

Rhodesia Becomes Zimbabwe and the Programme to Combat Racism

(British Methodism and African Nationalism in Rhodesia 1965-1980)

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My understanding of the developments

This paper deals with the response of the British Methodist Church to African Nationalism in Rhodesia from 1965 to 1980, up to the point at which the Methodist Church in Rhodesia became autonomous and the country Rhodesia became independent, having been re-named Zimbabwe. It sets out my understanding of what happened and I recognise that others who were involved may well interpret the events differently. I recognise, too, that an authoritative interpretation of many of the events can only be made by Zimbabweans.

I was not in Rhodesia for most of this time. I came on furlough in 1963 and did not return for family reasons. I was, however, soon appointed a member of the Central and Western Committees and I heard reports about the situation in Rhodesia at almost every meeting. In 1970 I was appointed Principal of Kingsmead College, to which people preparing to go out as missionaries came, and missionaries on furlough and African Church leaders – including a number from Rhodesia. I also became chair of the Birmingham Anti-Apartheid group, and chair of the committee running a small home for some of the children of African leaders detained in Rhodesia, and in this I worked with Rhodesian African political leaders in exile in Birmingham, including, for example, Didymus Mutasa. From 1977-78 I was Africa Secretary at Mission House and then General Secretary from 1978. I did an extensive tour of the Zimbabwe churches in 1981 with the then President, Rev Dr Crispin Mazobere, who himself was wanting to find out what the church people had been doing during the war which led up to the country's independence..

The Situation in 1965

The British Government

Legally Rhodesia was still a British colony, but in 1923 the Rhodesian government had been given control of the army and the police, and the power to decide how the land should be distributed.

In the 1960s there had been unsuccessful attempts by the Rhodesian government to persuade the Britain to allow Rhodesia to become independent, and the British government had set out five conditions that must be fulfilled for independence to be granted:

1. There must be unimpeded progress to majority rule.
2. There must be guarantees against retrogressive amendments to the constitution.
3. There must be immediate improvements in the political status of the African population (in 1965 only 16/65 members of Parliament were Africans, and only a small number of Africans had the vote).
4. There must be progress towards ending segregation (in 1965 there were still separate shops, restaurants, swimming pools etc).
5. Any proposals about the moves to independence must be acceptable to the population of Rhodesia as a whole.

The Rhodesia government

In 1965 Ian Smith was the Rhodesian Prime Minister and he was threatening a unilateral declaration of independence.

African political parties

By 1965 the African nationalist political movement had split into two parties: Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) led by Joshua Nkomo, and Zimbabwe African Nationalist Union (ZANU) led by Ndabaningi Sithole and including Robert Mugabe. The leaders of both these parties had been in and out of detention since 1959. Mugabe was re-arrested in December 1963, Nkomo in April 1964 and they remained in detention for ten years. Ian Smith had banned both ZAPU and ZANU and rounded up most of the other nationalist leaders.

But though the leaders of ZANU and ZAPU were in detention, many of the members had fled to Mozambique, Zambia and Botswana and formed themselves into guerrilla armies operating from these countries, making incursions into Rhodesia, and sometimes setting up bases in the country.

The Methodist Church

Rev Andrew Ndhlela appointed Chairman

In 1965 the Rev Andrew Ndhlela was appointed the Chairman of the Rhodesia District in place of the Rev H Jesse Lawrence. Most Methodists first heard about his appointment through the radio and most European members and missionaries were surprised and shocked by it. Bulawayo Area Council passed a resolution deploring the lack of consultation. Most senior missionaries felt the same, and said so publicly. For them matters were made worse when a relatively junior missionary, the Rev Jack Roberts, was appointed to be in charge of the District Office. Some senior missionaries said quite openly that it should have been one of them. But Andrew Ndhlela was a very respected senior African minister, and most African Church members welcomed his appointment.

