 I made my first acquaintance with Negro religious life and organisation during a three-month's visit to the U.S.A. (Alabama, Georgia, Pennsylvania and New York) and

found that the structure of Negro advance rested on the rock of a self-ruling church. Ninety per cent of the Negroes belonged to one or the other of the big denominations: Baptist, Methodist and Zion, the leaders being Negroes. The Negro church fathered the national endeavours to the extent of offering special prayers for Negro commercial and educational leaders. I witnessed business concerns being announced among the Sunday service notices. Their church was the hub around which all Negro social life and business enterprise centred. The Africans are equally religious in outlook.

(iv) The Church of the Province (South Africa) in 1900 founded the Order of Ethiopia, an African self-governing body of the Anglican Church.

(v) In 1923 the United Free Church of Scotland created the Bantu Presbyterian Church. The initial period of trusteeship had come to a logical end when the ward was advanced enough to conduct local missionary work independently of European control.

(vi) In 1927 the S.A. Baptist Missionary Society in pursuance of the same principle, realising that their African section was sufficiently trained to undertake the evangelisation of their people, gradually handed over their mission work to the Africans. "We have been developing the policy of taking the Natives more fully into our confidence by giving them a larger share in control, and the Bantu Baptist Church was formed in 1927 to advise as to personnel, and the progress and conduct of the work. This has been prepared for by three district Native councils which have worked well and will include them all. The Society hopes along this line to solve the difficulties arising from the different outlook of White and Black. (*Christianity and the Natives of S.A.*, by Dr. J. Dexter Taylor; Lovedale Press 1928; p. 312).

(vii) In 1931 the "Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions" of the U.S.A. held one of its quadrennial conferences in Buffalo (New York State). Its principal speakers and leaders were: Dr. J. R. Mott, LL.D., Dr. T. Z. Koo, Ph.D. (Chinese), Dr. O. M. Back, D.D., Dr. K. L. Butterfield, LL.D., Dr. W. O.

Carver, D.D., Dr. A. H. Clark, D.D., Dr. R. E. Diffendorfer, D.D., Dr. C. T. Loram, Ph.D., Dr. L. Dixon, D.D., Dr. D. J. Fleming, D.D., Dr. C. D. Fulton, D.D., Dr. D. F. Goodsell, D.D., Dr. P. Harrison, M.D., Dr. H. Hodgkin, LL.D., Dr. S. Inman, LL.D., Dr. T. Jesse Jones, Ph.D., Dr. W. Judd, M.D., Dr. K. Latourette, Ph.D., Dr. P. Lerrigo, Ph.D., and twelve others of similar distinction. The delegates were 2,300, being undergraduates drawn from over twenty State Universities. Loud speakers and outdoor amplifiers were employed for that mammoth audience. Here I was called upon to address the conference and to answer the following specific questions: "Is there any more need for foreign missionaries in South Africa? Are the Africans ready or not to carry on the evangelisation and education of their own people? Are they improvable?"

To answer these questions I did my best, but it was a diffident effort, because I had for a long time noticed that the Africans had reached the stage of managing their religion and education but I had not contributed anything practical to bring that ideal nearer to realisation, beyond a single appeal that I addressed to the S.A. Wesleyan Methodist conference about seventeen years ago urging a system of African autonomy within the church. This was answered with the appointment of an *ad hoc* committee at Queenstown where, after elaborating my proposal, a whole-day discussion ensued and I was ultimately outvoted and turned down. Since then I had done nothing further about it; not because of loss of faith but because I deemed it prudent to wait for a more propitious time and opportunity. Today, I feel, is that time and opportunity, because the air is ringing with schemes for post-war reconstruction, and there are many more who, like myself, recognise the need for such a development.

(viii) For many years the African National Congress, through its Methodist spokesman, Z. K. Makgatho, constantly enjoined the Africans in general to combine in a consolidated African church under the aegis of the Congress. Its annual conferences were thereafter opened with an elaborate religious service with this end in view.

ix) Tambaram. The Jerusalem 1928 meeting of the I.M.C. was continued in 1938 at Tambaram, India. The number of delegates was 471 (nearly doubling that of Jerusalem) and the countries represented increased to sixty-nine. The principle of founding indigenous or "younger" churches was carried forward.

