

# FOUNDATIONS IN KENYA

*"I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me shall not abide in darkness." John 12:46*

The story of most recent Christadelphian missionary work in Africa seems to have started around 1957. East Africa was no exception. On the coast road to Malindi, a popular Indian Ocean resort in Kenya, lies the village of Vipingo. On a day in November of that year, Vipingo was the destination of Brother Percy Lander as he sought out yet another CBM postal contact. Percy had flown from Nyasaland, via Dar-es-Salaam and Zanzibar, to Mombasa, and had caught 'by the skin of my teeth' the daily 2 p.m. bus going north. The crowded vehicle traveled through an area thickly covered with coconut palms and banana plantations. 'Women sat on the steps or in the doorways of their small huts, nursing their babies; others came from the fields, almost invariably with burdens balanced on their heads, and some carrying hoes - certainly not suggesting that women are the weaker sex.' The bus came to a halt at a deep inlet of the sea, waiting for a chain-ferry to transport them to the other bank.

Brother Lander was looking for the village store of a Mr J K Brown. On the advice of someone who thought they knew Mr Brown, he wrongly alighted four miles short of his destination and would have been stranded there but for the good offices of a policeman who hailed a lorry traveling north. Soon he found himself outside the thatched and whitewashed Post Office of Vipingo. 'Can you tell me how I can find a Mr J K Brown?' he asked the man behind the counter. 'Yes, that's me. But I cannot leave my post for another half hour.' So Mr Brown called to a passing friend, introduced Percy Lander, and asked him to take him for a cup of tea at a nearby cafe.

Later, they both returned to the back-yard of the Post Office, where they spent an hour or two running through the correspondence course lessons from the Bible Mission. The 'passing friend', who said he was an officer in the Salvation Army, took a great interest in what was said, and asked for some literature- which was sent to him from Nairobi a few days later. After another visit to the cafe and the Mombasa bus's failure to arrive, Brother Lander finished his journey in a truck, sitting alongside the Arab driver and his mate -'who spoke no more English than Percy could speak Arabic!'

## Many years later

No more was ever heard from Mr Brown, the original contact. But imagine Brother Lander's surprise when he read, 12 years later, of the baptism of his chance companion from the Salvation Army - Philip Wekati! The God given opportunity to preach to a stranger in Vipingo had been fruitful. 'Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.'

Brother Philip Wekati later described that 'chance' meeting in November 1957 as the turning-point in his life. As a Salvation Army officer, he had thought he knew his Bible well enough, and was very happy to preach, day-in, day-out, how wonderful it would be 'when we enter into the mansions prepared in heaven'. When he met the 'small-in-stature, humble and wise old man' he discovered how wrong he had been. The man had insisted that Christadelphians were Bible readers and Bible believers. He thought lie was, too; but the preacher had opened his well-worn Bible and it, in turn, had opened Mr Wekati's eyes! After receiving the requested literature, the matter greatly troubled him. The seed had been sown, but he did nothing about it for five years. Then he tried to make contact with Brother Lander, but without success. Another three years went by, and then he wrote to an address he found on one of the booklets. Sister Marjorie Hall put him on to the Correspondence Course, and when he had finished the lessons she told him about Brother and Sister Eddie Johnson, who were then working in Kampala in neighbouring Uganda. Contact was made, they met twice in Nairobi and finally Philip Wekati visited Kampala, where he was baptised on 3 April 1969.

## A mission to Uganda

Brother Eddie Johnson was an expert in managing rehabilitation programmes for disabled people. For many years he had been seconded by the British Ministry of Labour to work with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in third-world countries, and had been to Ghana before going to Uganda

and, later, to Kenya and Jamaica. Eddie and his wife Marjorie were staunch Christadelphians and on their arrival in Kampala in 1965 they set to work following up the many CBM contacts in and around the capital. They began to hold weekly discussion classes in their house and each Wednesday they gave Bible talks at a College of Domestic Science. Then every two weeks they were invited to Jinja, Uganda's second city, to share religious teaching with a pastor at a school. Soon Brother Eddie was advertising in the local press a simplified Bible course of his devising. By the time brethren Norris and Owen visited them in 1969 a young couple had also moved from the UK to work in Jinja, and it seemed that the foundations had been set for a small Christadelphian community to be established in Uganda.

