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The Church Mission Society in East Africa

Its philosophy and objectives

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The Anglican Church was introduced in East Africa by the Rev. Dr. Johann Ludwig Krapf in 1844. In 1994 East Africa's Anglicans commemorated one hundred and fifty years of its existence in this region. It may be instructive to reflect on the premises on which the Anglican church in East Africa was established. While doing so, we need to bear in mind that churches of the Anglican communion in Africa sprang up from essentially four missionary societies. Of these, one of the more prominent ones was the Church Missionary Society (CMS), which was founded in 1799.

In its operations, the CMS did not function haphazardly. It has some clear-cut philosophy, objectives policies, and practices. As guiding principles, they served as the basis of CMS endeavours in various parts of the world. What was true of CMS work in general applied to specific cases of its efforts in Africa also. With respect to East Africa, there are several instances of its operations which amply illustrate the consistent strand of thought which permeated its early philosophy and objectives.

In its missionary enterprises, the CMS had a tradition which was built on two major planks, "(1) the preaching of the Gospel as a witness; (2) the gathering out of the Ecclesia, the 'called out' Church of God."[1] To varying degrees, both these have persisted throughout the history of the Society.

Whereas in earlier years the first motif of evangelistic thrust was the more prominent of these, during and after the celebrated Secretaryship of Henry Venn, the second one of establishing self-sufficient local churches gained prominence. [2]

By the time the Society entered East Africa, these objectives were prevalent and continued to persist in the period of its establishment. In 1950, in dealing with what he termed the "Living Tradition" of the CMS, the famed missionary expert, Max Warren,

pointed out that whatever institutions the CMS established, it had a cardinal principle which dictated,

> That means must always be subordinated to the ends they serve. The end for which the Society exists is the preaching of the Gospel, the conversion of those who hear, and work, Industrial Missions, Medical work, these and all other activities are means to the supreme end. They are nowhere to be considered as ends in themselves.[3]

Underlying Philosophy of CMS Efforts

The Evangelical founders of the CMS believed that whereas there were many blessings which God had bestowed upon mankind, the greatest of them all was the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." They characterised it as "the sovereign remedy for all the evils of life, and the source of the most substantial and durable benefits."[4] Having experienced the reality of its transforming power in their own lives, they had formed this private but Church-related body through which they could share their message with others in foreign parts of the world. While setting out to impart all the social and civil benefits attendant to the Christian faith, they were insistent on the supremacy of the saving grace and power of the Gospel. It was for this reason that having outlined the other gains, they went on to state,

> Such are the benefits which Christianity is calculated to diffuse in the world; but these are its least blessings. It not only meliorates the state of man in society, but it saves his soul. It cancels his guilt, reconciles him to God, raises him from death to life, makes him an heir of the kingdom of heaven, and crowns him with glory and immortality.[5]

In their determination they realised that they could not attain their goal without the guidance of God on one hand, and the instrumentality of suitable men on the other. From the beginning they were conscious of the fact that for success in all of their endeavours, they needed what they termed, a "firm reliance on the divine blessings." As to the men who would implement this ideal, it was pointed out that the aim was to send out such men "as unite a fervent zeal with discretion and knowledge; such as have themselves experienced the benefits of the gospel and therefore earnestly desire to make known to their fellow sinners the grace and power of a Redeemer, and

the inestimable blessings of his salvation."[6]

Important as the tasks of preaching the Gospel and winning people to Christ was, in the final analysis, it was considered by the CMS merely as the beginning and not the end of its missionary design. Equally important was the responsibility of organising those who embraced the Christian faith into an indigenous church. While this objective had existed in the Society's strategy from the earliest days, it was highlighted and given fresh prominence from the Secretaryship of Henry Venn, 1841-1872, onwards. In 1868, the Committee's instructions on Nationality urged, "as soon as converts can be gathered into a Christian congregation, let a native church be organised as a national institution;... Train up the native church to self-independence and to self-government from the very first stage of a Christian movement."[7] This was what Venn championed and to which he devoted a good deal of his energies during his tenure of service. As Knight has noted,

