

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JCB-5
The Nederduitse Gereformeerde
Kerk Comes to the Transkei

January 30, 1962
29 Bay View Avenue
Tamboer's Kloof
Cape Town, South Africa

Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The latest church to develop missions in the Transkei is South Africa's oldest and largest church, the Dutch Reformed, Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk van Suid Afrika (hereafter referred to as "the Church").

This is belated action on it's part, but in some respects it is quite understandable.

Although the Church arrived in South Africa with the first White settlers in 1652, it did little mission work of any kind among the Africans until almost the beginning of the 20th Century.¹

During the 19th Century, Afrikaners were busy trekking inland and northward from the Cape, and fighting Africans on the frontier. Their church was suffering from a severe shortage of ministers to serve the growing number of adherents who were now settling in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. The Church was also facing internal battles over racial policy and doctrine, the outcome of which saw its Transvaal members withdraw to form their own church, the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk. All in all, it had neither time nor resources to consider further missionary work on any feasible scale.

Its endeavors were also hampered by the prejudice which had developed among many of its members about missionaries in general. At the time England took over permanent control of South Africa in 1806, there was an influx of English-speaking

1. The Church, in the early years of the 19th Century did organize a mission to the Coloured people of the Cape, and in the previous century it had converted many Hottentots, who lived nearby, and Malay slaves, who were imported. This, however, was without any over-all mission plan or policy. Two foreign clergymen, brought to South Africa to fill a ministerial shortage, did start the Church's first African missions in the Transvaal a hundred years ago, but they were a small beginning.

missionaries, primarily from the London Missionary Society. They stimulated the Church's mission interest with their energetic concern over Christianizing the heathen. At the same time, however, they preached political racial equality, unwelcome as far as Dutch Church farmers were concerned, and they had the audacity to call some Dutch farmers into court for ill treatment of their Coloured help. This prejudiced many Dutch Church members thereafter against any and all missionary activity.

When the Church finally started its own missions among the Africans they were primarily concentrated outside of South Africa. Missions were established in Nyasaland in 1884, Southern Rhodesia in 1891, and Northern Rhodesia in 1899. In 1909 its missionaries joined the Sudan United Mission in an attempt to build mission stations all across the Sudan in order to stop the southward expansion of Islam. Seven years later it took over the particular responsibility of the Tiv tribesmen in Nigeria. Its work there has only recently been turned over to the American Christian Reformed Church.²

At the turn of this century the Church was again hampered in its mission work, this time by the Anglo-Boer War. The problems of post-war rehabilitation, followed by a country emotionally divided by World War I, severe droughts in the early decades of the 1900's, and the resultant economic recessions, affected most of the Church members who were farmers, and left them in no position to aid missionary projects financially. In fact, the Church was sorely tried to take care of its own "poor White" problem which many of the farmers represented. It has only been in the last 30 years that mission interest and expansion has come with the increased stability and well-being of the Afrikaner economically and politically.

2. The turnover had to be speeded up because of the Nigerian Government's demand that South Africans leave the country. Sir Francis Ibiam, Governor of Eastern Nigeria and an elder of the Presbyterian Church, said in a speech given at the World Council of Churches Meeting in New Delhi, that most European missionaries were but "guardians of White supremacy" and that the South African Dutch Reformed Church should be condemned for "its inherent and studied hatred of the Black man." It should be noted, however, that in Nyasaland many of the Christian political leaders of Dr. Hastings Banda's independence movement are members of the Dutch Reformed-Presbyterian Mission there. Others who are ardent supporters of Black Nationalism have received their education and religious training from Dutch Reformed Missions. Perhaps this points up the fact that the Dutch Reformed policy of separate development is not opposed to Black Nationalism or African independence as long as it is separate from White aspirations.

