THE LAST CHURCH OF GOD AND HIS CHRIST

BY

PETER G. FORSTER AND GODFREY A. BANDA

(University of Hull) (PADETA, Lilongwe)

The phenomenon of religious independency in Malawi, and in Africa generally, has been well documented. Particular attention is often devoted to those movements which have promulgated some kind of radical message, whether with respect to the political order or to some basic teachings and practices of mission Christianity. But other movements which pose less of a radical challenge are often larger and better able to sustain or expand their numbers. By virtue of their sheer size, their social impact can be considerable. The Last Church of God and his Christ serves as an example of an independent church of this type. It has grown rapidly since its foundation in 1925, and this process is continuing. Of particular interest, and highly relevant to the success of this church in rural Malawi, is the way in which it tries to accommodate Christianity to indigenous culture. Other independent churches, including some in Malawi, have been engaged in a similar exercise, but have had a much more radical message with respect to returning to the ways of the ancestors. Another type categorizes those which have seceded from the missions but have not made major doctrinal changes. Still others have been prophetic movements. The Last Church does not fit easily into the usual categories. Kalinga has drawn attention to this problem, with respect to classifications put forward by Turner and others. One matter is, however, clear. The Last Church does not fall into the category of a sect, which is typically seen as an organization where membership is voluntary and conditional upon some mark of merit. The Last Church exists side by side with mission churches and has no objection to them. It has no exclusivist claims, and aims at harmony with, rather than separation from, the wider community. There is no lengthy preparation for baptism, and all that is required for admission is a sense of personal conviction. But it is more demanding in
terms of conformity to traditional custom than some other churches might be.

**Doctrine**

Doctrine is not clearly defined, and members are simply expected to recognise Jesus as Lord and Saviour. His birth, resurrection and ascension are the basis of salvation. It is anticipated that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. The Lord's Supper is regarded as commemoration of the Passover, and it is generally celebrated less than once a month. Theology has been influenced by mission churches working in Malawi, especially the Presbyterians, from whom the bulk of the initial followers were drawn.

The name of the church derives from I Corinthians 4:9: 'For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all'. The implication is that the Last Church is called to bring the Word of God to those who have not yet heard or received the message about the Kingdom of God. The Last Church also provides an opportunity for those to become Christian who have been rejected by the mission churches, especially over the issue of polygamy.

The Last Church relies on Biblical authority in support of its beliefs and activities; while respecting and supporting the work of the missionary churches, it takes the view that these have misinterpreted the Bible. Certain prohibitions imposed by the mission churches are seen as based upon Eurocentrism rather than Biblical authority. Jordan Msumba, the founder of the Last Church, claimed that a careful reading of the Bible provided no justification for a prohibition on polygamy. He further noted that, in the Old Testament, nearly all those who were blessed and spoke to God directly (such as Abraham, Jacob and David) had more than one wife. In further justification of their stand, Last Church members appeal to Jesus' answer to the Pharisees, implying that there was no relationship between social events on this earth and the heavenly kingdom (Matthew 22:30: 'For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven').

The levirate (practised in the Northern Region of Malawi, where the core of the membership of the Last Church is to be found) is also seen as justified on the basis of scriptural authority. Deuteronomy 25:5 lends support for the practice for widows who have no son: 'her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her'. The priesthood of laity is practised and is seen as justified by I Peter 2: 9-10; and John 10:12 is seen as supportive of the policy that priests should not be paid.