(x) A practical lead was incidentally formulated in the Orange Free State in 1939 by an influential group of Africans, Dr. J. S. Moroka, M.B., Ch.B. (Thaba Nchu), J. Nhlapo, B.A. (Evaton), P. Mosaka, B.A. (Orlando) and A. E. Noge (Harrismith). It was circulated in the Bantu press and in a local journal, *Itireleng*. It was headed:

### UNION OF AFRICAN CHURCHES A UNITED CHURCH IS A UNITING CHURCH

#### 1. THE FACT OF THE EXISTENCE OF DIVISION.

(a) The existence of division throughout the whole of Christendom is unhappily a fact which cannot be denied. The Gospel was brought to the African through many and various denominational sects frequently hostile to one another and at rivalry with one another. Perplexing as this state of affairs originally was to the African, it could only beget that sectarianism which has become the bane of African churches.

(b) The policy of segregation accepted in South Africa as the state policy in inter-racial affairs, whether explicitly formulated as a church policy (e.g. the Dutch Reformed Church) or not, was bound sooner or later to bring a further dichotomous partition (i.e. African churches and non-African churches) within the already existing religious denominations.

(c) The growth of race consciousness among African people has come as the inevitable result of education and of the application of the segregation policy. That this race consciousness should manifest itself in the growth of a purely African church will be admitted by all as a natural and legitimate aspiration.

#### 2. THE FACT OF UNION.

(a) The spirit of division (i.e. group self-sufficiency and exclusiveness) is alien to the spirit of Christ and therefore to the

church of Christ. Rightly understood, Christianity with its Gospel of Love teaches us of one God, one People, one Church.

(b) Towards the attainment of this ideal of One Christian Church, one in spirit if not in organisation and administration, the African churches must address themselves. "Charity begins at home." In like manner unity must begin at home. Within the African fold, the African churches must bridge the gulf between denomination and denomination and so work from within—from interdenominational co-operation and unity towards inter-racial and international co-operation and unity.

(c) It is the opinion of anthropologists and others that Christianity should be adapted to indigenous African culture; and that in religion as in other matters "the African should develop along his own lines." If there be any such lines or any distinctive contribution to be rendered to religion by the African, it is eminently the task of a United African Church to follow those "lines" and to make that contribution.

(d) When the role of the church in African life is fully considered, it will be realised that no single agency has so completely revolutionised African life as the church has done. It has produced more vital and progressive social groups. It remains the chief re-integrating factor amidst so many other forces that make for social disintegration and moral degeneration. For this reason a properly organised and effective African United Church is not only theoretically desirable but is an urgent practical necessity.

(e) To the missionaries who have for so long exercised a benevolent and beneficent trusteeship, the emergence of a full-fledged African United Church would indicate the attainment of majority by their wards. Such a Church efficiently organised, properly directed, and above all, correctly interpreting the spirit of Christ, would be the efflorescence of European missionary enterprise in Africa.

### 3. DISADVANTAGES OF DIVISION.

(a) Division implies weakness, while unity implies strength. "United we stand; divided we fall."

(b) Division within the church has led to rivalry, and, therefore, to methods which savour of commercialism in religion, a prostitution of the true aims and objectives of evangelism. The net result has been the lowering of the spiritual and moral standards among church adherents.

### 4. ADVANTAGES OF UNION.

With the reasons for establishing a United African Church so abundantly clear, the only satisfactory answer to the question "Why unite?" is "Why not?"

(a) The African churches should unite to emphasise their common African brotherhood and to enjoy a deeper and fuller Christian fellowship.

(b) They should unite in order to enrich each other with those several aspects of truth for which the various denominations stand.

(c) They should unite in order to improve their organisation of the church, to increase its resources, to eliminate wastage both spiritual and material, and to promote whatever will lead to the spiritual and moral rehabilitation of the African.

(d) They should unite to give a forceful reorientation to many churches that have succumbed to the policy of drift and to the more subtle and deadly forces of materialism and narrow nationalism.

(e) They should unite that they may widen the scope of their usefulness, and that they may the better minister to the educational, health, and other social needs of their people.

(f) They should unite because they believe in the church as the foundation of social life, and that as such the church must speak and act as one body.

(g) They should unite because a powerful Christian African Church must, like the Dutch Reformed Church, exercise a potent influence for good in the counsels of the state.

(h) They should unite that they may make their contribution towards the Church of Christ in United African Fellowship and in the witness of noble lives spent in the uplift of lost or benighted fellowmen.

(i) They should unite because the African church alone can understand and know how to satisfy the deep longings and aspirations of the African's heart.

