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FOUNDATIONAL HISTORY OF THE AFRICA INLAND CHURCH, 1895-1903

Watson A.O. Omulokoli

One hundred years ago on October 27, 1895, Peter Cameron Scott, the founding director of the Africa Inland Mission, first landed in Mombasa in British East Africa, now Kenya. Because of insecurity in the interior, a military escort under a European officer, together with three hundred men and forty-two camels, the first missionary party trekked for two weeks into the interior. The compelling vision of the Africa Inland Mission was to bypass the coastal strip of British East Africa where other missions had begun a work, and penetrate into the interior of East Africa with a chain of mission stations from Mombasa to Lake Chad. From that valiant beginning the A.I.M. International has spread like a fruit vine throughout East, Central and Southern Africa. During this centennial year of the Africa Inland Church, Kenya, it is fitting that Dr. Omulokoli should recount those difficult years which formed the foundational history of the Africa Inland Church Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

The Africa Inland Church (AIC) was born out of the missionary efforts of the Africa Inland Mission (AIM). The AIM, in turn, started its work in Kenya in 1895 under its founder, Peter Cameron Scott. Its initial base was among the Kamba in the present Eastern Province of Kenya. Here, in the initial period of 1895-1901, the Mission experienced a lot of hardships and difficulties, including the loss, through death, sickness, and resignations of almost the entire missionary force.

When the personnel situation began to stabilise at the turn of the century, the operational headquarters of the Mission were moved in 1903 from Kangundo, among the Kamba, to Kijabe, on the border of the Kikuyu and the Maasai. It is from here that the establishment, expansion, and growth of the AIM was directed in subsequent years. The result was that by the time the AIM handed over its work to the AIC as an indigenous entity, the membership spanned the entire country, with a strong presence in widely - scattered regions and ethnic groups of Kenya. Indeed, at the moment the AIC distinguishes itself as a prominent and powerful ecclesiastical unit which ranks numerically among the five largest denominations in the country.

BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE OF THE FOUNDER

Peter Cameron Scott was born on 7th March, 1867, of a devoted Christian family in Glasgow, Scotland.ⁱ When Peter was still young, the family migrated to the United States of America, where they settled at Philadelphia in Pennsylvania. By this time, one of Peter's sisters had died, and so, her grave was one of the main things the family left in Scotland. Peter had a good singing voice, and as he grew up, he began to show interest in becoming a professional singer. Because of the type of lifestyle which was connected with that career and since it seemed to be looked at negatively in strict Christian circles, his parents opposed this idea.ⁱⁱ After being dissuaded by his parents from taking up a professional singing career, Peter ended up in settling for a printing job.

At the age of twenty, when he was working as a printer his health broke down. His doctor advised him that a change of climate would help improve his health, and in this connection, he recommended that he should go back to Scotland to help his health to recover. When Peter was in Scotland, one of the things he did was to visit his sister's grave in Glasgow. As he stood by the grave, he began thinking about the possibility of his own death. This led him to dedicate his life to Jesus Christ as he promised that if God would spare his life, he would serve Him faithfully from then onwards.

God helped him, and as his health improved, he returned to America. When he was recovering and feeling healthy once more, he forgot his contract with God and tried to control his own life. On one occasion, he tried to join an opera as one of the chorus singers, and it was then that he was reminded in his heart about the promise he had made to God when he was ill. This experience drove him to a deeper commitment to Jesus Christ as he rededicated his life to God. From this time on, he began to grow in his spiritual zeal and at the same time his health improved so much that he recovered fully.

SCOTT'S INITIAL MISSIONARY INVOLVEMENT

As Peter continued to grow in the Christian faith, he found himself getting interested in going to Africa to work there as a missionary. As this interest in the missionary vocation increased, he joined the New York Missionary Training College in New York to receive the necessary training. While still in college he decided to spend some three weeks in prayer in order to be clear about the interest which he was experiencing in going to missionary work in Africa. This helped, and after it became obvious to him that this was what God wanted him to do, he wrote to his parents, seeking their consent in this matter. It was really reassuring when they wrote back positively, encouraging him to go ahead and follow God's will for his life.

When he was now ready, he was accepted by the International Missionary Alliance as one of its missionaries and was assigned to its sphere of work on the western coast of central Africa.ⁱⁱⁱ When all the preparations were complete, Peter Cameron Scott was ordained by the Rev. A. B. Simpson in November, 1890, in New York.^{iv} The following day, he sailed out of New York, accompanied by his mother up to London.