The Officers of the Overseas Division in London were aware of the resentment and wrote to the 1965 Synod saying that they

... recognised that the way Andrew Ndhlela had been appointed caused distress and misunderstanding, but the Society had difficulty in knowing the true mind of the Rhodesian Church. On many occasions it was difficult for the Synod to speak with one voice and therefore it was not always wise for the Officers to consult the District on every matter by the process of discussion and voting within the life of the Church. "In certain matters it is wiser to use other ways of consultation in arriving at the Officers' understanding of God's will for the life of the Church."

The General Committee of the Overseas Division, meeting in September 1965 recorded its sorrow that Africans and Europeans were deeply divided about the political future of Rhodesia. It said it deplored intimidation, civil disorder and violence. It considered that Britain should delay the granting of independence to Rhodesia until the representation of all the citizens irrespective of race was accepted as the aim of Rhodesian politics and until there was ... at least equal representation of African and European in the Rhodesian Parliament.

It strongly urged HM Government to convene in the near future a fully representative constitutional conference on Rhodesia. "It is our judgement that the African leaders must be released and must participate in that conference".

Unilateral Declaration of Independence

But Ian Smith was having none of this and on 11th Nov 1965 he made a Unilateral Declaration of Independence saying: "There will be no African government in my lifetime".

Meeting the following January, the Rhodesia Synod passed a resolution saying it was deeply disturbed by this:

The conscience of the Church in Rhodesia was deeply disturbed by the unlawful declaration of independence We are all called to prayer to seek God's mind in guiding the minds of the British and Rhodesian Christians. Our glory is in the Lord and the expression of love towards one another.

The Central Committee of the Overseas Division meeting in London issued a statement also condemning the move.

In 1966 the United Nations imposed economic sanctions against the Smith regime, and the armed struggle escalated inside Rhodesia.

The Armed Struggle

Until 1965 the guerrillas had only attacked what were seen as government buildings, but in April 1966 ZANU attacked electric power pylons at Sinoia. They also attacked a European farmer and his wife at Hartley and both were killed.

The economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations and the fighting put pressure on the Smith regime. Ian Smith met the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, on battleships anchored off Gibraltar in Dec 1966 and October 1968 to discuss what was needed for sanctions to be lifted, but there was no agreement, and the war intensified.

What happened during the war

In Britain in the 1970s we did not hear much about how local Methodist churches in Rhodesia were coping during the war. In 1981, however, I made an extensive tour of the country with the Crispin Mazobere, President of the Conference. We visited Harare, Epworth, Waddilove, Chimanza, Kwenda, Enkeldoorn, Sandringham, Molele, Sinoia, Karoi, Siabuwa, Bulawayo, Wankie, Dinde, Tegwani, Mzinyati, Shabani, Pakame, Gwelo, Gatooma; we met many people and they told us their stories.

During the war, in some of the rural areas, because the Rhodesian army forbade any kind of gathering, congregations were not able to meet for worship, and several African ministers had to leave their stations and move into towns for safety. The Overseas Division made grants to help with their salaries. Some who had to leave kept in touch with their congregations during the war and were then accepted back afterwards. Some left without consulting their congregations and were not accepted back.

Some ministers stayed with their congregations right through the war. Some churches were able to continue to have services and some schools continued to function. One school where there was also a clinic said that they were able to keep open because they gave the “freedom fighters” (the minister’s words) medical supplies from the clinic. One minister told me that his area had been strongly occupied by ZANU guerrillas. At night they called together the leaders of the community (including the minister) and told them, “We are not against the whites, but we want our freedom. We are your children. People must help us. We need money, food and clothing”. At first they did not trust the minister because he was from another part of the country, but they sent him on errands to test him (eg they sent him to Salisbury to get them shoes) and then they did trust him. On one occasion the minister went to the Chairman of the District and asked to be transferred elsewhere. The Chairman said, “No, you must stay where you are. We will give you extra money to give to the guerrillas.”

Ministers sometimes found themselves in very difficult situations. On one occasion a minister was stopped by five members of the Rhodesian army at 5.30 in the afternoon. They said they were stuck and demanded a lift. The minister refused. It was outside a store and neither the minister nor the soldiers knew that guerrillas were hiding in the store. The guerrillas sent one man out to tell the minister to give the soldiers the lift for which they were asking. The minister said to the soldiers, “You are putting me in a very dangerous position”, but he took them. That night he was called to the guerrillas’ HQ to explain what had happened. They said what he had done was right.