Then came the news that the ILO were moving the Johnsons to Nairobi in Kenya. It seemed sad at the time, and it was a number of years before the potential in Uganda could be taken up again. However, in the words of the old adage, Uganda's loss was Kenya's gain!

## **A good preacher**

Brother Wekati was a good speaker and a powerful exponent of the Gospel. His former Salvation Army responsibilities had taken him all over Kenya, and even into neighbouring territories, so that he had many contacts to whom he could talk about his conversion. The first of his fellow 'officers' who accepted the Truth were brethren Peter Maundu in Makindu, halfway down the road from Nairobi to Mombasa, Joseph Kalunda in Mariakani, 20 miles from Mombasa, and David Kilonzo, then working on the East Africa Railway and stationed in Mombasa. Brother Johnson interviewed and baptised them in Mombasa. Not long afterwards, they were followed by Brother Wekati's wife Florence and his son Epaphras, who came to Nairobi from Bungoma, and Brother Njoka and Brother Matunga from the east.

On one occasion, Brethren Kilonzo and Matunga were both arrested and gaoled in Mombasa. They were asked for a statement to explain 'this new sect', who the leader was and its objectives. They referred to Brother Wekati and he in turn was taken away by the CID to the police station in Bungoma, 600 miles away. He must have given a good explanation for, as he said later, 'We have not been arrested by the police since'. Brother Matunga, sadly, died within a few months, but his wife Monica has raised a good family of Christadelphians and has been the 'mother' of a stalwart bush ecclesia at Kikoneni, in the south-east of the country. Thus, marvellously, the beginnings of native Kenyan ecclesial life were planted across the breadth of Kenya in 1969. But not, yet, in the capital, Nairobi.

## **Journey to the west**

The writer recalls arriving in Nairobi from Malawi in May 1970. After Blantyre and Zomba, the skyscrapers, wide boulevards and elegant shops of Nairobi seemed more like New York than Africa. It was a joy to share the home of Brother Eddie and Sister Marjorie Johnson and it was here that we met a gentleman, Jared Opyo, who was taking Bible-study lessons twice weekly. Brother Wekati had travelled nearly 300 miles by bus from his home in Bungoma, close to the Uganda border. Brother Johnson generously lent us his comfortable yet sturdy car (comfort was a bonus, but any vehicle less than sturdy would soon be a write-off on Kenya's highways and byways) and the next day, with Brother Wekati and Mr Opyo, we drove some 200 miles to the west to Kisumu, passing along the escarpment of the Rift Valley, the bird sanctuaries of Lakes Naivasha and Nakuru, and through the 'White Highlands' of colonial days and the beautiful teagardens of Kericho.

Many contacts lived in this area and, in a hall hired from a Kisumu churchman, there was a goodly audience listening to a Bible address. Even the reverend gentleman himself joined the others in asking intelligent questions. Then, a candidate for baptism was interviewed and baptised.

## **Bungoma experience**

Next morning we drove through bush country to Philip's own village, and finally over a track whose specifications were noted in the record as: '16 inches wide, gradient 1:4, boulders alternating with 12-inch potholes, 3ft. 6in clearance between opposite thorn bushes.' The Wekatis' family dwelling on his

shamba was a thatched roundhouse, about 12 feet in diameter. Amazingly, alongside it was a similar one, built specially for the Englishman's one-day visit. It had taken three months' labour of love to build it. Afterwards, the same roundhouse would serve as their meeting place until the ecclesial hall was built.