On 31st January, 1891, Peter arrived in the intended territory on the western coast of central Africa, landing at Banana at the mouth of the Congo River. From there he proceeded into the interior where the International Missionary Alliance was working. A few months after his arrival, Peter was joined by his brother in these missionary endeavours. Before long his brother died, while Peter himself was in poor health. He finally had to return home, without accomplishing much in his brief stint as a missionary in the Congo.^v

THE FOUNDING OF THE AFRICA INLAND MISSION

On his way back to America after the short stay in the Congo, Peter travelled through England where he spent some time in London, with his friends, Mr. and Mrs. Brodie. During his stay there, he came across others who were engaged in the missionary enterprise. On one occasion, he met new recruits who were going out to missionary work. On another occasion, he attended a prayer meeting organised by the China Inland Mission. These, and similar experiences, helped him maintain his interest in and vision for missionary work.

While he was still in London, his health became worse, and so he broke down physically. This meant that he had to stay with the Brodies longer to recover, instead of proceeding to America. During this period of recovery, there was a time when he went to the Westminster Abbey for a tour. When he came to the tomb of Dr. David Livingstone, he knelt there and prayed in meditation. Somehow, despite his illness, his interest in going back to Africa as a missionary had not faded. As his thoughts went back to Africa, he dedicated himself anew to missionary efforts there. In this period, he conceived of the ideas of a chain of mission stations stretching from the coast in East Africa to Lake Chad in the central parts of Africa.^{vi} These thoughts eventually led to the formation of a missionary society which was to serve as the vehicle through which to accomplish this scheme. Indeed it was after this renewal of his missionary zeal and vision that Peter Cameron Scott returned to America, determined to start a new missionary organisation for missionary work in Africa.

As Peter Cameron Scott went around sharing his projections with various Christians in America, a lot of interest was shown in the proposed missionary scheme. One of those who gave him much encouragement when he

shared with him about the plans was Dr. A.T. Pierson, one of the leading American missionary statesmen of the day. With this kind of moral boost, he progressed to the point at which in 1895, he had enough support to launch a new missionary society, the Africa Inland Mission (AIM).^{vii} Prominently involved in these early arrangements was the Rev. Charles E. Hurlburt, a man who was later to serve as the General Superintendent of the Mission. Despite the hard economic times in which the AIM was born, its committee members were determined that the enterprise should get off the ground on a strong and sound note.

One of the areas that the organisers worked hard on in these initial stages was the operational philosophy of the Mission. From its very inception, it was made clear that the key would be to depend on God to supply and proved all that was needed in all that was undertaken.^{viii} The basic promise was that if the whole enterprise was under God's direction, then He would ensure that the financial, material, and human needs of the Mission were fully supplied. What this involved was that,

The whole project was committed to God in prayer. Resting on the promises of God, they looked to Him alone. No appeals for money were made, nor any debt incurred. The decision to adopt this principle was made after much thought and prayer. It has been a governing principle of the Mission ever since. There have been times of shortage, but there has never been a time when God has failed to fulfil His promise.^{ix}

TRAVELLING TO THE MISSIONARY FIELD

Following prayer and concerted effort, enough people were recruited to go out as the first AIM missionaries to Kenya. Included in this pioneer group were the founder of the Mission, Peter Cameron Scott, and his sister, Margaret Scott. Together with them were three other men, Mr. Fred W. Kreiger, Mr. Lester Severn, and Mr. Willis R. Hotchkiss, as well as two other ladies, Miss Minnie Lindberg, and Miss Bertha Reckling.^x When all the arrangements were ready, the farewell service for this group of seven missionaries was held in August, 1895, at the Pennsylvania Bible Institute in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the USA. During this occasion, this same place, the Bible Institute, was dedicated to serve as the headquarters of the new Mission.

From Philadelphia, the missionary party travelled to New York, from where they finally sailed off to Kenya. On their way, they stopped in Scotland where they were able to generate considerable support for the Mission and its work. Here, their number increased when they were joined by Captain Walter McClellan Wilson, bringing the total in the group to eight^t, with five of them men.

While in Scotland, they organised themselves and chose leaders for this team in the field. The Superintendent was Peter Cameron Scott, the Assistant Superintendent was Fred Kreiger, Willis R. Hotchkiss became the Secretary, and Miss Margaret Scott was to serve as the Treasurer.^{xi}

Peter and Margaret's mother, Mrs. Scott accompanied the group up to Paris. When they were about to part there, word reached them that another of Peter's brothers, George, had died at home in the USA. As the missionary party travelled on, while Peter's mother returned to the USA, she responded to this sad news with a very drastic decision. She felt that through this new crisis, God may be indicating that upon her return to America, the rest of the Scott family members should join the Mission and go to Kenya as well. Indeed, in later years, they were able to live up to this resolve by going to Kenya as AIM missionaries.