The minister was then the only minister in the area and he was still holding services. The guerrillas told him to stop because he would be attacked by the Rhodesian soldiers but he

continued to meet with a few members and the guerrillas allowed him to do so. Girls were taken to cook and wash for the guerrillas, but they could not protect themselves when the soldiers attacked and twelve girls from the church were killed.

In some areas the guerrillas told the people they must stop worshipping in the church and instead worship the ancestors in the traditional way. I was told that many people became possessed by spirits – a feature of African traditional religion. After a time a number of Christians lost their faith.

In some areas ZANU held meetings on Sundays at the same time as church services and that prevented people attending church. In other places there were no problems with political meetings on Sundays, politicians were church members and did not want the church to be disturbed. I was told of one place where a grandmother (Ambuya) had persuaded ZANU to change the time of their youth meeting because it clashed with the meeting of the Girls Christian Union.

At one church gathering people told us, “We never stopped praying during the war. We had a very courageous leader”.

At Siabuwa, right up in the Zambesi valley, people met for services right through the war, even though it was near the track along which ZAPU guerrillas entered Rhodesia from Zambia. One of the women led the services.

When the Rev Dr Brian Beck visited Rhodesia in 1978, after the long years of war, he met some Methodist women in one of the rural areas and they said to him, “Take back to Britain the message that we (still) sing, not because of our situation, but because of Jesus”.

One minister said that right through the war as well as ministering to African church members, he held services for European farmers and the European District Commissioner and did pastoral work amongst the farmers and their families. He said that some of the European farmers had been very afraid.

The Europeans in Shabani had a very good relationship with their African minister. He had remained there all through the war and ministered to both Europeans and Africans. When I was staying there (in 1981), Europeans were in and out of his house quite freely and they clearly accepted him as their minister. The Women’s Association and the Ruwadzano (the African women’s movement) met together and had joint accounts.

One minister left his station in the rural area and went to live in the nearest town. There was already a missionary there working with both Europeans and Africans. When the missionary went on furlough he was not replaced and the African minister was asked if he would preside at the Communion services in the European church. He agreed and gradually began to do pastoral work. He was asked to visit the Old People’s Home which the missionary had been accustomed to visit. On his first visit the elderly people (all white) were very anxious. But he kept visiting for a few weeks and residents began to look forward to his visits. Eventually it was the time for the

missionary to return. When the African minister told them the missionary was coming back they said they would be glad to see him, but added, “But when he moves to another circuit, can you be our minister?”

Some ZAPU guerrillas based in Botswanas abducted a large number of the students at Tegwani Secondary School, which is near the border between Rhodesia and Botswana. They made the students walk across into Botswana. They wanted the boys to be guerrillas and the girls to support them. But Luke Kumalo, the headmaster, insisted on going with them and in the end persuaded the guerillas to let the students return. Soon the whole school was moved to a safer place in the suburbs of the city of Bulawayo.

Pakame Mission was spared – it was said that this was because it was the secondary school where Tongogara, the head of the ZANU guerrillas, had been educated. But because it was spared the Rhodesian soldiers thought the African minister in charge was working with the guerrillas and they beat him very severely. Some church members were also arrested.

When I discussed with the people what qualities enabled ministers to support their congregations during the war I was told: They needed courage, they needed to be men of prayer, to live close to God. They needed to have a pastoral spirit, a real concern for their people, a willingness to suffer with their people. They had to be able to “play their cards correctly” – to talk over with the people what they should do in difficult situations and be guided by the people. Before the conflict started they should have lines of communication established with the significant groups in the community, communication with several groups, not just one part of the community, and this should include good relationship with the police.

During the war Andrew Ndhlela took great care to keep in touch with the guerrillas, and he tried to persuade them not to use excessive force. He also made a point of getting alongside white people and offering them support and pastoral care.

