

“ONE PLANTS, ANOTHER WATERS, BUT GOD GIVES THE INCREASE”!

By Missionary kid, Paul M. Riley

Nicholas Bhengu was born in South Africa in the heart of Zululand on September 5, 1909. His grandfather was a Zulu chief. His parents were both educated. They had found the Lord in Mission Schools. His father was a respected Lutheran minister. Nicholas received an education in several Mission Schools. Like many educated Africans he felt he was “neither fish nor fowl”. He was not comfortable with the Zulu tribal practices, yet was uncomfortable acting like a “black European”. He was aware that unskilled and uneducated Africans were paid very low wages, so he excelled in school and graduated from Marianhill College. Since he spoke fluent Zulu and English and was tall, handsome, and had a very engaging personality, he had no trouble getting jobs as a court interpreter, office clerk, and school teacher. Nicholas thought social recognition and financial success would make him happy. He started going to the bioscope [cinema] so he could emulate the successful people in the movies. Like the movie stars, he started smoking expensive cigarettes and kept expensive whisky and shot glasses near him to impress his affluent friends. He also started dressing, acting, and even talking like the rich movie characters, but still he was not happy. The only times he really felt any happiness was when he helped someone less fortunate than himself.

Next, Nicholas got interested in the struggle for African advancement. He worked for the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union. Because this didn’t satisfy him he moved to another city (Kimberley), where he became a member of the Communist Party thinking Communism would solve all the social problems of South Africa. At first he believed the Communist teaching that Religion was the “opium” of suffering people. Then he found that the Communist leaders had hidden agendas and were enslaving and intimidating poor and ignorant people. They were also locking up or eliminating any intellectuals who might disagree with them in the future.

One day, on the way to and from work, Nicholas noticed that a large tent had been erected in an open field. A sign advertised Revival Meetings. At times, passing the tent, he heard songs that he had sung in his father’s church when he was very young. He became more and more upset. How dare these foreigners come and try to convert his people? If they were preaching the truth, why weren’t there African spiritual leaders following in their footsteps?

Finally Nicholas decided to go to the meeting and expose these impostors. He would go to the platform and tell the audience that they were being duped! When he entered the tent he was gripped by the familiar songs and then the sermon. The preacher was crying when he begged the people confess their sins and escape God’s judgment. At the end of the sermon Nicholas was surprised that no one responded to the altar call. After the audience had left, Nicholas went forward and talked to the Evangelist and his Team who were packing up to leave. He noted that the preacher was very discouraged. He had preached in the tent for two weeks but so far had no converts. The team had train reservations to leave that night to travel to Cape Town and catch a ship to return to the United States. When Nicholas came forward and started talking with the preacher, a team member was sent to the railroad station to change the train reservations to the next day. The Evangelist realized that God was calling a potential Spiritual Leader. Nicholas and the preacher talked late into the night. The preacher explained the need for African Evangelists who were completely surrendered to God. They would have more success than foreigners. The gospel message had to be made more relevant to Africans. They needed a “Moses” to lead them into their “promised land”. Still Nicholas showed no response to the

pleading of the Evangelist. After a long prayer for his salvation, Nicholas went home and decided to kneel at his bedside and say a prayer like he did when he was a child. Suddenly he was overwhelmed with the sense of God's love and mercy and his spiritual need. He surrendered completely to God's will. His empty soul was filled to overflowing. He forgot to smoke a cigarette and have the usual drink before going to sleep. For the first time in many years he had uninterrupted peaceful sleep.

The next morning, out of habit, Nicholas poured a shot of whisky and lit a cigarette. It was strange, the smoke smelled awful, he had to extinguish the cigarette. He then tried the whisky, but that tasted awful as well. Suddenly he remembered, he was saved, he was now a new creature. He now hated his old life. He rushed down to the railroad station to tell the Evangelist that his efforts were not in vain, only to see the train leaving in the distance.