(j) They should unite because they dare not do otherwise; their creed as well as the practical exigencies of their times compel them to unite, for a united Church is a uniting Church.

### 5. HOW TO UNITE.

In order to carry out the union of African churches the following scheme is suggested:—

(a) Let each African Church send representatives to a round-table conference which should be held at Bloemfontein.

(b) After adopting the principle of union the churches would appoint a working committee upon which would devolve, among others, the following duties:

(i) The devising of ways and means of bringing about the desired union.

(ii) The drawing of a draft constitution for a United Church.

(iii) The studying of differences between the churches with a view to having them removed, in order to hasten and facilitate union.

(c) Let the immediate initial step towards the complete amalgamation of African churches be a *Federation* of these churches with federal councils of African churches in all centres of South Africa and an annual federal conference. The federation suggested should not be an end in itself but merely an anvil on which to hammer the various sects into one African Church.

(d) While the members of the suggested committee would report regularly to their respective churches, the federal conference would constitute the general assembly of all the churches to which the committee as a body would give the report of its activities and findings.

(e) The local federal councils in the various centres would be of supreme importance. They would have to carry out the following duties:—(i) To interpret the findings of the "Union Committee" and the federal conference to the members of the African churches.

(ii) To encourage and maintain fellowship and harmonious co-operation among all the African ministers in their locality.

(iii) To organise inter-denominational church services and sacraments, as well as the exchange of pulpits.

(f) The idea of a "Federal Union," it cannot be too often re-iterated, is only an easy step towards organic union of African churches for which we should earnestly labour, and for whose immediate realisation we should exert ourselves strenuously. If "organic union" could be achieved without the intermediate step of "federal union," nothing would be more pleasing to our hearts; and no achievement could be more valuable in the annals of spiritual work among Africans. *The need for an African United Church is very urgent. Let no valuable time be wasted.*

### II. SECONDARY SCHOOLS.

Africans have become keener than ever to take advantage of all chances to qualify for such professions as are open to them, particularly educational. During the last decade, improved funds for Native education have caused an increase in the number of secondary schools founded by missions and a new demand for African graduate teachers to fill positions as principals and assistants. Fort Hare has supplied most of the teachers required. We have no complaints about the assistants: but for the position of Principal we naturally expected to see seasoned Africans with five or more years of experience as readily appointed to principalships as the assistants to these new secondary schools. But we have been severely grieved to observe unworthy devices resorted to for the purpose of keeping out the Black graduates from these posts and appointing Whites instead. This policy has given rise to a fresh and unnecessary addition to the already many unsettled grievances against White rule. Not long ago, Native passes in the Junior certificate averaged ten a year, and about two or three for the Matriculation. In 1940 I counted 569 and 113 Native passes in the J.C. and Matric. (or its equivalent) examinations respectively. In 1941 these figures rose to 580 and 120. This is largely the work of

African graduate teachers, and we stand in no special need for European help today in this respect especially as teaching is our most attractive calling, because we are ruled out by the colour-bar laws and conventions of South Africa from becoming Engineers, Surveyors, Agricultural Lecturers (even), and so forth. At present we have 60 principals in Native Secondary, Training and High Schools, but only 18 of these are African, to say nothing of five out of forty heads of Native Educational Institutions organised by missionaries.

### III. MISSION STATIONS.

In African church mission stations, White missionaries are appointed as heads (or superintendents) over purely African congregations that can well be managed by Africans. African Bishops, Moderators, Presidents, Chairmen of Districts, are to be found only in our separatist churches, or those mentioned under paragraphs I (*iv*), (*v*), (*vi*) above, and it seems they will never be found under present circumstances unless an African indigenous church is founded with the blessing of the original foreign missionaries.

### IV. SHOULD FOREIGN MISSIONS CONTINUE ?

Those who justify the continuation of foreign missions hold, with perhaps some reason, that it is risky to entrust Africans with responsibility ; that it will always be unwise till the time is ripe ; that the good work done will be ruined by the inexperienced management of Africans ; that the Africans have yet to build a tradition of efficiency which follows only after the process of a sound education ; that a White clergyman by virtue of the tradition behind him is always presumably efficient even if not highly educated, just as the illiterate Indian or Jew makes a successful trader any time and anywhere ; that this efficiency and reliability took twenty centuries to acquire ; therefore the time will not be ripe till after another two thousand years.