Programme to Combat Racism

In 1969 the World Council of Churches Assembly set up the Programme to Combat Racism with a Special Fund to be used to make grants to organisations that combated racism, the grants to be specifically for humanitarian purposes. Since white racism was to be the main focus of the PCR’s attention, Rhodesia and South Africa became two of its main areas of concern. The setting up of the Programme raised a great deal of debate in the churches all over the world. Within Britain the Overseas Division (with the agreement of the British Conference) was the only church body to make grants to the Special Fund. Others debated whether they should, but in the end did nothing. Church bodies in Germany and the Netherlands who could use the “Church tax” rather than relying on voluntary contributions were more positive than the British churches in their support of PCR and the Special Fund.

The action of the Overseas Division in making the grants was criticised most severely by many

in Britain, including some prominent Methodists including Lord Soper, Dr Kenneth Greet, Rev Edward Rogers. But with the approval of Conference the Overseas Division continued to make grants to the Special Fund from 1971 to 1984 and the Special Fund made grants to ZANU and ZAPU for humanitarian purposes.

When I became African Secretary in 1977 and General Secretary in 1978, the Overseas Division had already been making grants to the Special Fund for six years, but the correspondence condemning it was still coming in. Apart from those who said they opposed the grants because they would be used to buy guns for those who “are killing our own kith and kin”, the basic arguments against making the grants were:

1. By making the grants the Overseas Division was supporting the use of violence, and violence had never brought justice and peace.
2. Though the grants were given for humanitarian purposes, they enabled the guerrilla movements to divert funds from humanitarian purposes to buying more armaments.
3. Though it was stated that the grants should only be used for humanitarian purposes, there was no check that the grants were in fact being used for this.

The arguments used by those who approved the grants were:

1. Although the Church believed that violence should only be used as a last resort, when faced with the evil of Nazism, the Church had recognised that sometimes it was necessary to use violence. Violence was already present in the Rhodesia in the racist oppression of the African people by white governments.
2. By making the grants for specifically humanitarian purposes and not for armaments, the Church was demonstrating that it was not supporting violence as such, it was giving moral support to the African people who were combating racism by the only means available to them.
3. By making the grants and not demanding proof of the way they were used, the Church was demonstrating its confidence that the African movements could be trusted to do what they had agreed to do, and this at a time when those whose thinking was influenced by racism maintained that African people could never be trusted.

Some of the correspondents were very hostile. On the whole we found that generally (though not always) the hostility was reduced when we were able to go and talk to people face-to-face about the issues involved.

In May 1979 I visited a ZAPU camp near Lusaka and saw the amount of educational and medical work being done there. I could see that it was costing much more than the grants from the Special Fund would pay for. I reported my visit in an article in the Methodist Recorder the following month.

The Debate in Rhodesia about PCR

In some of this I have relied on the account by Canaan Banana in *The Church and the Struggle* (1996) to refresh my memory.

Some of the missionaries working in Rhodesia were strongly opposed to the grants.

On 5 November 1970 the Rhodesia Herald published a letter from Rev Fred Rea (one of our missionaries):

I am distressed by the actions of both the BCC and the WCC. I recognise their desire to express deeper sympathy for the cause of African freedom and advancement. However, I do not believe that in Rhodesia the interests of freedom will be served by a policy of violence, nor am I able to reconcile its advocacy with the way of Jesus Christ. What distresses me about the WCC and BCC attitudes are their theological weakness. In effect it is saying 'if we do not make a gesture of support for the advocates of violent reform, we shall be accused of giving tacit support to existing governments'.

... Having watched for fifty years the continuing heritage of violence bred violence in my own country, Northern Ireland, I feel justified in saying to my brethren, both black and white, 'this must not be our way in Rhodesia. Here we shall overcome evil with good.'

The same edition of the Rhodesia Herald quoted Andrew Ndhlela saying:

If the World Council of Churches has spare funds to help overseas people, the money should be used for Church projects. The World Council of Churches' action did not seem to accord with the Christian teaching of peace and harmony among nations. Racism is an evil which has to be overcome but the advocacy of physical force will only create further mistrust between the races and misery among the people.