> Mr. Venn would, however, have probably ranked, as the chief work of his official life, his careful and prolonged labours for the organisation of Native Churches. All his measures converged to this point - the formation, wherever the Gospel was proclaimed, of a Native Church, which should gradually be enfranchised from all supervision by a foreign body, and should become, in his own phraseology, self-supporting, self-governing, and self-extending. .. He carefully discriminated between missionary work carried on by foreigners, and Christianity acclimatised, and so become indigenous in a National Church. The one was the means, the other the end; the one the scaffolding, the other the building it leaves behind when the scaffolding is removed.[8]

Transference of the Theme to East Africa

The history of the CMS in East Africa shows that from the start, those missionaries who were sent there were armed with this knowledge. On arrival on the scene of action they endeavoured, to the best of their ability, to uphold and practice these principles. This is evident from a survey of trends from Krapf's time to the Kenyan coast, through the Uganda era, to the period when the Church was established among Abaluyia of western Kenya. Intent on starting on the right footing,

Krapf made the central purpose of this venture clear when at a meeting with the chiefs of Ribe in 1844 he declared to them that he was 'not a soldier, nor a merchant who had come there to trade, but a Christian teacher who wished to instruct the Wanika and the Galla in the true knowledge of God."[9] Expanding on this theme a little more, he repeated it to the elders at Rabbai in 1845 when he explained to them that he

> was neither a soldier nor a merchant, nor an official employed by the Arabian or English governments, nor a traveler, nor a Mganda nor Mtawi, physician, exorcist, or enchanter; but was a teacher, a book-man, who wished to show the Wanika, the Wakamba, the Galla, and even the Watsumba (Mohammedans) the right way to salvation in the world to come.[10]

Krapf accepted the view that in addition to preaching the Gospel, it was imperative that those who were won to Christ should be organised into churches headed by their own people. It was his view that "so long as our missions are not embodied into a community, however small, so long will Christianity be unable to reveal itself in its complete form, and produce that impression which has always hitherto attracted the heathen."[11] Furthermore, it was essential that the Christian communities thus formed, in the case of Africa, should come under the leadership of the Africans themselves. It was in this connection that he advocated the necessity of "A black bishop and black clergy."[12]

While the concept of church-building was not as readily discernible in the farewell instructions to the first group of the Society's missionaries to Uganda, all the other characteristics were clearly spelt out as they were urged to put their priorities in the proper perspective. To begin with, as they set out, they were to keep in mind the fact that ultimately, God was the real source of their strength, impetus, and drive in all of their undertakings. To this end they were advised, "Let there be cultivated the deepest sense, and let there be seen the clearest acknowledgement, of your entire dependence for all true and permanent success on God the Holy Spirit."[13]

As to their outlook and approach, they were instructed to endeavour to "be first known in their true character of simple messengers of the Gospel." This was further elaborated on with the charge that from the beginning it was of first importance for every member of the party to be constantly cognizant of and to demonstrate "to all the distinctly

Missionary character of the expedition - that it is not as explorers they go forth, or as travelers, or as mere settlers, but as servants of God, messengers of peace, witnesses for Christ."[14]

Allied to this disposition, they were to keep very prominent in their minds and very clear in all their plans "that the primary object of the Mission is the conversion of the heathen to Christ."[15] With this in mind, once they settled down they were to be alert so that they would not miss any opportunity of presenting the Gospel to those who were under their care. Thus, when they reached Uganda, their priority concern was to convey to Kabaka Mutesa "and his people the message of salvation by the Lord Jesus Christ." They were to make it clear to the people they came in contact with that the first desire of their hearts was "to lead them to the Saviour, that they may be reconciled to God and become His children."[16]

When it came to assembling a Christian community, they were cautioned against lowering their aims so much as to "become content with something short of conversion to God." They were to pray and exert earnest effort towards ensuring that their first Christians were Christians indeed. For some time there would be no candidates for baptism, since it was most important that the would-be church members be thoroughly instructed first. It was especially crucial in the commencement of the Mission to take care that they did not accept adherents hastily and with ease. Only those who showed "evident tokens of being born again of the Holy Spirit" were admitted to the rite of baptism.[17]

Writing about two early missionaries to Uganda, Alexander M. Mackay and Robert H. Walker, a colleague of theirs, Robert P. Ashe, commented that they were wholly given to the "work of preaching a living Christ."[18] In the tumultuous period of 1885-1886, a small, but strong body of Christians had issued out of CMS efforts in Uganda. Speaking of this nucleus, Mackay wrote, "I believe that a work has been begun in Uganda which has its origin in the power of God, and which never can be uprooted by all the forces of evil."[19] On the 18th of March 1882, the first baptisms in Uganda took place when five were admitted to the rite. Then in 1985, twelve men were appointed to form the first church council in a move which proved to be as timely as it was essential.

