

THE HARVEST WORK IN AFRICA

DEAR BROTHER RUSSELL: –

At last I am able to report to you on the mission which has brought me to this part of the world. I have just returned from a tour through Nyassaland, which has occupied altogether close on four months. My experiences have been many and varied. I have traversed the African forest at midnight, slept in all sorts of queer places and traveled in all kinds of conveyances, from an ocean steamer down to a native canoe, and from a modern railway carriage to a hammock slung on a pole and carried on the shoulders of the natives.

It is not of my personal experiences, however, that I wish to speak, except in so far as these bear upon the harvest work in this part of the world. That there is a work of considerable magnitude in Nyassaland there is no denying. Hundreds, nay thousands, of natives of that country have left the Livingstonia Mission and have joined what is known here as the "Society Church," and in some villages the churches and schools of the aforementioned Mission are almost deserted and their work practically destroyed by the advent of the harvest message.

Within a radius of thirty miles of Bandawe there are close on one hundred churches in as many villages and thousands of natives owing allegiance to Present Truth. Each little company has its own Church building, a wattle and daub structure erected by the native brethren themselves. Some of these structures are of considerable dimensions; the Church at Chifira (the village where the harvest message was first preached) being about 100 feet long by 30 wide. As the natives sit on the floor, the seating accommodation of these buildings is greater than ours. On the occasion of my visit to Chifira I estimated the audience I addressed at between five and six hundred natives.

Each Church has also its own organization modeled upon the recommendations of SCRIPTURE STUDIES, Vol. 6. They are served by elders and deacons and I found nine brothers acting in a general way as pastors and teachers. These brothers are stationed in different parts of the country and act as instructors to the brethren in their various districts, preaching and expounding the Truth. Most of these pastors have had some instruction themselves from Mr. Booth, but not all; yet all have a fair grasp of the elementary features of the Plan. There is no literature in the vernacular and the brethren are dependent for their spiritual food on the preaching of these teachers and their elders. This is unfortunate, as in the nature of things these prominent brethren are none too well equipped for their task.

The number of brethren who speak English is comparatively small and those able to read it are even fewer. Many claim that ability, but a few minutes' conversation with them, or a simple text in reading, soon displays their ignorance. A translation of some of the more important tracts into the native language would be of great service in Nyassaland.

This would be a work of some difficulty, however, as these brethren are drawn from various tribes and speak no fewer than three different languages, namely, Chiuyanja, Chitonga and Chitumbuha. The former language (Chiuyanja) is the native dialect of the south and is read and spoken by all educated natives throughout the country, but the great majority of the interested are poorly educated and speak only one of the other two tongues.

And now, having spoken of the magnitude of the work, permit me to give my impressions of its spiritual value. While in Nyassaland I found some things to encourage and some that discouraged me in the attitude of the brethren towards the Truth. Many of them appear to be filled with a strong desire for a more intimate acquaintance with God's Word and some have already a very fair grasp of the Truth. But in *all* there is manifest a spirit of cupidity and self-seeking that is not

in harmony with their profession. This is not, I trust, evil speaking, nor am I presuming to sit in judgment on brethren in Christ. They stand or fall to their own Master. I am simply seeking to present a true report of the conditions which I found to exist in Nyassaland, that you may be rightly informed with regard to the blessed harvest work in that country. **[R4748 : page 26]**

The leading brethren and myself did not quite see eye to eye on financial arrangements. They were disappointed when I assured them that the Society could not lend its support in any way to an educational work, providing school books and teachers for instruction of the young in the English language and native dialects. This is one of the methods pursued by other missions in the district and doubtless they thought our work would be similar. I pointed out that our work was the gathering of the Lord's saints together out of Babylon and their instruction in the Word of the Lord only.

Some of them seemed to think also that I had come out with a pocketful of money to endow all the pastors and teachers and give them lucrative employment under the Society. I had to disabuse their minds of that idea. One brother was anxious to marry and proposed that I furnish him with the wherewithal to buy his wife (a custom that prevails in that country). I advised him to wait till he had saved sufficient to get him out of one difficulty before venturing into another. Finally he reduced his demands down to the level of an old shirt, which, needless to say, he did not get. I regret to say that almost in every case where I had dealings with individual brethren their interviews ended with an appeal for financial assistance in some shape or form.

I was the recipient of much kindness from them when I first appeared in their midst. They loaded me with presents of food, provided me with a native house and vied with each other for the privilege of carrying me about in the machila. But I soon found that their gifts were bestowed with an end in view. Before leaving Chifira

I was asked to pay for the house I had been invited to occupy. I paid up. Many of those who had shown me kindness proposed that I should sign their labor certificate, a document indicating that they had worked for me for one month and were therefore entitled to a reduction of three shillings in their hut tax. Even with the more prominent brethren, whom I proposed to recommend as teachers of the volumes, there was a spirit of bargaining that was not the spirit of consecration.

I am not condemning these brethren altogether. While these circumstances are regrettable, we must not expect too much from a people so lately rescued from barbarism. They are more or less grown up children and have all the weaknesses of children and must be dealt with as such.

The natives are naturally indolent. The white men have taken their country and they look upon every white man as a mine of wealth upon which they can draw for all their needs.

Mr. Booth's influence is markedly manifest on the work in Nyassaland. The brethren generally do not keep the seventh day as a sabbath, but I found the teachers with strong leanings that way. These opinions were strengthened by the teaching of Mr. Booth, that only those who kept the sabbath had the harvest message. Also since going to America he has been sending a copy of the Seventh Day Baptist Year Book along with a £5 note to all teachers reputed to be keeping the seventh day sabbath. I did what I could to present the Truth on this question and was enabled by the grace of God to deliver at least some of them from bondage.