But on 11 November 1970, the Christian Council of Rhodesia under the chairmanship of Andrew Ndhlela passed the following resolution by 29 votes to 4:

The CCR expressed its appreciation of the help given to our Churches in Rhodesia by the World Council of Churches. We acknowledge receipt in recent years of grants exceeding one million dollars for the erection of schools and colleges, for the relief of the needy, for agencies for extension of Christian work in general. In particular we record our appreciation for the recent gesture of concern and compassion for the oppressed people of Rhodesia. We interpret the WCC action as support for the Churches' world-wide Christian Programme against Racism. We recognise the help we have received has come from the free will gifts of our brethren in Churches throughout the world and for this Christian concern we record our thanks.

The same month three ministers in the Salisbury Trinity Circuit (of mainly European churches), Robert Forrest, Keith Horton and Brandon Graaff circulated a statement making clear their unequivocal opposition to the use of violence for the attainment of political ends in Rhodesia and expressing their great concern for the rightful aspirations of the African peoples. In response to this two African ministers, Stephen Manguni and Philemon Mzungwana, together with an African layman, Dr Herbert Ushewokunze wrote to the Herald on November 18:

The silence of many Church leaders on the injustice in Rhodesia makes nonsense of their current outbursts against the Christian Council of Rhodesia and the World Council of Churches ... When did those good gentlemen use their pulpits to condemn oppression, injustice and even the violence inherent in their own society? Their silence on these

issues makes nonsense of their current outbursts and one can only assume that maintaining the status quo is more important than fighting for peace and justice.

This showed deep divisions in the Church.

Andrew Ndhlela convened an extraordinary Synod at Waddilove Training Institution (still in November 1970) to try to bring the two points of view together but it failed to do so and the matter was referred to the regular Synod the following January. That Synod passed the resolution:

The Synod of the Methodist Church in Rhodesia believes that Christians ought not to support violence in any form. Violence will only create further mistrust between races and amongst the people. In considering the WCC Program to Combat Racism we note that the Council Executive has made it clear that it is not supporting the military purposes of the organisations to which it made grants but rather their political aims, namely justice, equality, human dignity and freedom... The Church should speak out against all those things which are barriers between races and between God and man, because it preaches peace and harmony amongst all peoples.

One African minister, Canaan Banana, felt that the Synod had failed to give sufficient support to the making of the grants from the Special Fund and he resigned from the ministry, though after conversations he had had with the Chairman and the Overseas Division he withdrew his resignation.

The Overseas Division was eventually stopped from making grants to the Special Fund by the Charity Commissioners in 1984 on the grounds that “an organisation whose purposes are directed at the elimination of racial discrimination and at promoting equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups cannot be a proper recipient of charitable funds”. The Charity Commissioners did not see that opposition to racism was central in the propagation of the gospel and witnessing to Christ.

When the report of the action of the Charity Commissioners was brought to the 1984 Conference, the Revs John Pritchard and Bernard Arnold persuaded the Conference to add an amendment to the report:

The Conference expresses its indignation that the Methodist Church is subject to rules imposed by an institution of the state, rather than the gospel, in the definition of what constitutes ‘Methodist Church Purposes’. It further records extreme dismay at the fact that the British churches contribute far less to PCR than the Programme grants to projects combating racism in Britain. It therefore instructs the Overseas and Social Responsibility Divisions to pursue relentlessly their examination of how this deplorable situation may be rectified, and report to the Conference of 1985.

The result was that a special fund was set up, at the Division of Social Responsibility, through which individuals could make their contributions to the Special Fund of the Programme to

Combat Racism. A few did so but the amount contributed was much less than the annual grants from the Overseas Division, and the fact that contributions came from individuals rather than from central funds meant that this was no longer an act of witness on behalf of the whole Church.

Chaplains

When the Special Fund of the Programme to Combat Racism was being discussed in Rhodesia, an equally controversial issue (but from the other side) was the question whether it was right for white Methodist ministers to become chaplains to the Rhodesian armed forces. The Synod debated this for several years and in the end decided that, although it would not give its backing to such appointments, it would not oppose the granting of permission by the Chairman to any minister who in conscience felt he should offer to be a chaplain.

