

Missionary history of the Dutch Reformed Church

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Being missionary, being human

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Review Title:

Missionary history of the Dutch Reformed Church

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Being missionary, being human is a must, especially for those with an interest in missiology. It not only provides a fresh perspective on the missionary history of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa, it also provides a clear description of the interactive relationship between context and mission. The author is a respected missiologist who is also well acquainted with the history of mission in the Southern African context. His method of research can be termed an interdisciplinary approach of interaction between culture, religion, and political economy.

He describes the social history in terms of waves of change. His intention is to describe the periods he distinguishes as waves, because this specific term makes good sense when describing the periods of extraordinary mission endeavor.

The first wave describes the period, 1779–1834. In what he calls 'a reflection on the early Dutch Reformed Mission', he describes the period that falls in the framework of the freeing of the slaves, as well as the development of a colonial society in the Cape Colony. This is also the period of mission-awakening in the protestant churches of Europe. It was during this time that Van Lier and Vos had established a ministry with far-reaching consequences in the Cape Colony. Both these ministers cultivated a much greater sense of mission involvement amongst the free-burghers in the Colony. During this period the focus of mission work was mostly directed towards the slaves – a group that was not only subjected to the worst possible human brutalities and dehumanisation, but was also regarded as non-Christian. The first wave also saw the institutionalisation of racism in the South African society.

The second wave (1867–1939) describes the DRC's mission work as the crossing of borders. During this period the DRC included in its mission focus areas outside the borders of the then Cape Colony. The most important theme that characterises this period is the awakening of Afrikaner identity within the context of urbanisation and industrialisation. The second wave started with the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley. This discovery eventually led to a new era, that of mining and industry in South Africa. This wave ended with World War II and the disunity amongst the Afrikaners about participation in the war. In the chapter dealing with the second wave, the author also describes the Scottish influence on the DRC, South Africa's vast open areas that presented unique mission opportunities to the DRC, as well as the opinion amongst Afrikaners that God entrusted them with a special calling in Africa, which served as their motivation for mission work, as well as a justification for the colonisation of the country.

The third wave (1954–1976) is described as a *crossing of inner boundaries*. This era must be understood against the political background of the time. The political landscape in South Africa changed decisively with South Africa's entry into the Second World War, the fall of the government, and renewed tensions between the Afrikaans and the English segments of the White electorate. This would eventually culminate in the National Party's election victory in 1948. Henceforth, any mention of South Africa, referring to the country itself, its people, social, economic or religious affairs, would be qualified with the adjective 'apartheid'. During this era, the Tomlinson (on socio-economic development of Black people) and the Eiselen (on education of Black people) Reports brought new insight about Black people, especially amongst members of the DRC and resulted in a wave of mission work.

The fourth wave began around 1990 with F.W. de Klerk's unbanning of all Black liberation movements. During this time the Afrikaner's self-understanding began to change. Doubts about the Afrikaner's place in Africa set in with greater force. During this time DRC members experienced an identity crisis, brought about by rapid political change. There was also a feeling that the DRC did not give her members the pastoral care they needed in these conditions. The financial burden of undertaking mission work in a poverty stricken Africa resulted in DRC members rather focusing on their financial resources as on their own people. Whether this argument is correct, is debatable. It is a known fact that many DRC congregations are involved in mission projects inside, as well as outside the country's borders.



The last chapter contains some conclusions. These vary from recognition of the role women played in mission work, to critique towards the DRC for its failure to acknowledge her role in the institutionalisation and the preservation of apartheid. The conclusions offer a bird's eye view of the interplay between calling and context, between the human and missionary way of being church. In the epilogue, the author concludes his study with the following:

I believe the next step in the spiritual-and-missionary journey on which God wishes to lead the DRC is most probably for them to 'become at ease with daily life and with all that belongs to the human condition' in Africa in the 21st Century – and remain 'to be present to those in need'. That may be the climax of being missionary while being human in Africa.

(Saayman 2007, epilogue)

This is a book that offers the reader much food for thought about the great commission! It comes highly recommended!