Missionary Interest Renewed

The interest of Church members in missionary work was given considerable impetus by the publication of the Tomlinson Commission Report in 1954 (JCB-3) which pointed out that 40% of the Africans in South Africa were still followers of primitive religions. In emphasizing the nation's Christian role in Africa, it reported that almost 50% of the Europeans and Indians in Africa live in South Africa, as well as one-third of Africa's Christians. It strongly suggested that church missions could do more for the future welfare of the country if they would increase their endeavors to bring Christianity to Africa's heathen. Concluding this advice, in words that seem more appropriate to a Dutch Reformed evangelical tract than a Government Commission report (illustrating the close relationship of today's dominant religious and political thought), it said in part:

"The only safeguard for European civilization in South Africa is an intensified effort to evangelize the non-Christian. We cannot hope to preserve a high Christian way of life if we allow along side it a widespread paganism or an equally widespread low standard of belief and practise claiming a remote kinship with Christianity....The State and the Churches must accept the fact that it was by no mere accident that European Christianity established itself at the Southern point of Africa, but that a high and exalted purpose was intended.... South Africa's Christianity must be made and kept conscious of its vocation as regards the rest of Africa. Thus only can Christianity retain its position in Africa and avoid vanishing like North African Christianity at the close of the seventh century. Indeed, it is the task of the Churches and the State to see that, as far as it is in their power, the future of Christianity in Africa is ensured. All this calls for sacrifice. It is the task of the churches to inspire Europeans to this sacrificial deed... The best of our European sons and daughters will have to serve as 'Missionaries' in every sphere of civilized life."

Purpose for the Transkei: Christian Zeal or Government Tool?

It has been suggested that perhaps the Church returned to home ground for its missionary enterprise because of the increased pressures against South Africans in the other parts of Africa. A more widespread, but also unproven, allegation is that it has turned to South Africa's Bantu reserves in order to augment the Government's policies there. The Transkei has been English-dominated for a long time in language and in approach to education and race relations which is contrary to the separate development policy of both the Church and the Government.

Members of the Church resent the implication that they are striving to rationalize Government policy. They point out that the racial policies of the Church have evolved over a long period of time. Far from producing a policy to augment the theories of the Nationalist Party, they contend that Government policies grew out of the developed philosophy of the Church.

In the early years of the 19th Century, at the time the Church was beginning its organized missionary efforts among the non-Whites, White and Coloured Christians worshipped in the same building, sat together for communion, and enjoyed Christian privileges in common. While there was concern among some of the White members that this practice was leading to too much mixing of the blood, the Cape Presbytery in 1829 reaffirmed the Church's then multi-racial policy. "According to the teaching of the Bible and the spirit of Christianity one is duty bound to admit such persons (Coloured) to the Holy Supper together with those born Christian."

Thirty years later, the Church effected a compromise, stating that while it was desirable and scriptural that Whites and non-Whites be incorporated in a single church, it was allowed, in order to meet the feeling of "the weaker brethren", that non-Whites might worship in separate buildings. In 1872, the Church decided that Coloured members should meet and receive the sacraments in their own chapels. About a decade later, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa was formed, consisting of those Coloured chapels and churches. This new church was formed, according to Church spokesmen, out of the Mother Church's concern for the welfare of the Coloured - it was for their benefit. Paraphrasing a statement they made at that time, "The well-being of both races is not promoted by race mixture and social equalization, but rather by the development of national character influenced by the Gospel." The Church was adopting a mission policy based on separate development because only in a separate denomination could the non-White be allowed full scope for self-development. This was a policy that some other missions in Africa had also found practical - the idea that Christianity must become as African in relation to the Africans as it is a European religion to the Europeans.

Present mission policy, as stated officially about the time the Nationalists came into power in 1948 (and re-affirmed at the meeting of the Cape Synod in November of this year) could also be a statement of the reasons behind the Government's racial policy.