The obligatory whole roast chicken having been set before us, and the finger-bowls used to good effect, we then moved to the group under the acacia tree, where were assembled the village Chief and other dignitaries, together with a dozen or so Bible students who were seeking baptism. The Chief made his elaborate speech of welcome (to which Scriptural reply was made) and said he was delighted to know that Christadelphians make law abiding citizens. They could therefore count on his help at any time and he would approve a site for a meeting room (which approval, in the event, cost E30!). The ceremony over, five hours were spent in the roundhouse interviewing the candidates, our un-baptised friend from Nairobi acting as interpreter - from English to Swahili, or to Abuyo or Luo, and back again. Some suppliants were accepted for baptism, others were asked to continue their studies for little time. Then it was time to squelch across the muddy fields to a swollen river to baptise five new brothers and sisters.

### **What doth hinder me?**

Returning with Jared to Nairobi the following day, we crossed the Equator at 9,100 feet above sea level, spying flamingos, zebras and giraffes on the way, and carefully heeding tire 'Elephants have right of way' signs. And then our splendid interpreter asked, quite simply: 'What doth hinder me to be baptised?' That evening was memorable! A Kenyan who had searched for the Truth for 11 years, who had undergone a year's patient instruction and had interpreted at nine other interviews, now gave his own marvelous confession and, in the bath in the Johnson bungalow, was immersed into Christ.

The next day, being a Sunday, Brother Jared Opyo was received into fellowship at the memorial service. There were also present at that meeting seven brethren and sisters from Southern Africa and elsewhere who had been meeting in Nairobi. At first they received the announcement of Brother Opyo's baptism with some coolness, as though they had not considered the possibility of a black brother in their midst. But the chilliness soon passed, and the Breaking of Bread, here in a city where the Truth had been assumed to be the white-man's privilege, was a moment to be treasured.

Foundations having been laid in many parts of the country the Gospel spread quickly in Kenya. The work owed much to the sound guidance of Eddie and Marjorie Johnson during their two-year stay in the country and to the CBM policy of regular mission visits for preaching and pastoral work and, in the early years, to limiting interviews and baptisms to experienced CBM brethren. Brother Johnson, in his position as an expatriate official of some importance, was able to make contact with those in government circles who could advise on the registration of the growing Christadelphian community in Kenya. In conjunction with the CBM he drew up a Constitution defining the pattern of organisation, as well as the beliefs, of Christadelphian ecclesias in the country. This was accepted by the Kenyan authorities and has served the ecclesias well throughout the last 25 years, as well as setting a basis for many other registration programmes throughout Africa.

### **The importance of a good Constitution**

In developing countries, where well-worn habits and tribal customs could so easily be at odds with Christian disciplines and daily life in the Truth, a well-defined Constitution which is accepted by the government of the day can be a strong defence against sudden oppositions to religious groups, or against rivalries which arise from historic divisions in the culture. There are occasionally situations (such as in Eastern Europe in the 1990s) where to apply for registration of the community is to draw the unwanted attention of the authorities; but in most cases those involved in the formation of ecclesias will find that government recognition of a Constitution which accurately reflects the objectives and practices of the Christadelphian body will be helpful in avoiding confrontations.

In those early days in Kenya not many of the young ecclesias had their own halls. Meetings would be in one or other member's mud-and-wattle house, or-in the dry season-under a spreading tree. It was an incongruous sight at Mariakani, for example, to drive up in Brother Johnson's car to a quiet place

deep in the bush to find half a dozen brethren and sisters waiting under 'the tree', the collapsible table and chairs (which they had carried on their heads from their homes) already set out for the meeting. If it was a first occasion, the visitor might well be presented with a chieftain's stick, or a robe or a live chicken or a dozen boiled eggs. It could be very touching, and it could also be quite embarrassing. (What does one do, politely, with a live, trussed and squawking chicken?)