These assumptions offer but a dismal prospect to the African. My reply is that they are misleading, being founded on in-

sufficient premises. It would take too long to confute them here ; and one argument must suffice, that already furnished by the success of the indigenous churches enumerated under paragraph I (*ii*) above.

Apropos to this, Dr. C. E. Ferguson-Davie, O.B.E., M.D. (Lond.), ex-missionary of Singapore, addressing a conference of women missionaries last January at Bloemfontein, was thus reported in the daily press : " There was a very rapidly growing race-consciousness among the educated Africans and a realisation of their right to claim a larger share of responsibility, both in public affairs and in educational and missionary work. There was no doubt that quite often they entirely misjudged the attitude of European missionaries towards themselves ; and yet there was also much truth in what they were saying. Mrs. Ferguson-Davie added that there were two stages in missionary work—the first stage in which the Europeans were in charge, with Natives working under them ; and the second stage in which the positions were reversed. In India the second stage had been reached some time ago. In this country it was only beginning to be reached. The Natives must learn to take responsible posts, and although very often these posts would be better filled by Europeans, missionaries must be willing to stand aside and allow Native workers to learn by their own mistakes."

Further, one may submit that in the growth of a race mistakes cannot be avoided. A baby, as we all know, is content to be spoon-fed for a long time ; but one day it will surprisingly and unaccountably demand the right to handle the spoon and feed itself. The results at first are a hopeless mess, for it misses the mouth ; the porridge bespatters its clothes and bedaubes the table and floor. But after some practice the spoon is successfully guided to the desired haven of the mouth, and all is well. Similarly the African, in his education and religion, feels he has been long enough spoon-fed and now importunately calls for the spoon to be in his own hand. He will make mistakes at first but will, like any other improvable individual, learn from the mistakes how to do the right thing.

## V. INGRATITUDE ?

An objector may at this juncture intervene with the remark, "This is ingratitude to the missionaries." My answer, No, it is far from being motivated by any sense of ingratitude. This plea would never have been formulated for the sake of advertising one's thanklessness to benefactors. On the contrary I have written this in the belief that I am typical of a large number of Africans who owe what they are to the education, enlightenment and religion taught by missionaries. I described our debt to the missionaries in a paper, "What Methodism has Done for the Natives" (Lovedale Press, 1923), with genuine thanks and even enthusiasm: "The achievement of the newer generation of Methodist missionaries is ample and creditable. It is different in kind but not inferior in merit and does not suffer by comparison with that of the pioneers. For this we grant them their meed and due. They have the gratitude of all the Bantu people. Their task has been, in some respects, a more difficult one because they have had to deal with the Native at a more advanced stage of development and civilisation, when the Native was more articulate and critical and less easily satisfied with conditions that his innocent and simple ancestors were only too thankful to accept. Proportionately their task is going to grow harder and harder with the advance of race-consciousness and ambition, justifiable ambition, on the part of their proteges."

Even at that time (1923) I did not neglect to indicate lines of further progress due to follow upon the initial work of the pioneers: "We must train our Theological candidates up to the point where they shall be enabled to discharge with efficiency the work required in our largest Native circuits which naturally must ultimately fall to them. The new century demands that the way should be opened for our people to be trained adequately to replace the European ministers in predominantly Native circuits. This is the natural order of things and the modern theory of mission work, making for greater power and contentment within the church." (ibid.)

Let me conclude here by saying, grateful as I am to my dear

father for what he did for me as a parent and for his love of me while I was a child, it would have been unnatural for him to wish me to remain a child all my life. So with all other human beings. Developed to our adult age by the European church, we now feel ready to help Africa through the lessons taught us by the missionaries. We are asking them to usher us to this next stage with the good grace of a proud and smiling parent over the success of his child. Our attitude is that of gratitude, not ingratitude.

## VI. PROMISING SIGNS.

(a) One big mission High School Department (which need not be named here) has for nearly twenty years had an African graduate as principal, with Europeans included in his staff. The work has flourished and needs no apology. The present principal has recently been appointed Vice-Principal of the whole institution, and it is the intention of the mission board, I am informed, ultimately to have an African as principal. This is not an accident but a deliberate pursuance of the I.M.C. policy.

(b) The Evaton High School, Transvaal, has always had a Black principal.

(c) The Ohlange High School, Natal, was founded by an African (Dr. J. L. Dube) and has been conducted by an entirely African staff since its inception.

