Mission history in South Africa

The FRCSA are very much involved in mission work, but fortunately it wasn’t them who started with mission work in South Africa. South Africa has a rich mission history, without which the country would not look like it is today. In this article I hope to give a bird’s eye overview on three and a half centuries of mission at the Southern point of Africa.

What is mission?
Before you can write something about the history of the mission in South Africa, one should know of course what mission is. Mission work is based on the command of the Lord Jesus Christ, as we find it for example in Matthew 28:19: Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

The purpose of mission work can be summarised in three aspects:
- Repentance of the heathen (unbelievers)
- Planting of churches
- Glorification of God all over the earth

Beginning of mission in South Africa
As far as we know the Bible arrived for the first time to stay in South Africa in 1652. This was when Jan van Riebeeck landed at the Cape of Good Hope, commissioned by the Dutch East Indian Company (VOC). The VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) was the first Western multinational and their greatest concern was business and making money. They were not interested in the salvation of the pagans in Africa. A Dutch speaking reformed church was instituted at the Cape, to cater for the spiritual needs of the European colonists. Some black people (Khoi-San) came into contact with the Bible and the church, because they were taught to read using the Bible as textbook. The primary purpose however wasn’t their repentance, but their civilisation, in order that they can be of help with various duties in the colony. Apart from that there was no organised outreach towards the black people with the Gospel. This is contrary to the Dutch colony in Batavia, East India (the present Indonesia), where the Reformed Churches from the Netherlands pursued organised mission work.

The real start of the mission work in South Africa only dates from 1737 when George Schmidt of the Moravian Mission Society from Germany arrived in the Cape. In the 18th century mission societies were founded all over Europe. This was a reaction to the times of the Enlightenment or Rationalism, replacing a living faith in the God of the Bible with reliance upon mankind with his cognitive abilities. This worldview had a negative influence on the churches in Europe, with the consequence that many had no interest anymore in putting the missionary command of the Lord Jesus Christ into practice. The missionary societies however placed much emphasis on a living personal faith, and the repentance of the heathen who were otherwise heading towards hell.
When George Schmidt arrived in the Cape, he founded a mission station in the Baviaanskloof. The place later received the name Genadendal (Valley of Grace), and is located about 80 km East of Stellenbosch. In those days it was a journey on a wagon for three days. But George Schmidt wasn’t welcomed with open arms at the Cape. The reason being that he wasn’t in service of the Reformed Church, and the VOC did not want to have different church denominations at the Cape. There were also many colonists who believed that it was impossible to repent the ‘Hottentots’. Notwithstanding he started with the work, and although it was not easy at all, the Lord did grant people who repented during those first years. However George Schmidt experienced more and more opposition from the churches in Cape Town and Stellenbosch, especially when it became apparent that he was baptising those who repented. The end result was that he was requested to leave the Cape again. In 1744 he returned on a ship to Holland, and lived the rest of his life in Germany.

These first seven years of mission work however were not without fruit. One of the first to repent was a woman George Schmidt gave the name Magdalena with her baptism. She continued to read from the Bible to her people after Schmidt had left. When the mission work was resumed again 50 years later in 1793, the three new missionaries found Magdalena. She had become old and blind in the meantime, but she still had her Bible, and her daughters whom she had taught to read, could read from it.
After 50 years, in 1793, the three new missionaries found mother Magdalena with her Bible

