

A HISTORY OF NHOWE MISSION

by R. Vernon Boyd



INTRODUCTION

The Nhowe Mission in Zimbabwe, Africa, has been one of the most successful mission efforts of the Churches of Christ in this century. Progress has come about because of the longevity of the mission and the open disposition of the national people toward education and Bible knowledge.

David Livingstone was the first European missionary/explorer to enter this south central portion of Africa, in 1851. In 1888 the Matabele tribe granted to Cecil Rhodes, a British financier, mineral rights in their territory south of the Zambezi River. A group of British settlers established Salisbury in 1890, and a large territory was named Rhodesia by the British South African Company in 1895. It was just seven years after these first white settlers pioneered to build Salisbury as the capitol that John Sherriff became the first known member of the Churches of Christ to arrive in the town of Bulawayo, in southern Rhodesia.

During the 1890s, the Europeans were able to subdue tribal resistance to their authority. With the discovery of gold in that same period, a flood of white settlers began to come into the region. The white persons south of the Zambezi River, in what was called Southern Rhodesia, voted to become a self-governing British colony in 1923. A federation of three adjoining British colonies was established in the 1950s, and lasted until independence was sought during the 1960s.

Because the white-controlled government of Southern Rhodesia was reluctant to allow more leadership to the black population, Great Britain broke off formal relations. Guerilla warfare by freedom fighters during the late 1970s allowed them to gain control of the government in 1980. The nation has since then been called Zimbabwe, after its ancient identity, and the capitol was re-named Harare.

Although the country lies in the tropics, its high elevation gives the area a very pleasant climate year round. The country is famous for its beautiful scenery and abundance of animal wildlife, which is preserved in national parks throughout the country. One of the great natural wonders of the world is Victoria Falls, on the Zambezi River which forms the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia to the north. The Zimbabwe monument, the largest man-made relics south of the Sahara dessert, gives evidence of the 13th and 14th century A.D. civilization which was centered in what is now Zimbabwe.

CHURCH OF CHRIST BEGINS

John Sherriff was born in New Zealand on October 23, 1864 the son of a stone mason who taught him the trade. As a young man he went to Melbourne, Australia, where he was converted to Christ in nearby Fitzroy. From that time on, his life would be marked by his skill in carving stones and monuments plus the making of "living stones" in the house of God. He married his first wife in 1889, but she spent the rest of her life in a mental institution after the death of their first child. He married Emma Dobson, one of his earliest converts, the year after his first wife died

in 1911. He landed in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1896, and advertized in the newspaper for "believers in Christ to meet for the breaking of bread."

After about a year's stay in Pretoria, where he converted two fellow-workers to Christ, he came to Bulawayo, Rhodesia, in July, 1897. He arrived by mule coach three months before the railroad line was opened. In January the next year he began having the Lord's supper with three other disciples. Sherriff's only evangelistic interest had been with the white population until a unique event happened to him in 1900.

He was a business man. Having developed his stone masonry and tombstone business in two locations, he at one time employed about 100 Africans in quarrying, cutting and transporting with oxen and wagons. One night, after having gone to check on a sick business partner, he saw a light in his stone yard, and stopped by to look in on the shed which contained his office and workroom. He discovered a young man who served as his night watchman bending over a candle on the floor trying to learn to read from a few pages of a New Testament he had found. Sherriff's conscience was pricked to begin a class one night a week, in which he taught some of his African workers to read the Bible. Soon working with him were several students eager to learn how to read. He was able to convert several of these men, who in turn became great preachers and workers in the church. One became a self-supporting preacher in Johannesburg; another returned to his home and his success became the basis for Sinda Mission; and a third, Jack Mzirwa, returned to his home about 80 miles east of Harare, and thus began the foundation work which was to become Nhowe Mission.

When an African contemplated marriage, often he would go great distances to obtain employment, until the bride-price was raised, and he could go back home. Some of these workers came to Bulawayo and were baptized by Sherriff. They then returned home to spread the Word. If there were successes, the former worker often appealed to Sherriff to come and help teach in the villages. When he visited these places and preached, the great evangelistic opportunity beyond which he could reach became obvious to him. He wrote B. P. Shepherd, an editor of a religious journal in the United States, and through him, he appealed for assistance.

John Sherriff began a boarding school for black students when he bought Forest Vale near Bulawayo. In 1920, the W. N. Shorts became the first missionaries from America to help. In 1921, they moved to Sinda Mission to work. In 1924, Sherriff and his daughter, Theodora, made a trip around the world and visited churches in America to appeal for help. Great interest was generated in the United States for African missions. In 1927 Sherriff sold his business, moved to where Jack Mzirwa was having evangelistic success in Mashonaland at a place called Wuyuwuyu. When Mzirwa had first returned to his home, he taught his relatives for three years before making his first convert. Gradually, he was able to establish a congregation of around 200 Christians in Wuyuwuyu. S. D. Garrett came to work in this mission in 1930. Sherriff retired briefly to Cape Town but returned to Wuyuwuyu where, after 71 years of labor for the Lord, he died in 1935.



DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOLS FOR CHRIST

Other workers were drawn to teaching the Bible in the schoolroom as this became an effective means to evangelize, because the people were eager for education. Most of the workers came from the United States, but others came from Europe or were whites who lived in Rhodesia. There was easy receptivity to Bible knowledge, with no cultural or religious bias against Christianity. This enhanced the advancement of the church.

When Jack Mzirwa returned to Wuyuwuyu and began to have considerable success in his preaching, there arose a desire for a school to educate the children both in secular and Bible knowledge. There was no school operated by the Churches of Christ in the country at that time. Jack Mzirwa asked John Sherriff if a school for the children could be established. Sherriff encouraged the W. N. Shorts to locate in Wuyuwuyu, which they did. He built a house and constructed a large church building. The mission school lasted until the Shorts lost their support from the United States, at which time he bought a farm so he could earn a living and continue to preach. The evangelistic work continued to prosper and many became Christians during this time, but the school was closed.

The Africans were not sufficiently educated to operate a school of which the government would approve. Jack Mzirwa contacted W. Leslie Brown who was working for two churches in Cape Town, and asked if he would come and help run a school. Leslie and Addie Brown came sometime in 1939 and saw the great disrepair of the of the former school building at Wuyuwuyu. It is in connection with the coming of the Browns that a significant change occurred in the development of what was to become Nhowe Mission.

THE BEGINNING OF NHOWE MISSION

W. L. Brown felt that Wuyuwuyu was too great a distance from a railroad line and a post office, so asked the district commissioner of education for a better location for the school. He was allowed to look for such, and the present farm was selected, because it was nearest a black population in communal lands to which the white government had resettled them. He asked Jack Mzirwa and other brethren for a proper name for the new location and they suggested it be called Nhowe Mission in honor of the Wanhowe tribe which had lived there. Because the Browns had no money, the government granted to the Mission a 25-year lease for the use of about 1,100 acres. The use of the land would be for maintaining the school.

The white Rhodesian government at this time maintained separate school systems: one based on the European standards for the white pupils and the other system for the blacks who, up to that time had no formal school system. Some parents were not willing to send their children to school. The government, however, had received several requests from religious groups wanting to do mission work in its territory. The solution devised was to divide the country up by allowing different Christian traditions to set up missions, provided they would educate the African children living in their district.

Thus W. L. Brown, representing the Church of Christ, was able to acquire the use of the excellent farm land which the Mission still possesses, in order to operate the school. There was not a single structure when the Browns first arrived on the farm. Constructing a temporary shelter for himself and his wife and gathering straw for a mattress, they settled down to build the first buildings with the help of local men. Bricks were made and the buildings were gradually erected. Eventually the classroom, church building and faculty housing were in place.

The building of the new mission began in 1939, and the Nhowe Mission school opened for the first term in 1940. The Central Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee, took over the sponsorship of the school and for the next 20 years gave consistent financial support and oversight to the work. Mrs. A. M. Burton, a wealthy woman in the church in Nashville, was especially generous in her support.

The school taught a curriculum set by the district commissioner of education. The Bible was also used as a textbook. There were about 39 students the first year. The enrollment swelled to about 400 students before the Browns left. By this time dormitories were built and food was provided in a dining hall. It took an heroic struggle to house, feed and teach this many pupils.

FROM MISSIONARY TO AFRIGAN CONTROL

Nhowe Mission school was concentrating on elementary grades so that the younger generation would grow up educated. However, the planting of churches among the older generation created the need for men trained in preaching the Bible. Therefore, a special building was constructed at Nhowe for this purpose and the training of those interested in preaching was begun. This work was sponsored by the University Church in Abilene, Texas. Later it was decided to relocate this work to some other area in order to spread the work of the church in the country.

The town of Mutare (old name: Umtali) was chosen and completely new and expanded facilities were built on the edge of the city. Later, this work was put under the sponsorship of the Hillcrest Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas, where it still remains. In recent years, and in keeping with the continued development and maturity of the churches within Zimbabwe, the Hillcrest leadership has decided gradually to terminate their involvement with the school, letting more and more responsibility fall on the local Christians to staff and maintain the work of preacher training. According to Loy Mitchell, the out-going director and the last remaining American missionary being fully supported from the States, the objective is good, but the planned cut-off date may force the closing of this excellent ministry. Because the Zimbabwean unemployment rate is as high as 40%, the economic base in the churches is not capable of taking up the financial needs of those presently attending the school.

Nhowe Mission, on the other hand, is in a better financial situation because the government pays the salary of teachers and administrators. In addition, tuition is charged for each student registered. The school is free to operate as a Christian school with no governmental restrictions regarding religious instruction, and is paid for by the state. Because of the long stability of the mission and the accomplishments of its graduates, the school enjoys a very good reputation within educational circles and in the country in general.

But getting to this point in the history of Nhowe Mission has not always been a smooth road. Because there were no black members of the Churches of Christ qualified to operate a school, it depended on missionaries from America for most of its existence. Missionaries tended to come and go with a frequency which left the Africans frequently unsettled as to the outcome. Seemingly, no black would ever be trusted to have leadership in the Mission. Often it would be time for school to begin and no missionary from the States had arrived to assume leadership. Some missionaries were more capable than others in administering to the educational needs of the school, dealing with the farming operations, and blending the talents of the personnel together.

