

# A Reflection from Africa: The Challenge of Writing Church History

Barbara Nkala, *Bulawayo, Zimbabwe*

## Accuracy, Courage and Collaboration

Africa has a strong oral tradition. Folklore and accounts of historical exploits and major national events have all been kept in human archives. These archives were the elders of that society. These human libraries then passed the knowledge and information by word of mouth from generation to generation. But, with the knowledge and information explosion that we witness nowadays, how much information can anyone's head store?

In Africa we are fast learning the importance of keeping accurate records. Knowledge and information in print is much safer than a reliance on oral traditions. Electronic sources are also promising. If a tape cassette or audio book is destroyed, another copy can be purchased. Computerized information can be retrieved and backed up as well. Copies of books and cassettes keep exactly the same information. But, word of mouth information has a tendency of taking twists and turns, tripping over potholes, being shaken along the bumpy and corrugated dirt roads, so that, by time it gets to the intended destination, it has lost some of its focus, color and splendor. In Africa, we do see a need to move from oral messages that lose their original meaning and impact by the time they reach the fifth and tenth recipient. Worst of all, the human storehouses or libraries die and are buried with their wealth, unless it is retrieved in good time.

In Africa, we keep moaning the loss of irretrievable information. We have heard Gerhard Ratzlaff, Mennonite historian of Paraguay, say that "a church without a history is a church without a future." A people without a history is a lost people, gone and forgotten. When people know where they are coming from, they get a proper sense of where they are going. The first challenge therefore is making inhabitants realize the importance of their history so that they become keen to find ways of recording and storing it. Many of us find it easy to listen to oral records, but the discipline of sitting down and putting it in writing is neither easy nor enjoyable. And yet, we do have stories that beg to be

told. Getting started is the most difficult task. They say a journey of 1000 miles begins with one step. We are glad a step forward has been taken.

Historians naturally are the best persons to call upon in writing church history. They are scholars who have the expertise of handling such tasks. Our African congregations do have historians, but there is possibly no structure or incentive to get these people to write. The task is huge and time consuming too. The church historian needs to be disciplined in maintaining close contacts with church leaders, in seeking relevant information, and in writing proposals to seek funds for the project. Research takes a lot of time and requires a huge amount of resources. The task of writing tends to be lonesome and overwhelming. For part time writers, it is important to collaborate with other writers on a project. The first volume of the Global Mennonite History Project (GMHP) published in 2003 and subtitled *Africa*, would not have been possible had it not been for collaborative efforts of writers co-authoring it. It is a less formidable task when one can consult with and be encouraged by others. More importantly, the project would not have taken off without a provision of funds, as well as a diligent coordinator and a hard working editor and publisher. This is great collaboration.

Writing church history demands great commitment, and a passion for the venture. In any given task, people tend to ask, "What's in it for me?" Life is hard and living in dicey economies such as the current one in Zimbabwe makes people wary of how they spend their time. They seek to do tasks that are productive financially so that they may support their families well. What does not bring immediate financial remuneration is not considered a priority. It then takes a person who has a conviction, commitment and passion for the task to persevere to the end.

### Personal Challenges

I was not originally involved in the writing of the GMHP, Volume 1, for Africa. It was with some fear and trepidation that I agreed to do a chapter, because though I am a writer, I am not a historian. I feared failure to deliver on such an important project. I had enjoyed reading various records and histories of Mennonite and the Brethren in Christ Church (BICC). When I think of people like Jesse Engle and H. Frances Davison leaving the comfort of their homelands to go into the unknown (what was considered 'dark' Africa then), to spread the gospel of good news, I am awed again and again at God's love. These people pioneered the work of our Church in Zimbabwe and history should not die with them. Some people in the past have taken time to record the growth of

our church, and records should go on. The Lord is still asking today, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" (Isaiah 6:8 NIV) Church history is a noble venture. Someone must do it. The problem often when faced with such a task is, we each tell ourselves that 'someone else' will do it. Most of us are complacent. Meanwhile, time ticks on and the human archives who are custodians of church happenings, die with their knowledge. So, if I can do it, if the next person can do it, expertise or no expertise, we must do it, for "We can do everything through him who gives us strength." (Philippians 4:13 NIV)

In Africa, we are well-known for taking our time to do things. There is no sense of urgency. We used to read time by looking at the sun and at the length of our shadows. We are today trying to schedule activities and to take cognizance of time management, with difficulty. With a full time job at International Bible Society Zimbabwe, my family, studies, and other commitments, I had to work hard at juggling my time so that I could fit all the tasks, when I became involved in the Global History project. I truly learnt the discipline of scheduling my activities with care, and also managing my time. Another lesson learnt was to say, 'No' to requests. I am not very good at saying 'No', and so tend to get into a trap with eyes wide open.

I had been using the computer for eight years when I was involved in the writing of the GMHP volume on Africa, but somehow, because I had never had major mishaps, the importance of backing up all that I did never seemed crucial. There were a couple of times when vital information 'simply disappeared' from the screen and I felt like giving up. In the anxiety to get on with the work, there is a temptation for amateurs like some of us to take short cuts. But quick fixes never work in the writing of good history.