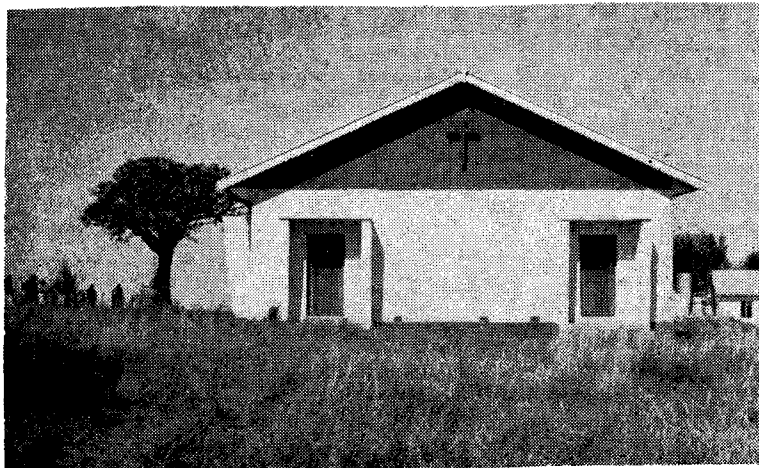
"Every nation has the right to be itself and to endeavor to develop and elevate itself. While the Church thus declares itself opposed to social equality in the sense of ignoring differences of race and colour between White and Black in daily life, it favors encouragement and development of social differentiation

and spiritual or cultural segregation, to the advantage of both sections. The policy of trusteeship as exercised at present must gradually develop into a policy of complete independence and self-determination for the Coloured and Native in his own community, school and church. The Dutch Reformed Church considers all segregation as a means of enhancing life and independence.The Native and Coloured must be assisted to develop into self-respecting Christian nations."

Whether or not these policies were developed together, it is still obvious that the presence of the Church in the Transkei and any increase in its influence could only be a help in getting Government Bantu policy peacefully accepted.

One of the reasons the Church did not enter the Transkei sooner, according to its spokesmen, is the fact that it had been hesitant about entering a mission field in which other churches (English) have played such an important part. This hesitation vanished, however, when the Church discovered recently that "Heathenism in the Transkei is growing faster than Christianity." Not 40% of the Africans there were non-Christian, but at least 2/3s, or one million of the one and a half million Xhosas, could not even be called nominal Christians. This is given as the major reason for the recent expansion by the Department of Dutch Reformed Missions there.

The Church today gives much to its rapidly expanding missionary work. Its 680,000 White adult members contribute over four million dollars a year to missionary work in addition to what they give to support the local church. In the last 30 years, 7 indigenous mission churches have been founded, in addition to 3 founded earlier. The 10 "Daughter" churches serve non-Whites in 14 areas and in 17 different languages.



One of the
new Mission
Churches
built in the
Transkei

Since 1951, the Church in the Transkei has expanded its White missionaries from 9 to 29, its major stations from 4 to 20, its membership and adherents from 5000 to 10,000, and its hospitals (general and TB) from 2 to 14.

Not only is the Church financially better able to support such work than it has ever been, but it also has a Government today which is very sympathetic to its work.³



Problems: Will Patience Be Enough?

But whatever help the Government may give, the Church missions will not have an easy life in the Transkei.

The major problem is shared by all the other missions. It is the general cultural breakdown of the family and the tribe, due to the disintegration of old authorities, spelled out in JCB-4. Western ways and ideas, the aim of which may be to help the African to a more healthy, productive and longer life, constantly attack and break down his old cultural patterns. The great gulf between the old and the new, the European and the African, confuse the newly-emerging African with mixed values, leading to general dissatisfaction, adult and juvenile delinquency. In this cultural confusion, the Church must win the confidence of the Africans to a new and positive way of life through the example of its missionaries if its Christian message and moral pattern are to be accepted and followed.

