VIII. DAB Meeting

Documentation, Archives, Bibliography Meeting
14–16 January 1985, Harare

I. Church Archives in Zimbabwe

Mr Paul Jenkins, archivist of the Basel Mission, who organized and chaired the DAB-meeting, opened the archive section of the meeting with an introduction on "Archives and the Re-orientation of African Church History".

African Church History must primarily be concerned with that indigenisation of the Church in Africa which has been carried by the local population in each traditional cultural or political grouping where there is a significant Christian presence. This indigenisations involves the exploration of the Christian message in traditional categories, in the search for help and guidance in the normal difficulties and predicaments of everyday life.

"The indigenisation which has been achieved locally is endangered if a new generation of priests or pastors tries to implement a new theoretical indigenisation from above in ignorance of what already exists — or perhaps out of prejudice, that simple village people cannot have achieved any indigenisation of value". (T.O.Ranger). A reorientation of African Church History to the Christianity of the villages is not simply a search for a more comprehensive history, but an effort to obtain from the "centre" recognition of the full dimensions of the Christianity of the village periphery.

Technically, a reorientated African Church History would have to be based on greatly increased care for all local church records, and a programme for careful conversation (not one-off interviews) to document all aspects of church life at the local level, "going to the people" in the spirit of learning what the village people already know. Concern for archives is good, concern for archives with the right sort of contents is better.

Measured by this standard the Zimbabwe churches discussed show marked differences in the level and orientation of their archival provision.

Dr C.J.M. Zvobgo reported on the Archives of the Methodist Church of Zimbabwe (the Methodists of British origin). Clearly the materials could lead some way towards a writing of church history from below — especially promising seem to be the record of the Ruwadzano, documenting an African women's movement which spread into Zimbabwe from the Transvaal in the 1920s. Clearly, too, the archives document to some extent the interaction of Christianity and culture. But whether the
density of written records makes a concern with oral traditional unnecessary is
doubtful, to put the matter mildly. Nor are archives a priority matter for the
Churches leadership.

Dr Ngwabi Bhebe reported on the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC, formerly
with Swedish Mission connections), which undoubtedly has, potentially, a
manuscript archive of great density which would be "critical to a reorientation of
African Church History". "The ELC began to take a definite organisational shape
which was also characterised by an unusual degree of African participation in the
decision-making process at most of its hierarchical levels in the 1930s". Especially
the Chipoka (congregational) and parish records could provide a fascinating insight
into grass-roots Christian history. "... all the various organs of the Church provid-
ed a mammoth amount of written work, a great deal of which still exists. I took
delight in sampling the minutes of one boka (parish) ... the minutes were written by
an African secretary in Chikaranga. They are a most detailed record of the proceed-
ings. The issues that were debated are most revealing about the expansion of the
Church, the adjustment of Christianity to local culture, the problems that beset the
Christians in their traditional society, how finances were raised, and many other
aspects of Church life. ..."

The main problems with the ELC archives are language (significant amounts of the
materials are in Swedish) and preservation and order. Away from the modern
Church Headquarters in Bulawayo the old records are simply put in storerooms, and
"nobody, even untrained, is assigned the task of organising and looking after such
storerooms".

Mr Shepherd Machuma talked to us about the United Methodist archives in Old
Umtali. In addition to the usual manuscript collection (files etc) the archives contain
a major compilation of oral tradition made by Mr Machuma himself during a seven-
year-period from ca. 1970. "In writing oral history there are rivers to be crossed and
mountains to be climbed", and Mr Machuma told us about some of these — con-
tradictory information from several sources, the unwillingness of some classes of
people to talk about some classes of information (women differing to their hus-
bands' views during interviews, e.g.). But he also said how right it was, that in
asking "elderly people to give oral history ... they are given their rightful place of
importance" in the Church as a whole. The recorded oral tradition is an anti-archive
of great value. Certainly, it has established the importance in the history of this
Church of the coming of the Holy Ghost with power during a camp meeting held
near Old Umtali in 1918. Oral sources make clear just how much of a role this event
played in the growing indigenous Methodist consciousness — in mission sources the
event is not given much prominence. Mr Machuma was asked what training he had
had for his work with oral tradition. His reply: he learned from on-the-job contact
with missionaries sponsoring what he did, but also chiefs and elderly pastors advised
him how to approach people. It was as if he were saying to us "If you want to learn
to work with oral tradition go to the oral culture and learn there the art of perceptive
conversation".

Professor Adrian Hastings reported to us on the situation of Catholic Archives in