Nicholas was only 21 years old when he was converted. He felt a burden for those of his fellow Africans who were discouraged, unemployed, and becoming criminals. He also felt called to reach African intellectuals who like him were headed for self destruction. He graduated from Bible School and started preaching to bigger and bigger crowds. Some of the crowds numbered over thirty thousand. He was called the "Billy Graham" of South Africa! He started many churches, opened a Bible School and travelled all over the world. He refused to take an offering at his Evangelical Crusades. He also refused to make appeals for money. He chose to depend entirely on God's promises! Prayer was the answer to all his problems! Yet all his expenses were paid on time. He was surprised when white business men started sending regular contributions to his ministry. These business men wrote that their workers, who had been saved in the meetings, had changed completely. They no longer stole from their companies and were working hard even when the boss was gone. Company profits had soared and companies were encouraging their workers to attend the meeting and go to church, even though the company owners were not Christians! It was the best insurance for their companies! Many thousand people were converted in his crusades. After the meetings trucks had to be hired to return stolen goods, including firearms, to their rightful owners. The victims of the thefts were so amazed that they refused to press charges. Converts had no trouble getting work! Honest workers were very much in demand! The police noted a marked decrease in crime in the cities where Rev. Bhengu had preached. He followed his converts, stressing further religious education for them. He encouraged student converts to learn to take leadership roles in business, industry and in their churches. They had allowed foreigners to be leaders for too long because they were too afraid of responsibility. Missionaries had trained and prepared them for leadership, now it was time to assume that role! When South Africa became a democracy, Christian black leaders must be ready, otherwise there would be riots and bloodshed. People would listen to black leadership and direction. For a long time after elections, many black people would be distrustful of white people!

Some of our Nazarene African Church Leaders, including Rev. Juliet Ndzimandze were led to the Lord by Rev. Bhengu. He was very humble and gave God the credit for all of his achievements! He trained his converts to be spiritual leaders in their communities.

Rev. Bhengu was anxious to contact the American Evangelist who had helped convert him. He had forgotten to ask the man's name. He went to the police station that would have issued permits for the tent meetings, but no permit could be found. He met the Christian leaders of many South African Churches, but no one had heard anything about the Evangelical team. In his travels in America he could not find any record of an Evangelist who was in South Africa in 1930. He knew that the Evangelist must have been very discouraged when he returned to America with no record of any conversions.

Rev. Bhengu held two different Revival meetings at Edwaleni Technical College, where my father taught motor mechanics. His audience was over two hundred very bright students studying for several trades. Several of the students had become rebellious, privately mocking the missionaries and the Christian teachers. At the time we did not know communist literature was being smuggled into the school. The students were being urged to go on strike, even to attack their missionaries and teachers, and to stop going to church or listening to the missionaries.

In one of his sermons, Rev. Bhengu told about returning to his grandfather's old home site in Zululand. He had to trek through bush country to reach the site of the old homestead. Suddenly in the distance he heard shouting, then he saw a very spry, muscular, young man shouting and running towards him. The man was dressed like a Zulu warrior. (That was the way Zulu young men dressed when they went "courting".) The man was acting very excited, he was running and jumping. He carried a decorated rawhide shield in his left hand and was wielding a large knob-stick ('knobkerrie') in his right hand. He would leap over a tall bush, then turn around and beat the bush to pieces, and then do the same to the next bush! Rev. Bhengu thought he would be next so he turned to flee. "Wait" the warrior shouted, "I want to tell you my good news. I have got it. I have got it. I have got it". "What do you have"? Bhengu asked. The man carefully removed the leopard skin vest. Underneath he wore a British Army surplus wool khaki shirt. He carefully removed a huge brass safety pin that was securing the flap of the left pocket, and then he unbuttoned the flap. Obviously, he had something very precious! He carefully reached inside the pocket and pulled out a multicolored square of beadwork. The man then told his story. Over a year previously he had seen and immediately fell in love with a beautiful girl, but she showed no interest in him. He had sent her gifts, but they were returned. He had tried to assist her when she went to the river to wash clothes and fetch water. He also offered to help her gather firewood and plow her family garden with his father's oxen, but she screamed at him and told him to "get lost". He finally stood by the path to the river one morning and told her he loved her and wanted her to be his wife. She screamed at him and grabbed a stick and chased him, telling him she would rather marry a wart hog! After that, every morning, without fail, rain or shine, he would bathe and dress up in his "courting outfit". He would wait by the path to the river. Each time, when she passed by, all he would say was: "What about my words." She would chase him with a stick and scream at him. With time, her rage slowly diminished until she started completely ignoring him. Still every morning for over a year, he would repeat the same words. That particular morning she told him to go to her sister's house. There he was given the square of beadwork. It was a Zulu "love letter" accepting his marriage proposal. Each line of beads was a different love message. The man carefully placed the precious object back into his pocket over his heart, then replaced the safety pin, then started running and jumping and attacking the bushes again. He continued all day long, stopping friends, relatives and strangers and telling them the complete story over and over again, sharing his joy with them. He felt compelled to tell his story to everybody! Late that afternoon Bhengu was in a small town about ten miles from where he first met the man. He saw a small crowd across the street. As he approached he heard a familiar voice. There was the Zulu warrior showing the crowd his "nhlanhla"(unexpected good fortune). The flap of his shirt pocket was threadbare from removing and replacing the safety pin so many times! He showed no sign of tiring! Everyone was hugging and congratulating him.

