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Reflections from Zimbabwe: The VIth International Conference of the International Association for Mission Studies¹

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Among the various international and ecumenical agencies, IAMS is a comparative newcomer. Like others, there is a family tree of meetings to list: Driebergen (1972), Frankfurt (1974), Costa Rica (1976), Maryknoll, New York (1978) and Bangalore (1982). Its founding father was the Norwegian missiologist, Professor Olaf Myklebust, whose two volume work on the study of mission remains a standard reference work. The association has grown until to day it has over 600 members, either individual or corporate, representing all the major denominations and language groups. It has been one forum where, since the merger of the International Missionary Council with the WCC, the missionary debate has been able to find a focus, whether among the missiologists or the directors of the missionary societies or institutes. The membership has a substantial overlap with the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. (CWME) In the conference under review, both Dr. Eugene Stockwell and Dr. John Pabee of the Genevan staff were present. A number of participants left early for a consultation of CWME in Kenya.

The title of the 1985 conference was 'Christian Mission and Human Transformation'. In round figures, the make up of the conference revealed some eighty participants resident in Africa, forty from Europe, fifteen from Asia, twenty from North America and ten from Latin America. For any who wish to pursue the findings of the conference in greater depth than this brief report can enable them to do, the IAMS has its own journal, *Mission Studies*.² The setting of the conference in the newly independent state of Zimbabwe, whose national life 'began' in 1980, on the northern borders of South Africa, meant that the consideration of Human Transformation was inevitably coloured by issues of liberation from oppressive *régimes* and structures, as represented by the white Rhodesian government in the past and the South African government of to-day, especially as

expressed in their policies of racial discrimination. The two keynote lectures served to underline this context. In the first, Professor Adrian Hastings, whose department acted as hosts to the conference and to whom it owed much for their warm and considerate hospitality, described how, from the beginning of the Christian mission in southern Africa the voices of protest against social injustice had been present in early pioneers like Vanderkemp and James Philip, the London Missionary Society missionaries. These, however, were often lone and isolated voices; and this was also true of John White and A.S. Cripps in the Rhodesia of the 1920's and 1930's, who received little support from either State or Church. In the main the Church was docile and acted in complicity with the *régimes*, a state of affairs which had not changed in the post-World War II period of Trevor Huddleston and Michael Scott. So there was a thin line of protest against oppression and the denial of human rights from Vanderkemp to Desmond Tutu. It was here, despite its isolated nature, that the authentic and prophetic Christian voice was to be located, which preserved the Church from social and political irrelevance.

This historical over-view was followed by a vigorous presentation by the President of Zimbabwe, His Excellency the Revd. Canaan Banana, of his own brand of socialist liberation theology. Here the Church was challenged to throw its weight in with the State and its social programme. Since independence in 1980 the Church has failed to stand where the masses found themselves to be. It needed to get off the fence and cease to take refuge in the excuse that its primary obligation was to preach the gospel. It should respond positively to the invitation extended by the State for dialogue on the future. It had nothing to fear. When questioned by the local Anglican bishop, Bishop Hatendi, on the meaning of 'scientific socialism' the president replied that this did not mean 'godless' or 'materialist'. It was for the Church, as also for the traditional African Religions, to see that religion occupied a significant place in the nation's future.

A general criticism of the conference was raised later by the third and final keynote lecture by Dr. Shun Govender, a respected black African theologian from South Africa, whose lecture was delivered in his absence by a colleague. This was that there had been inadequate treatment of the biblical approach to 'transformation' and too simplistic an equation between socialist revolution or political liberation and human transformation. Professor James Scherer, a Lutheran scholar from Chicago and an associate editor of *Missiology*, said that, while Dr. Govender had dealt faithfully enough with the 'moral and existential evil' of South Africa and its political and social system, he had missed 'the balancing wisdom of the divine revelation' 'defined in theological methodology'. Although in general this was a justifiable criticism, those who attended the workshop on 'The Bible and Human

Transformation' were given a careful treatment of the New Testament concepts on the subject by Dr. Pobee and also an excellent submission from the South African missiologist, Professor David Bosch, on principles of Biblical interpretation; but these were only heard by a minority of participants. Other workshops included 'Mission and Human Rights' (Michael Bourdeaux), 'Moral Values in a pluralistic Society' (Professor Charles West of Princeton Theological Seminary), 'The Gospel and Islam', in which Dr. David Kerr of the Selly Oak Colleges took part, and, largest of all, 'Development of African Theologies' (Professor Kwesi Dickson of the University of Ghana).

Readers of *Anvil* might hope that the Anglican Evangelical voice would be heard and this was the case on two fronts: first, in a fine intervention by Dr. Andrew Kirk, CMS theologian missionary, in a plenary session, making an invited response. Here he called for a theology which both explored the holy character of the God revealed in the Bible, 'entering into the heart of God', and one which felt deeply the situation of oppressed people like the migrant workers of Johannesburg in their pain and alienation. A theology worthy of the name needed to be alive to both or risk the terrifying self accusation of one British academic theologian: 'I am a scholar, not a thinker'. Theology must not put asunder what God had joined, both a proper concern for the gospel (he commended John 3:16 to 'ecumenicals') and for social policy (he commended Luke 4 to evangelicals). We must not read the Bible selectively.

Secondly, the present writer offered a paper on 'Anglican Evangelical Missiology 1922-1984', in which the voices of Bishop Stephen Neill, a member of IAMS until his death recently, and of Max Warren were heard again on subjects like conversion, the importance of history and the distinctiveness of Christ. They, being dead, yet speak. It was gratifying to find how wide an acquaintance with, and how deep a respect for, their writings could be found in Professor Carl Hallencreutz, the Swedish Lutheran Professor from Uppsala, Professor David Bosch of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa and Dr. Gerald Anderson, current president of IAMS and a member of the United Methodist Church. The last named also gave a fine presidential address to the association, which is to be printed in *Mission Studies*, and in which he identified the leading issues for mission for the twenty-first century.

In his opening lecture, Professor Adrian Hastings had posed four possible stances for the Church in relation to the State: a ghetto position, a Constantinian identification with the State (virtually called for by President Canaan Banana in the case of Zimbabwe), a position of reconciliation and a position of protest. The trouble with the third of these, attractive as it might seem, was that it turned too easily into

irrelevance – how could you speak of reconciliation when a man was on your back and beating you? Various strands in the conference, from those working in institutes of society and religion in India, in Sri Lanka, in Johannesburg and elsewhere posed this question sharply. Perhaps the vocation of the church is to retain its hold on its calling to reconcile; but, with this, to show a willingness to embrace issues, even when this may give it the appearance of a partisan, unafraid that its stance may be considered extreme, but committed equally to *change* (which must often come first) *and to reconciliation*. Here some common ground could have been found by Professor Hastings, President Banana and Dr. Govender on the meaning of the Christian transformation applied to issues of social policy.

NOTES

- 1 This IAMS conference was held in Harare, Zimbabwe, January 8–14, 1985.
- 2 It is available from the IAMS Secretariat, c/o The Department of Missiology, Rapenburg 61, 2311 GJ Leiden, The Netherlands. It is published at least twice a year and costs US \$12.00.

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