III. Exposure Experiences in Zimbabwe and South Africa

Preceding the IAMS Conference a number of IAMS members participated in small group-exposure programmes in Zimbabwe (organized by the Local Arrangements Commission — Dr. T. Mafico) and South Africa (organized by the Belijdende Kring — Drs. Shun Govender). Herewith we publish substantial parts of the reports as presented to the Conference.

1. Zion Christian Church, Masvingo

We (A. Wind and J. Heijke) were guests of Bishop Nehemiah Mutendi of the Zion Christian Church. His place is called Mbungo Estate, a holy place where as a welcome the visitor is purified with sprinkled water. The estate has a surface of 776 hectare arable lands and wood, all located around a hill on top of which was the Bishop’s residence. On the foot of the hill we saw quite a number of thatchroofed houses where people who came to be healed are living for some months. In exchange of this service of the Church they do most of the farming labour and the building activities. The profits go to the community. A nice primary school has been built and a secondary school is under construction.

We were cordially received in the Bishop’s home, and although we had read and even lectured on the African extended family we felt it for the first time in our lives. Especially at the moment of the evening prayer when from all corners of the big house the younger and the older members of the large Mutendi family gathered around the head of the family. It was a house full of children, youngsters and adults, of whom several declared spontaneously that they loved each other.

The Zion Christian Church was founded by the late Samuel Mutendi, the father of the actual bishop. The Mutendi family descends from the old Rozvi dynasty who built the famous Zimbabwean Ruins. The joyful and obedient reverence to the actual leader of the church reminded us of the attitude with which in former days the people might have approached its sovereign. Some features of the church are: the stress laid upon the Spirit (speaking in tongues), healing by prayerful counselling, the admittance of polygamy. (For further information see the books by M.L. Daneel.)

We were particularly lucky to witness the reunification ceremony of a separated group of Zionists who, after the death of the founder in 1977, had not joined the party of the actual bishop. Bad dreams, it was said, had brought back the dissident leader of the separated group. On Saturday and Sunday 5 – 6 January, the long ceremony of reunion took place at Mapranga, a village 200 km South of Masvingo. When we arrived the women spread clothes on the road shouting and singing — a kind of solemn entrance into Jerusalem —, the brassband blew, goats were slaughtered, and there was an atmosphere of great joy. In the evening the leaders of the former dissident group pronounced one by one, their loyalty to the legitimate
successor of the founder. Then an open air service took place which lasted from about ten in the evening till three o'clock in the morning. Between 1,500 and 2,000 people participated in it.

The next day, during the morning service under the trees, the music instruments of the dissi- dent group were handed over to the bishop. In the meantime in the open fields, though still visible for us, sinners confessed their impurity to prophets. This morning service lasted from about 8.30 till noon. In the afternoon 76 new church members were baptised in the Jordan, a pool some kilometres distant from the village. A third service took place at sunset, after branches of trees had been cut in the fields with which a large circle was enclosed. To enter the circle one had first to pass through a range of prophets who not seldom sent people back to the ministers for confession. Holy communion was distributed, and immediately after that we left the village at midnight, back to Masvingo.

We do not understand a single word of Shona, and even if we had understood, it would have remained difficult for us, Europeans, to feel what the Zion Christians themselves are experiencing. From what was visible, and from the information we got from English speaking participants, we collected the following impressions:
1. we had the impression on so much of a church as we are accustomed to but of a community for which religious and profane entertainment and devotion, socio-economic improvement and healing are integrated.
2. the Old Testament plays an important role
3. if there will ever be a really pluricultural christianity, our western churches have to be prepared for bigger surprises than what they are up to now. Real pluricultural christianity will perhaps produce churches which differ in many ways from the congregations known to us.

Finally: this Zion Christian Church is a member of Fambidzano, an association which provides Independent Churches with theological training. We visited the new farm of Fambidzano not far from Masvingo. It is hard to foresee what kind of theology these farmers-theologians are going to produce. Probably an African theology that starts "from the other side".

Jan Heijke

2. St. Francis Community in Makoni

When entering through the gate of the compound we face the church, a building with a small belltower. It was erected in 1935 and marks the beginning of the community, founded by Baba Francis Nyabadza. Since the mid-1920s Francis had been working as a catechist in the Anglican Church. In the course of time he attracted many people through his strong preaching, especially against beer drinking and brewing. This aroused the jealousy of the priests and although the bishop tried to reconcile the parties, it was to no avail and Francis withdrew, going back to his homestead in Makoni. The original name of the church was St. Francis of Assisi — The African Church. According to its 1940 manifesto it was "the church of all black people born in this country", in the same way as "the Church of England was started by a man in England".

Every day starts with a communion service at 5.15, immediately followed by Matins. The whole service is celebrated in high-Anglican style, with kneeling all the time, except for the Gospel and the Creed. This is quite different from any other independent church known to us.