Fred Rea wrote to the Overseas Executive in March 1979 defending this. His letter was published in the Methodist Recorder, arguing that though in allowing such appointments the Church would be accused of identifying itself with the establishment, it was a risk that the Church must be prepared to take. He pointed out that it was a risk that the MMS itself, when placed in comparable circumstances, was prepared to take when it gave monetary aid to the non-combatant needs of the military nationalists and was accused of identifying itself with violence.

As General Secretary at the time, and because I knew Fred personally and had worked with him in Rhodesia, I replied to him in a personal letter which I did not intend should be published, though in fact it has been published by Canaan Banana in two of his books. (He saw the letter in Fred Rea's papers in the Methodist Connexional Archives in Harare). I said that almost every black Rhodesian Christian leader, including Church leaders, who came and talked with us in London (and the "us" included Sidney Groves the Africa Secretary) told us how glad the African Christians were that we were giving to the Programme to Combat Racism. Later, Rhodesian missionaries with whom I discussed this, remembering the way Andrew Ndhlela had chaired the debates in the Rhodesia Synod, said they could not believe Andrew had said he approved the making of the grants.

On the whole, those who actually did become chaplains were ministers who had lived and worked in Rhodesia before candidating for the ministry. Some of them wore their uniforms when taking services in Methodist churches, and some African members said, "These men are blessing the soldiers who are killing our children". On the other hand one African minister told me that when one of them who was asked to serve as a chaplain asked his African members "What shall I do?", they said, "The only thing you can do is go as a chaplain". At the end of the war, when the country had an African government, some white ministers who had supported Ian Smith felt there was nothing for them any longer in Zimbabwe and they moved to South Africa. I was told that one white Rhodesian Methodist minister joined the all-white Pentecostal Church in Zimbabwe.

Constitutional Developments, 1969-1980

In 1969 Ian Smith devised a new Constitution under which there would be 50 seats for Europeans and 16 seats for Africans. A referendum was held amongst whites (less than 5% of the adult population) and 80% gave their approval, though both the Christian Council and the Catholic Bishops had urged the voters to reject it.

In 1970 Ian Smith declared Rhodesia to be a Republic. When asked on British TV how long it would be before the country had universal franchise, he said. "I hope never. I hope we will never degenerate to that sort of thing."

1971 Proposals for a Settlement

Further proposals were made in November 1971 by Ian Smith and Sir Alex Douglas Home, the British Foreign Secretary, this time with African representation theoretically eventually able to reach 60 in a Parliament of 110.

United African National Council

ZAPU and ZANU had been banned and their leaders were in detention. Former members of the two movements decided to form a new unity movement to oppose the proposals. They named it the United African National Council. Because none of the established leaders were free they appointed Bishop Abel Muzorewa, the bishop of the American Methodist Church as its leader. and the Rev Canaan Banana of the British Methodist Church deputy leader This new body and many church leaders, including the Christian Council of Rhodesia, rejected the Proposals.

The Pearce Commission

If the British government was to grant independence to Rhodesia on the basis of the New Proposals the Proposals needed the support of the majority of the population, including the majority of the Africans. So the British government appointed the Pearce Commission to test whether this was so. After visiting every part of the country the Commission said that the people of Rhodesia as a whole did not regard the Proposals as an acceptable basis for independence.

Ian Smith saw that as long as Nkomo and Mugabe were in detention he would never be able to have proposals acceptable to the majority of the population and so in November 1974 he released them. They left the country and joined their guerrilla armies.

In Oct 1976, under pressure from Presidents Kaunda, Nyerere and Machel, ZANU and ZAPU came together in an uneasy alliance, the Patriotic Front, but the armed struggle continued.

Geneva

The same month a Constitutional Conference on Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) Independence was held in Geneva to discuss a way forward. Stanlake Samkange, a Methodist layman, was one of Bishop

Muzorewa's advisors. The Rev Andrew Ndhlela went to the conference to try to help the delegates to find a compromise, but the conference adjourned without reaching an agreement.