Establishing this kind of trust and confidence takes time. The missionaries who have spent years there constantly commend patience as the greatest virtue. One missionary told me it took him three years to make his first convert. This need for time is a particular problem for the Church as its mission stations are primarily new, and its missionaries are generally young (in the 20's or early 30's) with little background of missionary experience. It will be some time before the expansion

3. For example, it has been made easier for the Church to enter the Transkei. Previously, churches were restricted from building mission stations too close to each other. New legislation has enabled the larger churches to build anywhere in the area where they can find the land.

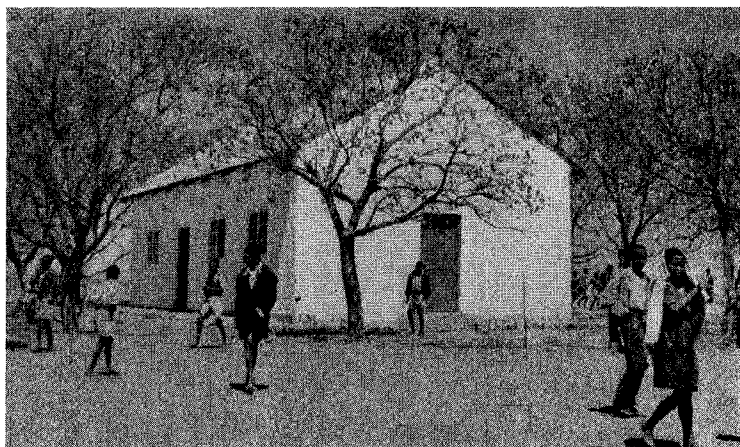
has much effect on the Africans in the Transkei.

On my visits to mission stations in Pondoland, the Southeastern sector of the Transkei, I saw beautiful new facilities going up. But at one station there was a new hospital with just one young missionary couple. When I asked about hospital staff they told me they had none as yet, but were hoping the Church would be able to recruit some soon. There is much talk about recruitment and training of people to man the mission stations, but I saw no immediate evidence of the sacrifice-minded rushing to join up, as the Church's building program would indicate. Although all churches must contend with staff shortages, it is particularly acute with the Church, since it must supply so many new staff people at one time. They are finding it particularly difficult to supply all the medical staff needed for the burgeoning hospitals.

The majority of its problems, however, stem directly or indirectly from its connection with the Government, real or imagined.

While the attitude of other missionaries in the area has varied, there does exist some ill feeling and considerable suspicion of the Church's motives. Church expansion in this basically English mission stronghold came at the same time as the Government was beginning to put into effect a new system of territorial government and education that took the schools away from the missions and put them solely under Governmental authority. To understate the case considerably, the English churches were most outraged that the Government should take over schools that had been theirs for a century or more.

The Transkei was opened to the outside world by the indefatigable efforts of early Methodist and Anglican missionaries. They established mission stations and trading stores. They provided the African, as much as they were able, with education, medical care, and some kind of social welfare.



Former mission school now run by the Government

Former South African governments, taking an easy way out, recognized the work of the church in education and provided some subsidy for the schools, thereby eliminating in their minds the necessity for establishing many schools of their own. Gradually the aid was increased, and it became traditional for the churches and the Government to cooperate in educating the Africans.

When the present Government came into power, this policy was changed with the enactment of the Bantu Education Act in 1953. While this Act brought a much-needed standardization to all the schools, it also forced the churches to relinquish control over what had belonged to them. The churches could either continue to run their schools without Governmental financial aid (only the Catholics and Seventh Day Adventists could afford to do this) or allow them to be run by the Government. Even those missions which pay their own way do so only for the right to give their own religious instruction. All other subjects are prescribed by the Government.

The new educational curriculum was considered generally acceptable and adequate, but it differed from the English mission objective in two vital ways. The mission schools educated the African child as they would a European, equipping him to deal adequately with the outside world. And English was the medium of instruction. Bantu education readies students to fit into the agricultural African community in which he lives. And now classes must be taught in the African's own home language, with Afrikaans and English as additional subjects. 4

Many missions also bitterly resented the way in which this Act was put into operation. Many of their missionaries had gained considerable knowledge of the area, and had intimate understanding of the Xhosa and his language. Yet they were not consulted. They were rather told, as several churchmen told me, to get out of African education.

