

Michael George Whisson – A Christian Odyssey. (C.V.)

Michael George Whisson was born on 10th June 1937 to devout Anglican parents in the parish of The Holy Innocents in Croydon, England. The family attended the services in the parish church; his parents followed The Bible Reading Fellowship notes each evening (although there were no family prayers); his father, sister and both of his elder brothers sang in the choir and their father read the lessons at evensong each Sunday evening. Michael sang in the boys' choir, although he never really read music, and he learned to love the oratorios of Handel and Bach which were sung by the choir on festive occasions. He also recalls the time that Kenneth Oram, then Dean of Kimberley & Kuruman, spent on furlough at Holy Innocents parish, very close to the Oram family home.

He attended the Billy Graham Mission, with a school party, in 1953, and while deeply impressed by the commitment of some of his schoolmates who were inspired by that event, has never experienced the "infilling of the spirit" which has played such an important part in the spiritual life of many of those whom he has known and respected over the past sixty or so years.

At Cambridge University, he was greatly influenced by two quite different emphases in the faith. Under Mervyn Stockwood, the vicar of Great St Mary's, the focus was on "Glory to God in the High St" – a socially active gospel. Under Christopher Waddams, the senior chaplain at St Catherine's College, more emphasis was placed on the lectionary, compline and annual retreats. During his undergraduate years Michael participated in "missions" to Manchester and Bermondsey, which involved door-to-door visits and mission services. He also became a blood donor and continued to be one for nearly fifty years.

In 1960, having graduated with honours in Anthropology, Michael obtained funding from the British Council of Churches to augment a fellowship from the East African Institute for Social & Economic Research at Makerere University, to undertake research among the Kenya Luo (the 'tribe' from which Tom Mboya, Oginga Odinga and Pres. Barak Obama's ancestors came) and to advise the Christian Council of Kenya on how it should respond to the independence of Kenya – which came about in 1963. From this research he produced a PhD thesis on the role of the primary school in rural areas and a book, "*Change and Challenge*" (1964) – the latter in fulfilment of his obligations to his sponsors.

He returned to England in 1962, completed his thesis on the impact of mission based primary education on the Luo people, and spent a year at the University of British Columbia as a leave substitute. He was then invited by a former curate from Great St Mary's to spend a year researching the heroin addiction problem in Hong Kong under the auspices of the H.K. Council of Social Services (an association of voluntary organisations, chaired by the wife of the Chief Justice). One of his most valued informants was the Brigadier of the Salvation Army, whose observations Whisson found both insightful and inspirational. "*Under the Rug*" was published shortly after he left the colony, to critical acclaim and some discomfiture in official circles.

In 1966 Michael met Adrienne: she was running Kupagani (a non-profit nutritious food distribution organisation in the Western Cape) and he was helping out at SHAWCO (the UCT Student Health and Welfare student outreach programme). Adrienne had matriculated from Butterworth, completed nursing training at Groote Schuur and a BA followed by a BSocSci (Social Work) at UCT in 1962. The couple married in September 1968, on the Feast of St Matthew, in Brakpan. Adrienne was of a Methodist background and, when the pair moved to Grahamstown she became a Quaker.

Michael was invited to UCT by Prof Monica Wilson, where he spent thirteen years as a senior lecturer and, from 1974-8, acting head of the Anthropology Department. Initially, he lodged with Canon John Rowland of St Mary's Woodstock. In 1968 he and Revd Gray Featherstone produced, co-signed and nailed to the cathedral door the challenge to the Church, emulating Martin Luther's "Theses"! He represented the parish at Diocesan and Provincial Synods; and became godparent to children of parishioners of his own generation. At the same time he produced short books on the housing crisis in greater Cape Town for the Diocesan Board of Social Responsibility; the crisis caused by the Group

Areas Act for the Kalk Bay fishermen and the people who had lived in Simon's Town and who had been moved to Ocean View. Research, for Michael, has always had a strong element of meeting people at their point of need – exposing injustice and proposing ethically appropriate remedies.

In 1978, Michael was offered the post of Professor and Head of the Anthropology Department at Rhodes University. He and Adrienne have lived in Grahamstown ever since, seeing their children, David (born in 1970) and Rebecca (1972), through their schooling and University studies at Rhodes and sharing with Adrienne the challenges of work in the fields of nursing and social work, to which she has dedicated her working life.

At Rhodes, Michael served on Senate, the University Council, as Dean of Arts and has taken a full part in the life of the University. For a decade, after his formal retirement in 2002, he devoted much of his time to assisting students from the Anthropology and Journalism Departments in coming to grips with social and economic problems in Grahamstown. His research work has included two studies of labour conditions at the Ford Motor Company in Port Elizabeth; labour relations and development opportunities at the Magwa Tea Corporation in Transkei; the impact of forced removals on the people of Glenmore (where he helped organise a feeding scheme and a basket making business) and Tsweletswele; and a number of evaluations (for funders) of pre-school educational projects in Ciskei, Port Elizabeth, Soweto and the Free State.

Michael joined the Grahamstown Cathedral congregation on coming to Grahamstown where he became a lay minister (with preaching duties) and soon joined the Fort England psychiatric hospital team (under Revd Canon Nancy Charton) where he has taken communion services (with reserved sacrament) on most Saturdays for the past thirty years. He has represented the Cathedral parish at many diocesan synods and the Diocese at many provincial synods since his first initiation in 1968 as a representative of Woodstock parish. He served on the Cathedral Council from 1982-2011, being a Cathedral churchwarden for the last ten years. He edited (and funded) the monthly Cathedral news magazine, "The Spire", for 17 years to 2011. He also served on the Council of the College of the Transfiguration from 1988 to 2011, assisting there with lecturing.

Michael has also been active in the wider community in Grahamstown. After a few years of activism opposing some questionable decisions of the (white) Grahamstown City Council he was chosen for the Negotiating Forum and subsequently elected to the Transitional Local Council in 1995. He served, for 17 years, on the Makana Local Municipal Council and, prior to his retirement in 2011, was for ten years the *de facto* leader of the opposition on the Cacadu District Council. Despite being leader of the minority, opposition, party, he was widely respected in all communities for his work on the Councils and was chosen as Grahamstown's Citizen of the Year in 2009.

Although he claims to have "retired" from all his offices, other than that of Lay Minister, Michael preached on five occasions over Passiontide and Easter in 2012, and delivered (and compiled) the views of Pontius Pilate for a dramatic presentation at the Three Hour Service on Good Friday.