The Methodist Church in Rhodesia Becomes Autonomous

In 1977 the British Conference took the steps needed for the Methodist Church Rhodesia to become autonomous, making sure that it was autonomous before the country became self-governing.

Internal Settlement

In 1977 Rhodesians were feeling the effects of sanctions and pressure from South Africa. Ian Smith announced he was willing to accept the principle of majority rule based on one man one vote as a starting point for negotiation, in exchange for an end to sanctions. The UANC led by Bishop Abel Muzorewa was the only legal black party in the country and it began negotiating with Ian Smith. In March 1978 Abel Muzorewa, the Ndabaningi Sithole and Ian Smith signed an Agreement for Majority Rule, based on what was called the "Internal Settlement", and a Ministerial Council was appointed composed of equal numbers of black and white ministers. The leaders of ZANU and ZAPU, however, had not been involved in the negotiations and the war continued.

In April 1978 elections were held on the basis of the Internal Settlement. The Security Forces did a great deal to influence the result, and Ian Smith got the result he wanted. Abel Muzorewa became Prime Minister, and the country was renamed "Zimbabwe". Nkomo and Mugabe denounced the new administration and the British and American governments and the United Nations refused to recognise it.

Margaret Thatcher

On 3 May 1978 Margaret Thatcher's Conservative party won a massive victory in the British elections, and she became Prime Minister. At the Commonwealth Conference in London in August of the same year she announced that the British government was prepared to de-colonise Zimbabwe and bring it to independence, just like Kenya and Tanzania. She said she regarded the Internal Settlement as defective, because its constitution gave the whites power disproportionate to their numbers; her ideal would be a balanced constitution where the whites would have an entrenched position in parliament but it would be genuine majority rule. Nyerere and Kaunda were delighted. A contact group representing Tanzania, Zambia, Nigeria, Jamaica and Australia were appointed to work with Mrs Thatcher and Lord Carrington (Foreign Secretary) on a way forward and they decided on a conference at Lancaster House in London in August 1978. The Front Line States put pressure on Mugabe and Nkomo to attend.

Lancaster House Conference

In September 1977 I had been appointed Africa Secretary for the Overseas Division and my family and I had moved to London. The following year I became General Secretary and the Rev Sidney Groves became Africa Secretary. The Lancaster House Conference opened on 10 September 1979. Sidney Groves and I arranged a gathering for prayer in St Martin's in the Fields just prior to the Conference and informed the delegates that it was being held. Not surprisingly none came along – for one thing each group of delegates was deeply suspicious of the rest, and did not even want the others to know where they were staying.

In wondering if there was anything the Methodist Church in Britain could do to give support to the conference I went to a Methodist who was a senior member of ACAS, often involved in negotiating in industrial disputes. He suggested the best thing we could do was to assure the delegates of the support of the Church in Britain, and the concern in Britain that the delegates would be able to find a way forward that would bring justice and peace to Zimbabwe.

There were three main groups: the ZANU group led by Mugabe, the ZAPU group led by Nkomo, and the Ian Smith-Muzorewa-Ndabaningi Sithole group. Because they were each suspicious of the others, it took a few days to find out where the various delegates were staying, but eventually we did and Sidney and I had a number of meetings with each group. Mugabe did not stay with the members of his delegation and we never met him. We spent a lot of time talking with his two main negotiators, Dr Herbert Ushewokunze a Methodist member and Eddison Zvobgo who had been trained at Tegwani. In another hotel we met Joshua Nkomo and several of his people, including Josiah Chinamano who had worked with me at Waddilove, and Joseph Msika who had interpreted for me when I had held services for the detainees in Marandellas.

In a third hotel we met Bishop Muzorewa, whom I knew from Zimbabwe. When we asked him (as we had done with all the others) if there was any way in which we could help the conference, he said there was one thing we could do. He was finding it difficult to get to sleep at night. He had a cassette player, and if only we could get him a cassette of Jim Reeves singing "How great Thou art" he was sure it would help him to sleep a lot better. Sidney had to dash off to a meeting but I went to Oxford Street, and though I couldn't get a cassette with Jim Reeves singing that hymn, I got one with a choir singing it. When I took it to him he was most grateful. If the Church was only help some of the delegates get to sleep more easily, it was possibly a very small contribution to the success of the conference.