All these difficulties between the English churches and the Government have had their effect on English-Afrikaner church relationships. The Dutch Reformed Church welcomed the

4. The Education Act has caused bitter resentment among the Africans themselves. Xhosa chiefs, meeting just after Dr. . Verwoerd's announcement of impending independence, stated that they would return to the English medium of instruction in their schools when they obtain control. Major objections to the use of Xhosa as a teaching-medium is its uselessness in communicating with the rest of the world, and that there have been no words in the language for either geographic or scientific terms. Words invented by authorities and added to the language seem only another foreign language with which the Xhosa student must struggle.

Government action and gladly turned over the few schools it had in the Transkei. The curriculum in the Government schools fits the Dutch Reformed philosophy so aptly that the other missions are inclined to feel that their schools were taken over in the Government name only to be operated as Dutch Reformed schools.

The Africans themselves are inclined to be suspicious of the intent of the Church, because it uses Afrikaans, as do most of the Government officials, and because it supports the racial policy of the Government. At the meeting of the Cape Synod this spring (October-November), Dr. P.P.A. Kamfer, Actuary of the Bantu Church, brought up this point. He said he was worried about the great confusion that existed in the minds of many Bantu regarding "that which is the State and that which is the Church." "The Christians of our Bantu Church cannot discern between what is Mother Church and what is Government. What the Government does, the Mother Church also does, and what the Mother Church does, the Government does." Dr. Kamfer stressed that he did not want to ask the Synod to criticize the Government, "but if there are matters with which you do not agree, I ask that you should not discuss them in secret with the departments, but will make them public in the press."

Dr. Kamfer's statement is indicative of some of the rumblings within both the Mother and the Daughter Church. As missionaries spend more time in the field, they find themselves more and more in an awkward position explaining and re-defining statements made by the Mother Church without consultation with them. (In this same way the Government Bantu Authority often embarrasses local Bantu administrators in the Transkei, who seem for the most part to be able, conscientious and knowledgeable men.) The dedicated missionary will find it hard to rationalize some of the statements made by members of his church with the aspirations and desires of the people among whom he must wield his influence.

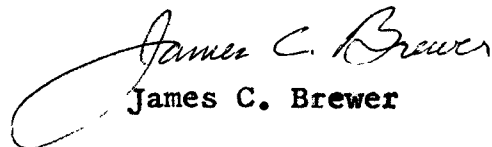
The situation in the Transkei has been and continues to be ripe for Communist infiltration and agitation. The Superintendent of Missions put much stress on the extent of Communist activity in Pondoland, an area which has been under emergency regulations since serious disturbances rocked the area in 1960.

With rising political aspirations sweeping the African continent, Black Nationalism is increasingly attractive to men in the Reserves. Africans in the Transkei have been pressing for INDEPENDENCE NOW, and it would seem that the Government is about to grant them their wish, more or less. There are therefore all the problems of transition and their accompanying dissatisfactions. Added to this is the fact that the Transkei borders on Basutoland where the Communists are openly at work, and are ready to make capital out of any problems not appreciably reduced or totally solved. Although Islam has not yet made

inroads in the Transkei, it would find exceedingly fertile ground. The religion which considers itself that of the Black man as compared with White Christianity, and is willing to accept the practice of polygamy, still favored by at least 1/9th of the husbands in the Transkei, could, according to some of the missionaries with whom I talked, sweep rapidly through the territory. A red fez anywhere in the vicinity causes consternation.

It is in this context that the new Dutch Reformed Missions now have to operate and hope to be influential. It will be an increasingly difficult job.

Sincerely yours,


James C. Brewer

Received New York February 5, 1962