BEGINNINGS IN KENYA

When they arrived in East Africa, they first went to the main terminus at Zanzibar before moving on to Mombasa. During their one-week lay over at Zanzibar, a German captain of a coastal vessel gave them warm hospitality on his ship. When the time to move on came, Mr. Scott and Mr. Kreiger went to Mombasa on 27th October, 1895, ahead of the rest of the group, in order to make detailed arrangements for the missionary team. Two days later, the rest followed. At Mombasa, they were well received by the staff of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), being accommodated on its mission station at Freretown.

At the time that they were ready to move into the interior, there was some insecurity on the outskirts of Mombasa in the intervening area leading to their destination. This being the case, it was only the five men who went into the interior, moving under the routine military escort for caravans, until they had gone through the danger zone. They left Mombasa on 12th November, 1895, with the three ladies remaining behind at the CMS mission station for the time being.^{xii} On 29th November, the five men arrived at the East Africa Scottish Mission (EASM) station at Kibwezi.^{xiii} Because quite a number of the group were sick from malaria, they remained there for eight days before moving on. From Kibwezi, the missionary team travelled on into the interior of Kambaland, arriving at Nzawi, about 250 miles from Mombasa on 12th December, 1895. It was here that they decided to settle and start their first mission station. Accordingly, the first step they took was to build a house for their own accommodation before embarking on anything else.

While the other four men remained at Nzawi to continue with the process of settling down, Peter Scott went back to Mombasa to help lead the ladies to Ukambani. On reaching Mombasa, he found that one of the ladies, Miss Bertha Reckling, had to return to the USA. He made plans for her voyage home and saw her off on 2nd February, 1896. By then a brick house which was under construction was complete. This meant that at the end of February, 1896, there was a team of seven, five men and two ladies, at the AIM mission station at Nzawi.

The AIM was forward-looking in that efforts were made early to spread out as much as possible. It was in this connection that in March, 1896, a new station was opened at Sakai, and Hotchkiss was assigned there as the missionary in charge.^{xiv} Less than a month later, a third station was opened at Kilungu, with Kreiger posted to work there. Then in September, 1896, new recruits arrived, among them Peter's parents, Mr. and Mrs. John Scott, and his sister, Inez. The others were Rev. and Miss. Thomas Allan, Mr. Jacob Toole, and Mr. John W. Codd, as well as Miss Edwards, a lady from Scotland. In the case of the Scott family, their number was now five members out of the total group of 15 at the time. With this increased manpower, it was now possible and important to open more stations to which missionaries would be posted. In this connection, in addition to Nzawi, Sakai, and Kilungu, it was now possible to open a new station at Kangundo, bringing the total then to four.^{xv}

Just when all seemed to be going well, disaster struck towards the end of 1896. First, on 4th December, 1896, the leader of the missionary team, Peter Cameron Scott, died of black-water fever at Nzawi, where he was buried.^{xvi} Peter's death had a serious destabilising impact on the missionary personnel. Following his death, the remaining missionary force was so immensely demoralised that- within the period of one year, they were scattered due to different reasons. Most of them returned home because of ill-health, but a few others resigned from the Mission and took up work elsewhere, either with the government, or with private agencies.^{xvii} In the latter category, a case in point was that of the Mission's Assistant Superintendent, Fred Kreiger, who resigned from the AIM in order to start another missionary enterprise among the Kikuyu to the west.^{xviii}

DEPLETION OF THE MISSIONARY FORCE

Out of the 14 members of staff who remained after Peter's death, only six were still with the Mission by December, 1897. These were, the Rev. and Mrs. Thomas Allan, Miss Minnie Lindberg, Mr. Lester Severn, Mr. Jacob Toole, and Mr. Willis Hotchkiss. Even this small group was systematically depleted over the next few months. It started with Mr. Toole, who was ill and had to return

to his home in Canada, but on his way to Mombasa, he died on 31st January, 1898, and was buried near where the Mombasa-Nairobi road meets the Tsavo River. Next, in February of that same year, Mr. Severn left for the USA, and on 4th March, 1898, Rev. Thomas Allan died.