During the late 1970s, the political climate became unstable. The minority white government felt increasing pressure from within and without the country to bring the majority blacks into control of public and private institutions. Whites tended to protect their investments and resist change, while blacks supported a greater advancement for themselves and their children. Also, because the country is made up of two separate tribal loyalties, there was tension as to which side would eventually be in power. Military operations increasingly threatened and killed to secure support for each conflicting cause. Soldiers in governmental service were committed to securing peace for those in power, while freedom fighters sought to overthrow the government. Roaming groups of military personnel made the countryside unsafe for the average citizen, which was asked to choose sides.

Guerilla warfare continued throughout the countryside, which put many people in difficult positions. On one occasion, a group of freedom fighters came to the Mission and demanded that the school be closed immediately. Because of several boarding students who were miles from home, the leaders explained it was impossible to send everyone home near dark. A promise was made to respond as quickly as possible, for parents would be concerned about their children's safety. Two of the Mission officials were taken with the soldiers but released a few hours later. The white missionary in charge of the Mission during this time was Dr. Roy Palmer. During the last phase of the revolution, he moved his family into the capitol city and drove out to the Mission in the daytime two days a week. Finally giving up hope for the Mission, he informed the sponsoring congregation, the Swartz Creek Church of Christ near Flint, Michigan, of his decision to close the entire operation.

Chris Chetsanga, who had grown up attending Nhowe Mission and later became a teacher there, was at this time teaching for the University of Michigan - Dearborn campus. The African brethren appealed to him to contact the Swartz Creek church to transfer the leadership for the school to a board of Zimbabwean Christians. This appeal was made and the Swartz Creek brethren granted the request. The original board was made up of respected men, both black and white, who were located throughout the nation. The school continued to operate under African leadership.

With the war ending and the new independent nation of Zimbabwe established, peace returned to the countryside. The Nhowe school resumed with an increased enrollment as parents sought a good education for their children. The excellent reputation achieved for the school through its graduates, meant that parents other than those associated with the churches of Christ were willing to send their children to Nhowe. In addition, children from Church of Christ homes also sacrificed in order for their children to have a Christian education. This increased enrollment has meant a present enrollment in 1989 of over 1500 pupils, 700 of whom are boarding students. With students sleeping on the floor in dormitories, there was the necessity for new buildings to accommodate their needs. In the last five years, new classrooms, faculty housing, piggery, two new water towers and a maternity addition to the clinic have been built.

At one point a new element came into the board with a turnover of personnel. The new board fostered much of this growth. By far the most impressive and ambitious expansion occurred in the building of the new auditorium, begun in 1987. The idea of the building was forced upon the leaders, due to the lack of space in the old auditorium. Five hundred of the youngest pupils were not allowed to attend daily chapel because there was no room. Too, the annual lecturship, which attracted members of the Churches of Christ from all over the country, could not be handled.

Although there was no money to begin with, fund-raising efforts were started, and construction was begun. Some of the work which could not be done locally was hired out, but much was done by the local workers, led by Zebedee Tandí. This included many of the students helping to make bricks, pouring concrete, hauling supplies. An appeal was made to Zebedee Tandí's sponsoring church in the United States, the Oakland Church of Christ near Detroit, Michigan, and approximately 25% of the construction cost was sent. The shell of the building was completed in time for the annual lectureship in September, 1988. Five leaders from the Oakland Church of Christ came for the dedication.

The Oakland leaders report these needs:

1. Money for the Nhowe staff to construct new pews for the new auditorium,
2. Money for purchasing a new public address system for the new auditorium, and
3. Help to sustain the Mutare Bible school until the local Christians can maintain the preacher training facility.

While attending a gospel meeting with the church in Triangle, the group asked help in building their building. Their cost is approximately \$10,000 (Zimbabwean dollars). Plans have been drawn and approved by the city in a favorable location. The lot is paid for. Many of the men of the church are willing to help in construction and some of the supplies have already been purchased.

The Oakland eldership is willing to serve as the vehicle to channel financial support to these needs listed above and proper accounting will be made to contributors. Their address is: 22355 W. 11 Mile Road, Southfield, MI 48034, phone (313) 356-9225.

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NOTE: The following names are of workers at Nhowe Mission about which little is known regarding their contribution. Mr. and Mrs. J. C. Brown (1939-1940); Foy Hook, who had a sick wife (1956); Thomas Ward died there (1950); Dr. Marjorie Sewell; Ann Burns Booth, a Rhodesian friend of Dr. Sewell; Dick Clark (1956); Loy Mitchell (1956); Roy Giffort (1956); Loy Giffort, the father (1956); Clayton Waller; Monica Steinigar, a German who made the sign for the building; William Van Winkle; Jim Petty; Hays Clawson; John Hancock; B. Palmer; Steve Roarabacher; Gil Gorey; Mrs. Reed; Mr. Legg; and John Willis.