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Socio-History of the All Africa Conference of Churches

It gives me pleasure to share with you now some aspects of the work of the All Africa Conference of Churches. Ours is an organization concerned with the witness of the Church in Africa. Those who work in it represent a variety of linguistic groups and strive to respond to the needs of Christians from Cairo to Cape Town, Dar-es-Salaam to Dakar. What unites them is the desire to follow Jesus Christ, our master, honor God, our creator, and serve the people, beginning with our neighbors.

The AACC is a sociological and historical reality. It gathers people geographically separated and unites them in a single body. It is "a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and only Savior according to the Scriptures and therefore seeks to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

The AACC is a movement with a humble beginning, but with a great future. It can inspire Black people in the diaspora, encourage them to forget their differences, gather them together to accomplish the sacred task of saving humankind from complete annihilation. The strength of the AACC comes from God and the belief that we are a chosen people living in a blessed continent. We believe that it was in Africa that Abraham, the father of all believers, found help when there was famine in the land. The liberation story which speaks of the greatest exodus of all times also begins in Africa. Moses, the central figure in it, is first presented as a desperate

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little abandoned child, left to float on the water of the river. To understand what happened to that small baby, one has to believe in the mighty acts of God. It is with pride that we say that the liberation story was the work of God, using as his instrument a man born, nurtured and trained on African soil.

Our continent continued to be used by God in Jesus' time. Jesus himself, in his childhood, found refuge in Africa, and at the time of his death, on the way to Calvary, it was an African who came as a volunteer to help carry his cross.

We could go on recalling names of men of faith in church history. People like the Ethiopian baptized by Philip, and Cyprian and Tertullian who greatly contributed to the advance of Christianity in the early days. It is this tradition of which we are proud. We have to share it with people of all ages: children, young people, single people and young couples, adults and people of old age. We work with 138 member churches and Christian Councils in 39 countries. We want to keep before them "the demands of the Gospel pertaining to their life and mission, for evangelism, for witness in society, for service and for unity." We also want to encourage closer relationships and mutual sharing of experience among the churches in Africa and Black people in the diaspora through visits, consultations, conferences, and the circulation of information. Our work also includes assisting churches in their common task of leadership training.

Anyone who knows Africa does not envy our job. Africa is large and complex. Though the majority of us are Black, we have tremendous communication problems. The spiritual unity we seek is often broken by political and social realities. Poverty, disease and ignorance surround us. Though we live in rich countries, we are still struggling to find solutions to problems created two hundred years ago.

Basil Davidson in his book *Modern Africa*, traces major African historic developments from 1914. As you know, 1914 was the year of the scramble for Africa, when almost overnight our continent became a mosaic of

European flags. Tremendous changes have taken place in these seventy-four years. Between 1885 and 1901, existing frontiers were fixed; from 1901 to 1914, Europeans occupied the colonies, crushed resistance, and built railways; between 1914 and 1918, the First World War was waged. The Germans were defeated and their colonies transferred to other European countries by the League of Nations. From 1919 to 1929, the exploitation of minerals began and Africans were recruited to become migrant laborers. The following years, 1929 to 1935, were years of great world economic depression. During that period, nationalism grew in a number of countries. From 1939 to 1945 is the period of the Second World War, at the end of which the United Nations was founded in replacement of the League of Nations. From 1945 to 1952, there was a profound social crisis in the colonies. Some educated Africans, encouraged by the Atlantic Charter of 1941, which gave freedom to people to choose their own government, started to form political parties.

Between 1953 and 1960, Ghana became independent and in other countries nationalism continued to grow, warfare broke out in Kenya and Algeria, and the non-aligned states met in Bandung in 1955. By 1960 more countries were independent. There was wide-spread recognition that unity can ensure success for all countries and the Heads of States came together to launch the OAU in 1963, with headquarters in Addis Ababa.

What happened in politics finds its echo in religion. God, working through the church, has shown us that he cares for Black people. Concrete proof of this is the fact that under colonialism, exploiters of this continent were undermined by missionaries who brought us the Bible. Reading the gospel message, generation after generation understood that God is always on the side of people who suffer, if they stand for peace and justice, unity and progress. The sharing of life experiences based on the Bible, and very particularly the study of the life of Jesus, greatly contributed to shape the minds of past and present generations of African leaders. It is known that more than 60% of the Heads of States in Africa are either

Christians, or have been exposed to Christian principles in their formative years. Kenneth Scott Latourette, in his *History of Christianity*, indicated that recent revolutions find their inspiration in Christianity. There is no nation in Black Africa that dismisses the role of religion in society. Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana, is quoted as saying: "Natural rights of man...to be respected and guaranteed by the state, are those in the religious sphere." The participation of the Church in shaping the future of Africa can best be seen by looking at the movement prior to the formation of the All Africa Conference of Churches.

With the Protestant world, things began to change after William Carey (1761-1834) set out for India in 1793 as the first missionary. With the consolidation of missionary societies in Europe and the United States, the gospel reached Africa for the second time. The church grew rapidly in South Africa after 1914.

It is also interesting to note that the present ecumenical movement in Africa finds its genesis in South Africa and in Liberia. The beginning of the AACC, which had a South African as its first General Secretary, Dr. Donald M'Timkulu, goes back to 1904. In that year, in Johannesburg, there was an interdenominational missionary conference.

Lutherans are credited with having been instrumental in starting the ecumenical movement in Africa. In 1955 they held an All African Lutheran Conference on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro at Marangu in Tanzania. The aim of the conference was to get a vision of the Christian Church throughout the whole continent of Africa. Out of 168 delegates, 116 were Africans.

The main organization responsible for the creation of the All Africa Conference of Churches was the International Missionary Council that in 1957 held a World Assembly in Accra, Ghana. The following year, under the auspices of the Christian Council of Nigeria, the International Missionary Council helped to organize the first All African Church Conference in Ibadan, Nigeria. The theme of the Conference was "The Church

in Changing Africa." Alan Paton, who passed away in April of this year, was one of the 195 participants. That white South African, author of the book *Cry the Beloved Country*, introduced himself as "a native of Africa."

The All Africa Conference of Churches is growing "from strength to strength" today. As its leader I am pleased to greet you today and to urge you to support this historic arm of the ecumenical movement in Africa as we work for the salvation and liberation of all humankind.