## **Coastal welcome**

The first 'public' meeting in Mombasa in 1970 was on a palm-tree plantation on the outskirts of the city. The reception was stage-managed by a young sister, Ruth Mataka, who spoke no English but, as a Kamba speaking schoolteacher, had begun a Sunday School and trained her pupils in welcoming hymns and songs, accompanied by drums and tambourines. It was a Sunday, and it attracted a sizeable crowd of locals who, as well as hearing the Gospel preached, were greatly intrigued by the simple celebration of the Breaking of Bread which followed. On another occasion, before there was any hall for the few brethren and sisters at Lunga Lunga (near the border in the south), it was planned to hold the meeting under the great tree that marks what passes for the village square at the side of the main road that crosses into Tanzania. Here, just outside the village school, it would be customary for one's arrival in a hired car to be marked by excited children shaking your hand or perhaps hoping for 'sweeties'. But on this occasion there was none; and enquiry with the sister who came out from the schoolhouse elicited the alarming response that the 'spirits' had spoken and the villagers had been warned by the witch doctor of the imminent arrival of 'an American, who will poison your children'.

From the back of the square there now approached a line of loinclothed males, each armed with a formidable stick or spear. Their intentions seemed hostile; nevertheless, through an interpreter, they were greeted cordially, told that we were British missionaries and invited to join the meeting under the tree. With much muttering they declined, and finally drew back to stand in a defensive semicircle around the proceedings. Children and parents began to emerge from the shadows and to sit cross-legged on the ground, while the message of salvation went forth. The Word, it seemed, had power over the spirits of the bush.

## **Sin and the serpent**

On another occasion, under the selfsame tree, we were delivering an address on Sin, Satan and the Serpent when the speaker was halted by a cry from the crowd. With masterful accuracy, a brother went into lively action and then held up on a stick a five-foot-long snake that had been hissing its anger just under the table. This is all par for the course in the more primitive parts of Africa, and ministers are not always exempt!

Preaching in Africa presents problems to Europeans. There are language difficulties, cultural barriers, the vastness of the bush, and the shyness and suspicion of the rural African, who has not acquired the sophistication of his brother in the town. There are dangers, too, if one disobeys the unwritten rules. Brother Peter Watkins once related that, on the road to Mombasa, a herd of scrawny cattle slowed down the car: 'We shall never forget that Masai herdsman in the long, red robe. How thankful we were that the last cow had crossed the road before I raised my camera! As the angry African rushed towards us, Stephen put his foot down, and the car shot forward. (Good job we got the engine timing put right the night before!) Epaphras, our efficient young Christadelphian interpreter who was sitting in the back seat, ducked as the herdsman's club landed with a clatter on to the road, inches away from the retreating vehicle!'

There were 55 brethren and sisters in Kenya when Brother and Sister Johnson returned to the UK (and thence moved to another posting in Jamaica) in June 1972. One of the heritages they left the ecclesias was a regular programme of Bible Schools in different locations. In this large country, with cheap fares on buses or 'mammy wagons' and native-style accommodation on the way, the weekend Bible Schools brought together brethren and sisters who had never met before, for a few days of study and fellowship. Depending on where the venue was, journeys could take a night and a day, or even two days each way; but Kenyans are resourceful people and, with some modest help from the

CBM, they would cheerfully overcome the vagaries of weather, uncomfortable travel and somewhere to sleep.

## **Johnson tailpiece**

A year or two later, while awaiting a change of planes in Addis Ababa, we exchanged pleasantries with an intelligent-looking gentleman in the airport lounge, and enquired his business in Ethiopia. 'My name's Brown - Regional Adviser on vocational rehabilitation for Africa,' he said. 'Oh yes,' we continued, merely to pass the time courteously, 'We have a very good friend who does the same sort of thing for the ILO - man by the name of Johnson.' His mouth fell open, he stared for a moment in wonder, and his eyes glowed. 'Not Eddie Johnson? - Well, well! He was my great buddy.' It is, as they say, a small world indeed!

## **The hazards of interviewing...**

The 48 ethnic tribes in Kenya seem to have as many different languages or dialects. In colonial days, the more sophisticated learned English, and this became a common denominator in commerce and communication. However, the newly independent government of the former 'Mau Mau' Kikuyu leader Jomo Kenyatta (whom we once met and spoke to at a 'comfort stop' on the Mombasa road) reversed all that in 1963 and made Swahili the national language. In a rural district it could sometimes mean that English had to be translated into Swahili and Swahili into Bukusu or Kamba or one of the preferred native tongues, in order to be understood. This could make interviewing of candidates very protracted work - even precarious, unless one had a good understanding of the local cultures and customs.

