

THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN MISSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY (SAMS)

1. Background

Missiology as an academic discipline is relatively young in South Africa. The first chair in Missiology was established in 1959 at the University of Stellenbosch (Prof WJ van der Merwe). Nine years later, in 1968, SAMS was formed as a result of the initiative of David J Bosch and a few colleagues.

2. Functioning

SAMS is a loosely structured community of about 130 scholars and practitioners of mission, which is held together by a common commitment to reflect critically on mission, to attend an annual congress and produce an academic journal, *Missionalia*. The following quote from the 'Vision' statement in the SAMS constitution gives an indication of how we see ourselves:

SAMS functions for the purpose of promoting studies relating to various approaches to Christian mission within a Southern African context. It serves as a forum for all its members in which they may communicate their faith in Jesus Christ, debate issues, and share their missiological research and practical experience with one another, other organisations and groups as well as the general public. Hereby SAMS wishes to serve the Kingdom of God and work for the transformation of society to its fullest potential. It is the vision of SAMS to promote greater understanding of the needs and problems which disciples of Christ experience and joy in the successes they achieve. It also promotes dialogue with people of diverse cultural and religious traditions, in order to understand them and their relations to God, to each other and to the whole of creation.

2.1 Annual congresses

SAMS members meet annually in January for a 2,5 day congress devoted to a theme determined at the previous year's congress. Plenary sessions, smaller 'forum' sessions and a business meeting make up the programme.

2.1.1 Participation

Since its inception SAMS was ecumenical, in the sense of drawing together people from different denominational, cultural and language backgrounds, but also in the sense of being concerned about the inclusive welfare of the inhabited world (total context) in which we live. Initially this was due primarily to the influence of David Bosch, with his inclusive ecclesiology and his commitment to achieving shalom in society through non-violent and reconciliatory action. Gradually this became the SAMS ethos, so that the congress committee ensured that there were speakers from across the political and denominational spectrum at every congress. It was particularly the 'racial' divide in South Africa that SAMS started bridging by inviting black church leaders as speakers and accepting them as members, in distinction from the other academic societies in South Africa (e.g., Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, Practical Theology, etc.). For a long time academic theology in South Africa was dominated by white and male (mainly Afrikaner) theologians. In our 2004 congress, about 50% of our congress participants were black and about 15% women.

It is also important to point out that our name is not 'South African' but 'Southern African' Missiological Society. We strive to foster a broader African debate on mission, even though South African issues have long dominated the agenda. In recent years we have become more representative, with theologians from Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique and Swaziland becoming actively involved.

Even though we still have a long way to go in order to become a fully representative Southern African theological community – in terms of overcoming the male, white, South African and Reformed domination of the agenda – we have achieved significant progress in this regard already.

2.1.2 Themes

The themes selected for congresses can be characterised as contextual, with a leaning towards the political/economic/social end of the continuum, rather than the evangelistic/holiness/church growth end. Over the years this alienated some white evangelicals, Pentecostals and charismatics, so that in this respect too we are not as representative as we want to be. Perhaps we are simply paying the price for trying to be contextually relevant in the highly polarised South African context of the 1980s and early 1990s. However, a significant number of black evangelicals, Pentecostals and charismatics are active members and participants.

The themes of some recent congresses may give an impression of our contemporary concerns: Mission and development (2003); Mission and prophecy (2004); Mission and the New Testament (2005).

2.2 *Missionalia*

Missionalia is the official journal of SAMS, but not all papers read at SAMS congresses are published in it. For one thing, not all plenary or forum speakers get round to polishing their presentations for publication in an academic journal. Secondly, *Missionalia* is a research journal, accredited with the SA government's Department of Education so that an academic earns her/his university a financial reward for getting an article published in it. To keep this accreditation we need to apply a strict system of academic scrutiny to all articles submitted to us, whether they are SAMS members or not. Articles are refereed independently and 'blindly' by three members of an editorial panel.

In terms of personnel, David Bosch established the journal single-handedly in 1973 and remained the editor until his tragic and untimely death in April 1992, when his mantle fell on me. We had to appoint an editorial committee of six to do what David did, so I am called 'coordinating editor' rather than merely 'editor.'

3. Missionary, missiological, ecumenical – fostering missional integrity

Perhaps it is symbolic that we have our SAMS congresses in January because, like the Roman deity of old, we have two faces – that look in different directions. On the one hand a SAMS congress is something of a 'revival' meeting (in the best and most inclusive sense of that word) through which practitioners of (various shades of) mission gain new clarity and receive spiritual empowerment for a new year's work. So we face the concrete Southern African reality and the challenges it poses to Christian churches. On the other hand (or with the other face) we seek to sustain a 'hard-nosed' academic journal and engage in critical scholarship by interacting with other theologians and with scholars from other disciplines.

This tension is not new, but it has special relevance when we discuss it here in Malaysia, as diverse missiological societies and as an international missiological society, to clarify our particular contribution(s) and calling(s). University faculties/schools of theology, seminaries, churches, mission societies and missiological societies may respond differently to the tension between these two faces or may even opt out of the tension by choosing the one face against the other, but I believe that we as missiological societies individually and collectively – living as we do in the overlap between the academic and the activist modes of mission – have to address it if we are to achieve integrity in mission – and in missiology. Perhaps we in SAMS have succeeded to some extent in making the tension between our academic and our activist face a creative rather than an alienating one, thanks to the legacy of David Bosch, taken further by Willem Saayman and now Tinyiko Maluleke (as General Secretaries), but I am not sure if we have developed an adequate theological method to help us consciously deepen this interaction.

It is in the area of worldwide intercontextual debate on missiological method that IAMS can perhaps help regional societies the most in their search for missional integrity.

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