While in Nyassaland I called upon the Governor of the Protectorate and the president of the West Nyassa Province, where most of the brethren are located. I found both of these in a tolerant attitude toward the work. Viewed at first with some misapprehension, the spread of the work has proved the groundlessness of their fears. The Government has no opposition to offer to our work so long as the natives are law-abiding.

Your letter, with powers of attorney, was awaiting me on my return to Durban. It will be impossible for me to lay claim to the title deeds of the Shiloh Mission Station until my return to that country.

That station, however, is now in our hands, with a native brother, Alexander Makwinja, in charge. I stayed there for some time while waiting for a connection for Bandawe.

As I indicated to you in a previous letter this property at Chihunda is of questionable value. The brick chapel is an irretrievable ruin. The teachers' houses have no existence now, unless these describe a few grass huts erected by the few natives who have taken up their residence on the land. If so, these have been put up by the natives and are their property.

I do not know where the workshop is, unless it be a dilapidated building now used as a church building, where a half dozen natives and their wives meet daily for prayers and service. There is an attendance of about twenty on Sundays.

This building is very much in need of repairs. The roof is stayed from the floor, the walls bulge outwards and were the stays removed the whole structure would certainly collapse. The only building of any real value is **[R4749 : page 26]** the house and it, too, is fast falling into decay. It is a four, not five-room structure, unless, perhaps, the kitchen is included, bringing the number of apartments up to five. This house could be repaired and made habitable if it would be worth while to spend money on it.

The Shiloh Station is hundreds of miles removed from the center of interest in the Truth. It is fully a week's journey from Bandawe, and the number of interested in the neighborhood can be counted on one's fingers.

The general impression which I have formed from my visit to Nyassaland is that the work among the African natives cannot hope to

rise above the level of a restitution work. Doubtless there may be eminent exceptions, but, generally speaking, they have the greatest difficulty in appreciating spiritual things. Their minds are untrained. Unlike the Asiatics, they have had no philosophy of religion (even of error) in the past to direct their minds toward God, and while they readily grasp the rudimentary features of the Plan, I doubt if many of them appreciate their spiritual significance. The keeping of a sabbath and the preference of immersion over sprinkling as a Scriptural mode of baptism are tangible things which their minds can lay hold of and retain, but the spiritual meaning underlying these is something which it would take a long time to impart to any but a favored few.

This work is too great, however, to be neglected and following the suggestions made by you before I left Scotland, I have divided the part of the country where the brethren are located into six different districts and would recommend the appointment of native brethren as teachers under the Society, they to visit these districts in rotation, spending sufficient time in each village to go through one of the volumes with the class at that village, then passing on to the next. The brethren whose names I am giving have a fair grasp of the Truth; they are able to speak and read English. They have all read at least the first three volumes of DAWN and are capable of interpreting them in the native dialect for the benefit of their less favored brethren. They are also clear on the sabbath question.

Since this question had been exalted into the position of an essential I was forced to deal with it as such and to [R4749 : page 27] consider in making recommendations only such brethren as could agree that the keeping of the seventh day was *not* essential to Christians.

I shall provide these brothers with forms on which they shall report to me at the end of each month regarding the meetings held and the volumes studied. As their time will be wholly devoted to the work

I have indicated that the Society will provide them with £1 (\$5) per month for their maintenance. This sum is adequate for all their needs.

I shall also supervise and direct their work and render such assistance as is in my power. I propose soon to set one of the brethren to work to translate some of the more important tracts into Chitonga (the majority of the brethren in Nyassaland speak that dialect) and I myself hope to provide a glossary for the volumes which will bring most of the difficult words in these books within the comprehension of those who have even a smattering of the English language.

My thought is that this work could be better carried on from Durban than by taking up residence in Nyassaland.

To settle in that country would not, in my judgment, be the wisest course. It is impossible, even if it were desirable, to live as the natives do. To take up one's residence in a native house is simply tempting Providence. Shiloh Station is too far removed from the center of interest to be of any greater service than a rest house on the way to meet the brethren.

To build in the interested district would mean a considerable expenditure of money and of even more precious time, as it is necessary first to make the bricks before you can build your house.

The language difficulty requires also to be considered. It would take a considerable time to acquire such a knowledge of any one of the three languages spoken by the native brethren as would enable me to address them in their own tongue and even were that accomplished there would still remain the other two dialects unconquered.

For these and other reasons I would recommend that my headquarters be situated in the south, preferably in Durban, where I can give my attention to the very promising work going on here among the whites. While keeping in touch with Nyassaland, as already suggested, and making the aforementioned provision for the

continuance of the Lord's work there, I could visit that country at least once a year as long as the opportunities for harvest service remain with us and seek by my presence and instruction to encourage the brethren and further the Lord's cause there.

Meanwhile I would counsel the establishment of an African Agency in Durban, the publication of the sermons in South African newspapers (which I hope shortly to accomplish, having received the papers and forms forwarded by the Lecture Bureau) and the general advancement of the Lord's work in the various South African towns as opportunity offers. I shall write you later, giving further suggestions regarding the establishment of an agency in Durban with an estimate of probable cost.

I am grateful to our Heavenly Father, who has brought me through all my varied experiences with health and strength and I feel confident that he will bless my humble efforts to serve him and his dear flock and that wherein I may have erred, even there his wisdom shall overrule and cause all things to work out for his glory and the good of his children.

I enclose herewith one or two photographs of Shiloh Station, which will give you some idea of its appearance. Praying the Lord's guidance for his work, and with much love to yourself, dear brother, I am,

Your co-laborer in the harvest service,

WM. W. JOHNSTON.

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