In addition to examining the doctrinal foundations and attempting to get behind the 'by-rote' system of learning which is part of the normal culture, the interviewer must enquire most diligently about tribal and family connections, about marital status, and about boy-friends and parental intentions. On one occasion there were two candidates for baptism, using two interpreters because of language problems. One gave a good confession and was ready for baptism; the other needed more instruction. On reporting this to the ecclesial Elder, he held up horrified hands. 'The one you have passed is a Luo, the other an Abuyo.' To accept one without the other would invite alarming repercussions in the district. The only thing to do was to wait until *both* were ready for baptism and to put the matter in God's hands. 'Be ye wise as serpents and harmless as doves.' The Lord knows the hearts, anyway!

## **...and the joys**

It is a very wonderful, every awe-inspiring, experience for the visiting missionary who spends a day working with a young bush ecclesia. Just such an occasion in the early days at Nalondo, in the west, was reported thus: The visitor, quite rightly, is expected to cram a week's work into one brief visit. Handshakes, greetings and introductions all round. A hospitable mug of tea in the Elder's cool house, and then a procession of interested friends who have applied for immersion... [Several hours are spent with the candidates] ...The dignity of the interview proceedings in the simple surroundings of the frugally furnished 'living-room' under the elephant-grass roof serve to heighten the sense of wonder at the occasion...

By early afternoon it is time for a short break, and Priscilla brings in a massive chicken and a bowl of rice. It is enough to feed an army. Then, shooing away the live chickens and the cow at the door, we move up to the mission hall, taking a chair apiece - while those who have no chairs take up a comfortable position on the floor. African tunes waft the words of the Kenya Christadelphian hymnbook across the banana plantation, the speaker gathers themes from the daily readings and there are lively questions from an audience of a dozen brethren and sisters and a score of friends and children. It all adds up to a miracle - that here, in tribal tropical Africa, are men and women who can sit around camp fires debating the Word of God and talking of their Saviour, the literate reading to the non-literate. Here in this place, Bible classes bring men from miles around; here is a Sunday School and a Youth Group; there by the door of a hut whose design has not changed for thousands of years

sisters sit, sewing garments and chatting about the Truth, their menfolk meanwhile preparing for the next excursion on foot or cycle to preach in other villages.

Time now for the procession to the river, which has been dammed to give it depth. The two sisters-to-be, dressed in cotton frocks, are joined by the brother-to-be in shirt and trousers. Each will change into their best garments after the immersion; they will be buried in the old, and rise up to put on the new... One by one the nervous candidates are helped down into the water and in the heavy heat of an African afternoon the responses 'Yes, I do' are clearly heard. 'Then upon this your public confession of faith...' - the timeless fellowship of baptism in all its sincerity. Different people, different colour, different culture -but sharing as equals the salvation which is in Christ Jesus. As we walk back many thoughts flash through the mind. What is their immediate future? A simple life, untouched by the trappings of worldly civilisation, for the most part. Some hardship? Some poverty? Famine every now and then, perhaps? Family squabbles, torn allegiances, perhaps the sweep of political events just over the border-the turmoil that lies barely skin-deep beneath the face of Africa! But 'God hath chosen the poor of this world rich in faith'. The joys of fellowship and the prospects of the Kingdom of God on earth, with all its benefits to mankind, are for these men and women realities which none shall take from them.

### **Mission workers consolidate the ecclesias**

One of the great benefits to the development of the Truth in Kenya in the 1970s was the facility for expatriates to obtain work in East Africa. Early in 1972 Brother Stephen and Sister Wendy Sykes (with their children) arrived as missionaries, taking up teaching posts at a boarding school on the outskirts of Nairobi. They continued the good work, and within six months another two Study Schools had been organised - as the record says: 'one at Bungoma (turn left out of Nairobi for 275 miles) and one at Mariakani (turn right out of Nairobi for 290 miles).'