This sad course of events left only three people in the work of the AIM. These were, Mr. Hotchkiss, Mrs. Allan, and Miss Lindberg, but all was not well as both the two ladies were ill, and in consequence of this, weak. After a decision was reached that they should return to America on account of ill-health, Hotchkiss left with them on 6th March, to take them to Mombasa from where they would sail homeward. On this occasion, as he faced the frightening prospects of being left alone, he wrote to the home committee of the Mission in the USA, expressing his trepidation, but at the same time asserting his determination to press on with the work, even although alone.^{xix} With the departure of the two ladies, the only member of the Mission remaining at his post in Kenya was Mr. Willis R. Hotchkiss, and as was later pointed out, "and he represented all that was left of the AIM in Africa".^{xx}

As the number of missionaries decreased, the work was so adversely affected that due to lack of personnel, the missionary stations were closed down one by one until in the end, the only one remaining was that at Kangundo. The first station to be closed was the one at Sakai, in September, 1897, when Hotchkiss moved to Kilungu, with six missionaries left in the field. Then, when Rev. Allan died at Nzawi, that station was closed down, and the two ladies, Mrs. Allan and Miss Lindberg transferred to Kilungu to join Hotchkiss there. After seeing the ladies off at Mombasa, he returned to Ukambani, settled at Kangundo, and eventually abandoned Kilungu.^{xxi}

A PERIOD OF TRANSITION

Hotchkiss was alone from March, 1898, to November of the same year, when two new arrivals joined him. These were, Mr. Charles E. Hurlburt, the new General Director of the Mission, and Mr. William C. Bangert. While Hurlburt had only come for a few months to assess the work, Bangert had come to stay.^{xxii} In May, 1899, Hotchkiss resigned from the AIM, intending to return to America to organise a Mission to Kenya by his own denomination, the Friends Church. To this end, he departed from Kangundo, the sole remaining AIM mission station, on 29th June, 1899, and returned to America.^{xxiii} This left Bangert as the only AIM missionary to Kenya until reinforcements arrived later that year. This Hotchkiss-Bangert era was a transitional period, separating the beginning uncertain and trying years of the past from the more settled, sure and prosperous years ahead.

The period which Hotchkiss and Bangert remained isolated in the Mission both individually and jointly, was one of the most trying for the people of the central parts of Kenya. From some time in the year 1897, to the early part of 1900, a combination of drought, famine, rinderpest, and smallpox descended on the region, all in epidemic proportions.^{xiv} In the same way in which Hotchkiss had served alone earlier, Bangert was on his own from the time of the departure of Hotchkiss in June, 1899. The situation improved in October, 1899, when he was joined by two new people, Mr. C.F. Johnston and Mr. Elmer Bartholomew.

Because Bangert's health was failing, as soon as Johnston and Bartholomew were settled and established in the work, it was arranged that Bangert should return to the USA. In later years, although he desired to go back to Kenya, he was not allowed to since his health problems persisted. Around the same time that Bangert left for the USA, Mr. Lester Severn, who was in the original group of 1895, but who had gone back to the USA in 1898 due to ill-health, now returned to Kenya, this time in the capacity of Field Superintendent. As the effects of the famine continued to be felt, many children were left without parents and became orphans. To help alleviate the suffering of these children, the three bachelors, Severn, Johnston and Bartholomew started an orphanage where they were soon in charge of 25 orphans.

REINFORCEMENTS AND TRANSFER TO KIJABE

The earlier perseverance of Hotchkiss and Bangert, in turns, paid off when the missionary staff level improved considerably in 1901. Already by then, the Mission had Severn, Johnston, and Bartholomew. Now, those arriving included Hurlburt's family of seven, together with Rev. and Mrs. Lee H. Downing, Miss Emily Messenger, and Dr. John Henderson. They travelled by railway from Mombasa and disembarked at Athi River. From there, they walked to the headquarters of the Mission at Kangundo, where they arrived by the Christmas of 1901. This meant that since 1897, this was the first time that the number of the missionary staff had exceeded six, and yet, there were more on the way. Although he visited Kenya briefly in 1898, and finally came there to stay in 1901, Hurlburt was the General Director of the AIM since 1897, and remained in that capacity until 1925.

Once the Mission and its work stabilised following the arrival of the large group of 1901, two issues occupied the attention of the Mission's leadership. One of these was the need to open new stations and expand once more. The other was that of finding a more suitable location than Kangundo for establishing the headquarters of the Mission. Among the issues which featured prominently in this search was that of the overall accessibility and the allied nearness to

communication facilities. It was on this score that Kangundo was ruled out since it was about twenty-nine miles away from the railway line.