When Bishop Alfred R. Tucker first entered Uganda in 1890, he expressed his philosophy in the words, "It is a truism, but yet it cannot be repeated too often, that if ever Africa is to be won for Christ it must be by the African himself. ... No! Again I say our hope for Africa (under God) must be in the

African himself."[20] Armed with this belief, he built on the 1885 initiatives of Mackay and his colleagues, when he appointed and licensed six men as Lay Readers in 1891. He followed this up in early 1893 when he selected seven men to undergo training for five months, with a view to ordination as deacons at the end of that period. Eventually, only six of these were ordained on Trinity Sunday, May 28, 1893.

Willis' Faithfulness to the Society's Objectives

When the CMS entered western Kenya from Uganda, it was fortunate to have the Rev. John Jamieson Willis as its pioneer there. After difficult initial days at Vihiga, he took advantage of the lessons learnt there to build strong and lasting foundations at Maseno. All this he did in an attitude of utter dependence upon God as expressed in this words, "We can teach, but God alone can produce that attitude of mind which shall make effective preaching possible."[21]

He was convinced that when preaching the Gospel in a new environment, it was essential to employ the local idiom as the mode of communication. He contended that for effective work, it was "not enough to bring men into the Kingdom of God; more than we realize depends on how we bring men into the Kingdom."[22]

Beyond being faithful in preaching that "Christ Jesus came into the World to save sinners" as the essence of the Gospel, it was of crucial importance that this message be conveyed in terms which were intelligible "from the standpoint not of the teacher, but of the taught." He pointed out how by using parables as stepping-stones, Christ's method was to take "His hearers from the known to the unknown, not by a heroic leap in the dark, but step by step, until almost unconsciously they passed into another world."[23]

It was out of this concern that Willis teamed up with a number of the earliest converts in writing a small book in which they attempted to build a bridge between the indigenous beliefs and the Christian faith. Step by step, this introduction to the gospel was designed to lead the hearers through some cardinal Christian truths, albeit in the people's own thought-pattern. The book dealt with, "First the doctrine of the one God, growing steadily clearer and more exalted through the Old Testament; then the human life of Jesus of Nazareth, bearing its own unique witness; and, last of all, the full message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, Son of Man and eternal Son of God, with all that this involves."[24]

In the course of his labours in western Kenya, Willis aimed at and longed for conversion to Jesus Christ

and inner transformation on the part of those among whom he worked. Of this he wrote in 1908, "That change can only come in one way, by the Spirit of God making a radical change in their hearts. God grant indeed that this, and nothing less may be done, and that soon."[25] Before long, the first signs of this response began to appear, and on May 8, 1909, this received formal recognition when "Seventeen of the older boys stood up before the congregation to their faith in Christ,"[26] as they were admitted as the first Anglican Church catechumens in western Kenya. Then in January, 1910, a further step forward was taken when 14 of these 17 became the first group of Anglican adherents in western Kenya to undergo baptism.

In addition to this faithfulness with regard to the centrality of preaching the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ, Willis considered as of crucial importance the establishment of a full-fledged indigenous Church. As he worked towards this idea, he wrote in 1908, "I look for the time when in all parts of the country we shall have little groups of Christian boys who shall in their own villages, be witnesses of Christ."[27] Before long, he took the bold and commendable step of constituting the senior student leadership in Maseno School into a Native Church Council. This action was consistent not only with the CMS policy, but also with his own philosophy on the matter. It was his belief that whatever else contributed to the success of the exemplary process of Church building in Uganda, the chief factor was indigeneity:

> The methods adopted in the work of evangelization and Christianization. The key to these methods lies, in a word, in the establishment of an indigenous Church. As the consummation of the best British rule, whether in Asia or in Africa, is ultimately self-determination and self-government, so the euthanasia of the Christian mission is the birth of the native Church.
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> It has been the policy of the C.M.S. Uganda Mission, becoming, as the years passed, more explicit and more articulate, to build up a self-governing, self-supporting, and self-extending native Church.[28]