(d) The Fort Malan and Kentani Weaving schools, and the Nqabara (Willowvale) secondary school, all in the Transkei, were founded by Africans (Rev. Sol. J. Mvambo, Ner A. Mazwai, and the Rev. N. Makaluza, respectively) and each continues to function under a purely African staff.

(e) This year has seen the first appointment of an African as Governor over a Methodist Training and Secondary school at Bensonvale, C.P.

(f) The Methodist Church this year has, for the first time I think, placed African clergymen as heads over two rural mission stations hitherto occupied by European missionaries.

(g) A European Governor of a Methodist Training and High school declared to me while I was his guest eight years ago that it was his desire to make way for an African Governor during his life time, over his big establishment, because he believed it was only fair for European ministers to withdraw with good grace and thanks to God from such positions once a competent African was available to fill the post and serve his people in what is peculiarly an African's sphere of work.

(h) African Governors or Principals of educational or missionary institutions in South Africa are no longer miracles or monstrosities. I am not asking for the moon. I am humbly pleading for a whole-hearted and Christianly adoption of a policy already accepted and functioning.

### VII. EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION.

In the case of one large missionary society known to me in South Africa there is a policy of substituting Africans in positions of responsibility whenever a post is vacated by a European through death or superannuation. Dr. J. E. K. Aggrey once said, with characteristic humour, he wished all missionaries had studied algebra, for then they would know the process of elimination by substitution. One would recommend this system of evolution to all the churches, because by it they will save the Africans from striving to obtain their dues only through methods of revolution. This constitutes my special appeal to the Methodists in particular, for I belong to them; and to all the other missionary bodies, for I co-operate with them in the Christian Council of South Africa.

### VIII. TRUSTEESHIP.

Last December at Cape Town, General Smuts, in an address that was courageous for a South African political leader, described the basis of trusteeship as being "probably the only basis on which a happy relationship between Europeans and Africans could be obtained." As a politician carrying an excessive burden of responsibility, he tactfully refrained from follow-

ing the argument to its logical conclusion but left it to us, who were listening to him to supplement the dogma with its necessary corollary that the wards or proteges of the trustees do some day attain to adult maturity and become competent to do without their trustees and to manage their own affairs in such a way as to maintain happy relationships with their former guardians.

During the following week Dr. J. S. Moroka was reported in the daily press, addressing some Bloemfontein City Councillors, thus:—"He said he was glad that Dr. Setlogelo had been asked to give the health lectures to his people, for Africans ought to be given the opportunity to do whatever they could for their people. They appreciated what the missionaries had done, but they realised that if they were to progress they would have to be given a chance to develop their own faculties and to lead their own people. I have never thought much of a man who wants to lead me in such a way that he will always lead me. I want a man to lead me in such a way that in years to come I am in a position to lead myself."

General Hertzog's public speeches during his Transkei tour in 1925 seemed to foreshadow a policy of this kind for the Natives in their reserves, but somehow or other it was never carried out although he had fifteen years in which to implement it.

### IX. CONCLUSION.

What can we do as a start in building up an indigenous church? The Order of Ethiopia, The Bantu Presbyterian Church and the Bantu Baptist Church may constitute a nucleus.

We are likely to have more of the same type released and launched by the good offices of the existing missionising bodies.

We may hope for a favourable response, from all those concerned, to the strong appeal and clarion call of Dr. Moroka and others, as republished under paragraph I (x) above, with its ample constructive suggestions.

All those in favour of a beginning being made will indicate their goodwill by placing this document in the hands of their

Church authorities, by drawing attention to it, by using their influence to getting it discussed by their societies, and by helping to secure representative attendance at the first preliminary meetings at Bloemfontein, which should probably be fixed to be held about Dingaan's Day, next December.

The movement will be vitally helped by co-operation with the International Missionary Council that embraces the whole world of present day Christianity, and its local representative body, the Christian Council of South Africa, because independence does not mean separation. There is everything to gain by goodwill and co-operation.

This matter needs the earnest prayers of all Christians, African and European, for it is sure to prove an acid test of South African Christianity. Its aim is a higher and greater unity: (I pray) "That they all may be one," said Jesus (John 17: 21). It will not be settled by force or blind impetuosity. Our foresight will be required, foresight directed to the future, a happier future for South Africa. We shall be called upon to exercise our clear thinking, for "Where there is no vision the people perish" (Prov. 29: 18).

It needs the approval, the divine blessing of God and our reverent prayerful co-operation, because "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it" (Ps. 127: 1).

Fort Hare,

Alice, C.P.

14th February, 1942