When the final decision was made, it was Kijabe, about 7,000 feet high, and to the west of Nairobi, which was chosen, largely because of its proximity to the railway line. With the decision made, Hurlburt moved there in early July, 1903, and was joined there by his family on 10th August. Towards the end of that same month, two new recruits, John Stauffacher and George Rhoad arrived at Kijabe. By this time, plans were already underway for an AIM missionary staff conference. Stauffacher and Rhoad worked hard to help Hurlburt to prepare for this first Kijabe missionary conference which took place on September 10-13, 1903.^{xxv} In a sense, it heralded the new era of progress, expansion, and stability in the AIM.^{xxvi}

END NOTES

ⁱ Kenneth Richardson, *Garden of Miracles: A History of the Africa Inland Mission* (London: Victory Press, 1968), 21. For this section, this paper has relied heavily on Richardson.

ⁱⁱ *IBID.* In some quarters at that time, professional singing was associated with loose-living, hence prone to sinful tendencies.

ⁱⁱⁱ C.P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa*, Vol. 3, 1878-1914 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1964 Reprint), 119-120. The International Missionary Alliance was then working in the Congo. Later, when the Christian and Missionary Alliance emerged, it took over this work.

^{iv} *IBID.* Also Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. 5, *The Great Century in the Americas, Australasia, and Africa, 1800-1914*. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943) 425-426. A.B. Simpson was at the centre of these missionary endeavours.

^v Latourette, 5:405.

^{vi} J. Lewis Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours*. (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1860) 109-111. This proposal of a chain of mission stations by Scott, (Richardson, 26), was reminiscent of Krapf's thoughts on the matter fifty years earlier.

^{vii} Latourette, 5:405. It is rightly pointed out here that Peter Cameron Scott was the founder of the AIM.

^{viii} Robert Hall Glover, *The Progress of World-Wide Missions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1939; reprint, J. Herbert Kane, ed., 1960), 326. The AIM is a prime example of a body which is known as "faith mission".

^{ix} Richardson, 27.

^x Burnette C. Fish and Gerald W. Fish, *Place of Songs: A History of the World Gospel Mission and the African Gospel Church* (Nakuru, Kenya: World Gospel Mission, 1989), 13.

^{xi} *IBID* 11.

^{xii} Gladys Stauffacher, *Faster Beats the Drum* (Pearl River, New York: Africa Inland Mission, 1978), 18.

^{xiii} Watson Omulokoli, "The Roots of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa: The East Africa Scottish Mission, 1889-1901", Unpublished typescript, 1996. The station at Kibwezi belonged to the East Africa Scottish Mission and not to the Church of England (Fish and Fish, 14) or to the Church of Scotland Mission (Stauffacher, 19).

^{xiv} Willis R. Hotchkiss, *Then and Now in Kenya Colony: Forty Adventurous Years in East Africa* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1937), 50.

^{xv} Stauffacher, 20.

^{xvi} Richardson, 36. The body was later transferred by Peter's parents for reburial at Nairobi.

^{xvii} Horace R.A. Philip. *A New Day in Kenya* (London: World Dominion Press, 1936), 16-17. One of these, Walter McClellan Wilson, married Margaret Scott and followed his resignation from the AIM with a distinguished career as a government Official, businessman, farmer, and influential politician who serve in the Legislative Council and the Governor's Executive Council. Another, Inez Scott, was married by Mr. John Ainsworth, the Chief Native Commissioner of the country (Hotchkiss, 70- 71). Also Richardson, p. 37.

^{xviii} Stauffacher, 21. Also Hotchkiss, 79.

^{xix} Fish and Fish, 19.

^{xx} Stauffacher, 21.

^{xxi} *IBID.*, 20-21. See, Hotchkiss, 55, 70-73.

^{xxii} Some sources put the duration of Hurlburt's stay at two months (Stauffacher, 22), while others six months (Fish and Fish, 20). Whatever the length, this was a research tour in his capacity as the Mission's General Director.

^{xxiii} Hotchkiss, 95. Here Hotchkiss attempts to give a summary of his rationale for switching from the AIM to a new Mission under the Friends Church.

^{xxiv} *IBID*, 46.

^{xxv} Stauffacher, 24.

^{xxvi} Dick Anderson, *We Felt Like Grasshoppers: The Story of Africa Inland Mission*. (Nottingham, Crossway Books, 1994). This is a valuable source, covering a wide area of the account of the AIM.