With the help of the resident missionaries the Bible Mission was able to set up an established organisation of ecclesias in Kenya, responding to the requirements of the Constitution. The country was divided into Eastern and Western areas, quarterly meetings of the committee officers and welfare representatives were organised and ecclesial delegates attended an annual general meeting in one of the main centres. Eastern and Western areas provided the Chairman in alternate years. It was a learning process for such disciplines to be assimilated easily, but it was character-building for all concerned. The resident missionaries, together with visiting fieldworkers from the UK, acted as advisers and ensured that the plans that were formulated were within the available funds and the accepted policy of the CBM. These arrangements engendered a sense of corporate responsibility and an awareness of the needs of others in different parts of the country. It was not without 'growing pains', but within a few years the Brotherhood in Kenya was developing into a lively, respected community, and young and sometimes better-educated converts were playing an important part.

### **Dedicated fieldworkers**

As the Sykes family left, so arrived for a two-year stay in Nairobi a mission minded family from Vancouver, Brother Philip and Sister Pam Snobelen and their two girls. Philip was a chartered accountant, and his firm had secured him a pleasant bungalow in a leafy suburb. It had taken nine months to plan this venture, and lesser souls might have been deterred by the problems along the way. As they later wrote, 'making a break from a home and an ecclesia is not easy, but the fellowship of new brethren and sisters and the challenge to help them and their many friends who are eager to learn from Scripture replace these losses with a new sense of belonging and zeal for the work of the Lord.' Though the hazards of life in a Kenyan city, such as housebreakings, highway potholes and mad drivers, were greater than back home in Vancouver, the Snobelen family thoroughly enjoyed its experiences.

There is a long list of couples who, while conditions permitted, moved to live and get work in Kenya. They all went as families, taking their offspring with them and setting examples of Christian family upbringing, for all to see. They included Brother and Sister Philip Munday, who took up musical

appointments in the capital, and who at great risk secured the lives of two brethren who were wrongly suspected of being involved in a coup against the Kenya Government; Brother and Sister Chris Furniss, previously mission workers in Jamaica, who obtained teaching posts in Nakuru; and Brother and Sister Jerome Loria from New South Wales, who took long leave and hired an apartment on the coast north of Mombasa for nine months, and greatly stimulated the coastal ecclesias (including Jimba, where a formidable sister named Dorcas banged the drums and called the whole village to order).

Then there were David and Beryl Rowley, and Leon and Joan Shuker, who discovered that the best way to obtain reasonably priced accommodation was to rent houses from officials who were going away on leave and who did not trust the burglars to exempt them from a visit. All these did sterling work, and helped to lay strong foundations against the years when the ecclesias would have to shoulder more of their own ventures - and their own problems.

### **The sadness of parting**

Mention has been made of Brother Philip Wekati, who was the first Kenyan convert, and his family. It is one of the sadnesses of the Mission's work in Kenya that Philip and his family were, for a time, seduced by visiting Christadelphians from North America into joining another fellowship, with lavish promises of the benefits that would accrue. Kenya was not the first country (and there have been several since) where other Christadelphian missionary groups have indulged in the 'poaching' of members or 'building on another man's foundation'. None can forbid the preaching of the Gospel anywhere; but there are sometimes discourtesies among brethren, and they can bring much pain and sorrow.

God has richly blessed the work. A quarter of a century after the first baptism there are 40 ecclesias and almost 1000 brethren and sisters in Kenya. What is more, preaching has spilled over into Uganda to the west and Tanzania to the south, and there, too, goodly ecclesias are preparing for the coming of the King.

After Jerome and Ali Loria had served for 9 months as CBM missionaries in eastern Kenya in 1975-6, Sister Ali recalled the life of the fishermen they could observe each day from their apartment in the following sketch and her 'Reflections' in verse.