Eventually the Conference led to an agreement which included universal franchise for Zimbabwe. Elections were held Mugabe won 57/80 seats and became Prime Minister. Nkomo won 20/80 seats, and was offered the position of President but with no executive power and he eventually settled for the post of Minister of Home Affairs. Mugabe appointed the Rev Canaan Banana, as President. Muzorewa's party won 3 seats.

Independence

In April 1980 Zimbabwe became independent. The Zimbabwe Methodist Church welcomed the new majority government, and urged ZANU and ZAPU to work together.

George Lovell Consultation

I emphasised at the beginning that this interpretation of the relation between British Methodism and African Nationalism in this period was based on my own experiences, and that other people with different experiences might well interpret the events differently.

In August 1980 the Overseas Division arranged for the Rev Dr George Lovell to lead a consultation in Zimbabwe to work out what the Church saw as the strengths and weaknesses it had shown both before and during the war years, and what it saw as the key tasks for the church in the post-war period. The Consultation was made up of 14 leading members of the Church (ministers and lay people, African and European, men and women). The report of the Consultation says that before the war the Church was able to grow and extend its work ... by being faithful to the traditions, standards, patterns of working that were characteristic of Methodism, and these had a great influence for good on the life of the Church. But this strong Methodist influence led to Europeans, including missionaries, being less open to learn from African culture and tradition. Africans were prevented from being true to their real selves, eg they often said what they thought the Europeans wanted them to say. European ministers were the “bosses” even when they were junior to African ministers. Separate arrangements for worship for Africans and Europeans did a disservice to both groups and to the Church.

The report goes on to say that during the war some Africans and Europeans cared for each other and shared together in unprecedented ways. Different members and sections of the church supported and ministered to people connected with all sides of the conflict. They provided moral, spiritual and practical help. Therefore the church as a whole ministered to the people as a whole, though in parts in factions. This meant that the church was not identified exclusively with one side or faction.

But a weakness of this ... was that the Church was “on both sides” and this led to confusion amongst the Christians. In doing what they felt they must do, some people were misunderstood and maligned, eg army chaplains who were only caring for their members were identified with the Rhodesian Front with whom they were not in sympathy. Some of the care offered by the World Council of Churches for humanitarian purposes was not widely known about because of the reaction to the help given to the freedom fighters.

The Consultation did not consider the relations between the MMS Officers and the Methodist Conference in Britain and the church in Rhodesia.

Conclusions

Theologically, right through this period, the Methodist Church both in Britain and in Rhodesia made sound statements about all men and women being children of God, all equal in the sights of God. This is recognised by all the main African Nationalist leaders.

But the confidence of the Europeans – particularly that of the missionaries – that they knew what was best for the Church and for the African people, prevented the Church from acting as if all men were women were equal in the sight of God.

Racial discrimination in the life of the Church was not removed soon enough. The value of African culture and traditions was not recognised at a sufficiently early stage in the life of the Church. Some African ministers and lay people held back from engaging in radical political activity because they felt it would offend their missionary friends and colleagues. The concerns of African men and women who became leaders in the African nationalist movements were not taken seriously enough by the Church as a whole.

Church leaders failed to see sufficiently early that African people would only be treated fairly when there was a government representative of the population as a whole. When the African political parties were banned by the Rhodesian government, the Church did not protest sufficiently.

The fact that the Church was a multi-racial church also had its effect. Decisions in Synod were made on a democratic basis and the points of view set out by European as well as African church members had to be taken into account. Church leaders had to take seriously how both European and African church members would react to any action they took. Sometimes this led to them trying to influence the government by private lobbying rather than through public statements condemning government action, and then the African people felt the Church was doing nothing.

Some missionaries realised that if they became too critical of the government they would be deported and their influence would cease.

With hindsight, it is easier to see all this now. I recognise that when I was involved in the situation I myself took decisions and made many compromises which I now very much regret.