**The Great Mission Age**

The fact that the mission work could start again, was due to a change in government policy at the Cape. From then onward more church denominations were allowed at the Cape. This caused a huge influx of missionary societies during the 19th century. The Moravian Mission Society could continue and expand its work in the Western and Eastern Cape. But others also came, like the Rhenish Mission Society from Germany, the Norwegian Mission Society from Norway, the Paris Mission Society from France, London Mission Society from Britain, and likewise from many other countries like the Netherlands, Scotland, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Ireland, America etcetera. The 19th century is known as the great mission age. Mission stations were founded to begin in the Cape, but they expanded more and more towards the North and the East. Before gold and diamonds were discovered halfway the 19th century, missionaries probably formed the largest group of Europeans who came to live in dark Africa. There were more than 200 mission stations all over the country. Some of them developed into large communities like Genadendal, being at the beginning of the 19th century the second largest town in the country after Cape Town. But other mission stations ended in a failure. The well known pastor of the Trekkers Erasmus Smit for example was a dismissed missionary of the London Missionary Society. He endeavoured to found a mission station on the farm Kookfontein (where the Karoo National Park is located today), but it collapsed. Apart from foreign missionary societies a South African Missionary Society was founded as well, although its activities were small compared to the rest. But as time progressed more and more cooperation developed between the missionary societies and the local churches. One also finds that initially the black people who became Christians were accepted within the reformed congregations, but in the course of the 19th century the habit emerged to have separate churches for black and white.
Influence of the mission stations
The influence of the mission stations was huge on the history of South Africa. Many black people repented, churches were planted, and the light of the Gospel started to shine in many places at the Southern point of Africa. Furthermore the mission stations also facilitated schooling and trades for many black people. It sometimes even led to jealousy amongst the surrounding (Vryburger) farmers, whose children were unschooled. Through the years there were often tensions between the farmers and the mission stations. Missionaries admonished the farmers to treat their slaves or labourers well, and not paying them for example with wine rations. The farmers however accused the missionaries that they ‘stole’ their labourers. Especially after the abolition of slavery in the 19th century many slaves who were staying until then on the farms, preferred to move to the mission stations. However there were also many examples of positive cooperation, where surrounding farmers attended the Sunday worship services on the mission stations, and sent their children to school over there as well. The mission stations also became a safe haven for many extra-marital children, whom the farmers begot with their slaves/labourers.

Bible Translation
A huge task for the missionaries was also to translate the Bible into the different languages of the black people. The Bible was translated fully for the first time in Zulu in 1883. The first Northern-Sotho (Sepedi) translation of the Bible was finished in 1904 at Botshabelo (between Middelburg and Groblersdal) by the Berlin Mission Society. Most black people in South Africa had the Bible available in their mother tongue even before the Bible was translated in 1933 by Totius in Afrikaans.

During the 20th century the First and Second World Wars also had a huge influence on the mission stations, in the sense that many funds came from Europe until that stage. But after the World Wars the European countries were too poor to continue their funding. Partly because of that, and also because of urbanisation in the second half of the 20th century the influence of the mission stations diminished drastically.
Mission and government
Through the ages the relationship between the mission work and the government was often problematic. During the 17th and 18th centuries the mission work was experienced as a destabilising factor. In the 19th century the attitude of the British government was positive towards the mission stations, in view of the huge contribution they were rendering to the development of the black population. The mission stations also benefited from the law and order and stability the colonial governments brought about at the Southern point of Africa. At the same time the government tried continuously to mingle in with mission affairs, for example with regard to land issues. The same can be said about the governments in the Free State and the ZAR. In the 20th century the apartheid government since 1948 also tried to regulate the mission work. Only churches who were recognised officially by the state were allowed to do mission work in the (planned) homelands, and so supporting the homelands policy – like for example the three sister churches. Other church denominations were only allowed to evangelise in the townships, which were regarded as temporal settlements for the black people. History however evolved in such a way that many parts of the rural areas (like the homelands) depopulated, whilst the townships became bigger and bigger.

What is our calling?
Also today ongoing mission work is indispensable for South Africa. Although 75% of the population regards themselves as Christian, for many this is very superficial and often still mixed with paganism. Furthermore it appears as if in the new South Africa there is a comeback of the old pagan African traditional religions. Also for the 21st century the missionary command of the Lord Jesus Christ applies, to lead unbelievers toward repentance and faith, to plant churches, and to glorify God in this land.

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Questions
1. Where does the commission to do mission work come from?
2. What is the purpose of mission work?
3. Who was the first missionary in South Africa and when did he arrive?
4. What is the name of the first mission station in the country?
5. When was the great Mission Age?
6. When was the Bible translated for the first time in Zulu?
7. On which mission station was the Bible translated for the first time in Northern-Sotho (Sepedi)?
8. What should be the role of the government with regard to mission work?