A church history project is not just another project. This is a record of "Kingdom work." This is a work meant to inspire others from works of faith recorded. This is work that requires more "knee mailing than emailing. One night, when my sister Doris and I were really trying to put the whole manuscript together to send off to Doctors Lapp and Snyder, we just could not get the machine/machines to work. Everything that could go wrong went wrong that day. My husband is quite good at computers, but even he could not fathom some of what was happening. We battled all afternoon and all night, and agreed that we were up against the rulers and principalities of this dark world. As we saw it, the devil was not happy with the venture we were in. We needed the Spirit of God to battle for us. We prayed and strove till daybreak. Shadreck and I were catching a flight back to Harare from Bulawayo (Zimbabwe) that very morning and I slept throughout the flight. Prayer is an important ingredient in diffusing the wiles of the evil one. Missionary Charles Spurgeon once said, "Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the arm

of the omnipotent.” Indeed, it is. Without prayer, we would not have managed to conquer the numerous hurdles that were up against us.

Only an enabling environment can produce expected results. When I was involved in the GMHP, I did lose a few friends who expected to be visited, and or who wanted to visit but found me too busy. Getting away from the madding crowd and peace and quiet, are needed for progress. A home like mine is not the best place to sit and write as there is always traffic in and out. But, there are financial constraints to getting away to a conducive venue. I also learnt during the GMHP that I cannot spend all the time I am expected to spend at the endless weddings, the endless funerals, endless meetings and other social activities, if I mean to deliver at an expected deadline. I became unavailable even to my family. Such a project demands firmness and discipline.

Then, there are times of mental block as one researches and writes. And there are times when the task seems formidable and overpowering. One needs to persevere. I understood more clearly the principle of finishing the race well. When one is way back in the trail and others have already hit the finish line, it is tempting to stop completely and fall by the way side. The New Testament writer James says that whenever we face trials, it is a testing of our faith which in turn develops perseverance, and perseverance must finish its work so that we may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:3-4 NIV) The Apostle Paul also says, perseverance develops character, and character gives hope that does not disappoint us. (Romans 5:3-5 NIV) Indeed, when the task was done, there were sighs of satisfaction and joy.

### **An Honest Legacy**

During the Zimbabwe International Book Fair of August 2004, a call rose for having one of the themes in future as the ‘The Voice of Science’. This is a call for high standards in researching and keeping accurate and lucid records of the occurrences in any nation. Empirical research is generally lacking. If Africa is to be a dignified part of the global village, then we need to move at the same pace as other nations. There is need to critique oneself as one writes, but also to develop a circle of honest critics to evaluate one’s work. Generally, people shun pointing out other people’s errors. They do not like hurting feelings, but that only postpones reality.

In 2001, I had the privilege of being among the 12 African women who were afforded a glorious opportunity of visiting the Netherlands. That was an eye opener. I remember with nostalgia the awesome records I saw at the Haarlem Mennonite Church, where there was a register of membership, births, baptisms, marriages, religious affiliation, and

records of deaths of members dating back to the seventeenth century. At the University of Amsterdam Library, I saw a book by Menno Simons published in 1539, and many other awe-inspiring records. What an absolute treasure of precious books! I could not believe I was looking at records dating back to the sixteenth century. In Africa we have very little dating back to just a 100 years ago.

The Literature Committee of 1997 at the BICC in Zimbabwe recommended the starting of a museum at Matopo, the first BICC mission station in Zimbabwe. Preservation of history is not only through records in books, but through items and articles of interest pertaining to particular periods of history. Though many people realize the importance of keeping safely various artifacts for posterity, not everyone has the passion to develop the museum. The task cannot be done by one person. It is a collaborative effort. It remains a challenging effort to make our people realize that good church history forms part of the heritage and culture of a country.

Records written by earlier historians, most of who were disdainful of Africa were either exploitative or patronizing. Today, when we are blessed to have people who want to encourage and support us in doing our own histories, it fills us with profound joy and a sense of pride. We need to be awakened to the demands of high standards of research. When there is success, the satisfaction and achievement derived cannot be quantified in monetary terms.

I have been accorded privileges by the Mennonite and BICC at home and abroad. I have seen the importance of keeping archival material for future reference and for posterity. I have joined my sister Doris Dube in her passion for keeping records of happenings in our church. The challenge is to record materials on tape cassettes, to capture happenings on video tapes, to take good photographs, to keep encouraging the churches to take minutes of all important church functions and to record key events that take place in their communities. Most of all, the challenge is to encourage young people who are our future, to develop a similar passion for recording their local church activities for posterity.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding, please note this: in a public address or drama or show, the limelight is beamed at the person at the centre of the stage. That is where eyes are focused. But, the reality is that the star at the centre of the stage would sooner or later experience disaster without the backup team that stays behind the scenes. I wish to take this opportunity to thank the great team behind the scenes. Thank you so

very much! to Mennonite World Conference, BICC, and to the caring donors, all of whom supported, coordinated and directed the Volume 1 GMHP from behind the curtains. We thank God for Dr John Lapp, who coordinated the work, offering constant encouragement throughout; the publisher, Dr Arnold Snyder, who did the sterling work of sifting through the chaff to glean and put together a better quality production than would have been. We cannot thank the Lord enough for those who provided the much needed funds for the production of the work. We pray Luke 6:38 for you. May the Lord bless you all for your support, and your willingness to hold hands with your brothers and sisters globally, and may He who has started a good work in the Church see it to fruition. Siyabonga Thina!