Central to the establishment of an indigenous Church is the ability to devolve responsibilities upon the local people themselves. In Willis' words, "Not only must Africa be evangelized by the African but that every native Church must be built up by its own sons. This is fundamental. ...That

mission will do best in any country which is most successful in developing the resources of the Christian community of the country itself."[29] But beyond the general Christian community, there is the particular need of an indigenous leadership. From this point of view, it is true that "The primary need of a native Church is a native ministry" to direct and manage the various facets of the Church's life.[30] As Willis saw it, apart from the clergy, other useful personnel in this category were, Lay Readers, catechists, and teachers. The successful development of this indigenous leadership would help the Mission achieve its penultimate objective of issuing into an indigenous Church.

Summary and Conclusion:

It is clear that in its operations throughout the world, the CMS followed certain premises and principles. What was true in this general scope was applied in the case of East Africa when the work of the Society was introduced and established there. This began with the Rev. Dr. Johann Ludwig Krapf when he arrived in East Africa in 1844. He was very clear in his mind about the twin emphases of the primacy of evangelism and the ultimate goal of establishing an indigenous African church. Secondly, when the first group of CMS missionaries to Uganda were sent there these cardinal principles of the Society work were strongly impressed upon them. From the time they arrived there in 1877, these objectives were played out as is expressed by Alexander M. Mackay and the Rt. Rev. Alfred R. Tucker. In the third instance, there is the example of Western Kenya where CMS work was introduced was introduced by the Rev. John Jamieson Willis in 1905. Concise in theory and disciplined in actual practice, he promoted evangelism as of first importance and at the same time was always alert to keep the goal of an indigenous African church in view. This was in line with the enduring living tradition of the Church Missionary Society.

[1]Eugene Stock, The History of the CMS: Its Environment, Its Men and Its Work. 3 Vols. (London:CMS 1989), Vol. 2, p. 82.

[2]Ibid., p. 83

[3]Max A. G. Warren, Unfolding Purpose: An Interpretation of the Living Tradition which is CMS. (London, CMS, 1950, pp. 9-10.

[4]Church Missionary Society, "Account of a Society for Missions to Africa and the East, Instituted by Members of the Established Church, 1799," p. 2.

[5]Ibid., p. 4.

[6]Ibid., p. 11.

[7]William Knight, Memoir of the Rev. H. Venn: The Missionary Secretariat of Henry Venn, B.D. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1880), p. 285.

[8]Ibid., pp. 276-277.

[9]J. Lewis Krapf, Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours During an Eighteen Years' Residence in Eastern Africa (Second Edition with a new introduction by R. C. Bridges). (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968), p. 137 (First Edition, 1860).

[10]Ibid., pp. 145-146.

[11]Ibid., p. 499.

[12]Eugene Stock, History of the CMS, 4 Vols. Vol. 2, p. 462.

[13]Church Missionary Society, "Instructions Delivered by the Committee of the Church Missionary Society to the Members of the Mission Party Proceeding to the Victoria Nyanza," 1876, p. 27.

[14]Ibid., p. 20.

[15]Ibid., p. 26.

[16]Ibid., p. 26.

[17]Ibid., p. 17.

[18]Mackay's Sister, J.W.H. A.M. Mackay: Pioneer Missionary of the Church Missionary Society to Uganda. (The Unabridged first Edition with a New Introductory Note by D.A. Low) (London: Frank Cass & Co. Lit., 1970), p. 316. (First Published in 1890.)

[19] Ibid., p. 288.

[20]Alfred R. Tucker, Eighteen Years in Uganda and East Africa, 2 Vols. (London: Edward Arnold, 19-8), Vol. 1, pp. 113-114.

[21]J. J. Willis, "The Appeal to the African," in The Church Missionary Review, January, 1912, p. 29.

[22]Ibid., pp. 29-30.

[23]Ibid., p. 30.

[24]Ibid., p. 33.

[25]J.J. Willis, "Willis Papers" (London: Lambeth Palace Library Microfilm) 11 November 1908, p. 214.

[26]Ibid., 26 May 1909, p. 217.

[27]Ibid., 15 March 1908. p. 197.

[28]J. J. Willis, An African Church in Building (London: CMS 1925), pp. 5-6.

[29]Ibid., p. 37.

[30]Ibid., p. 68.