When Rev. Bhengu finished speaking, he had the undivided attention of every student in the chapel. He then told them how much more persistent God had been with them and yet they were still

rejecting Him. When any one of them came to Christ there would be more joy in Heaven than what the Zulu warrior had experienced. Hearts melted and almost the entire student body rushed to the altar. Initially the troublemakers tried to confront Rev. Bhengu, but the love, concern, and understanding he showed for them melted their hearts and at least two of them became church leaders. In his last meeting, Rev. Bhengu told this account of his conversion and call to become a spiritual leader of his people.

Rev. Bhengu radiated God's presence wherever he went. Even white racists soon forgot the color of his skin when they talked to him. He helped break down racial barriers in South Africa. Smiling he would say to white racists who cursed him; "Why do you have a white skin but a black heart when I have a black skin, but Jesus has given me a white heart. Why don't you let Him give you a white heart? He urged white people to stay in South Africa after black leaders were elected. South Africa was like a piano. It needed both white and black "keys". His converts helped in South Africa transitioning into a peaceful democracy after so many years of racial division and tension. That took several miracles!

For several years there were secret meeting between the leaders of the South African Apartheid government, tribal leaders, political parties, the Communist party, freedom fighters, United Nation officials and Western diplomats. Initially, every faction demanded retribution against some of the other factions that had harmed them. It soon became apparent that only a miracle could bring the sides together. The African preachers appealed to their members to go to their churches and keep a prayer vigil around the clock until the crisis had resolved. One by one the problems were resolved as the Christians humbled themselves and prayed for God to heal their land. Finally there was one last big issue. The Zulu leaders refused to participate in the election. Traditionally Zulus had considered themselves far superior to other Africans! Nelson Mandela was a Xhosa. Zulus and Xhosas had fought each other for two hundred years. Recent clashes between the two tribes had resulted in thousands of deaths! Zulus were the largest political group and yet would not be properly represented! Radical Zulu leaders threatened to join radical whites, stage a coup, and then form their own Bipartite Government. If this had happened, the resulting genocide would have been far worse than what had happened anywhere else in Africa. The more foreign diplomats tried to resolve the issue the angrier the Zulus became. Only another miracle could save the election! The prayer vigils increased, church, tribal, and racial barriers began to evaporate as people cried out to God.

A few days before the election, a very unassuming, Spirit-filled, black man from Kenya flew down to Zululand to try one last time to get the Zulus to vote in the election. Election officials were dumbfounded when almost at the last minute an agreement was reached. The Christians prayed like never before! God was their Country's only hope! A last minute uprising was still a real possibility!

Miraculously, at election time [April 26 to 29, 1994], every South African adult had a chance to vote. The turnout was amazing. Tribal and racial hatreds vanished. Church leaders who had been inspired by Rev. Bhengu, including Bishop Tutu, helped set up a Reconciliation Committee. If past atrocities were confessed, then those responsible would be forgiven. The rest of the world was amazed by the love and restraint showed by so many who had suffered for many years. Rev. Bhengu had known, that someday, his people would be free. Only fully committed Christian leaders supported by prayer warriors could save the country from itself! He died several years before his people were free, but with God's help, he with other Spiritual Leaders, had prepared Christians to lead his country thanks to the unknown Evangelist from America.

Rev. Bhengu said that the Evangelist, who thought that his South African Campaign was a complete failure, would be really surprised when he entered Heaven and met a large crowd of witnesses including Rev. Bhengu. He would also be surprised to meet his Master and hear the words: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant".

Rev. Bhengu died in 1985. He had started at least fifty all black, autonomous, self-governing, self-supporting and especially self-propagating Churches. Several African evangelists, saved in his meetings, were touring the country. South African missionaries were going to other countries. Foreign missionaries were turning their work over to local missionaries and pastors, inspired by Rev. Bhengu and his followers, and were leaving to open work in more needy areas. Rev. Bhengu always encouraged his converts to return to their own local churches and missions and help their local churches reach out and start churches in un-churched places. Improvement in living standards and decrease in crimes and violence was seen after churches were started in these communities.

There were large gangs of criminals (called Tsotsis) in the Black Townships. They were determined to keep the Evangelists out of their territories. One Evangelist was told that he would be killed if he continued to preach. When he was ready to preach one night, he was told a carload of Tsotsis were waiting along the road to "necklace" and kill the Evangelical Team after they left the Meeting. Before leaving the meeting the team prayed for God's protection. They encountered no trouble on the way home. The next day the Van load of well armed thugs was found beside the road. All the occupants were dead. They had old tires and cans of gasoline with them! Because of the cold weather that night, the engine had been left running. A carbon monoxide exhaust leak had killed all of them! After that, the gangs left the Christians alone!

Rev. Bhengu's disciples carry on with his work supported by the prayers of thousands of his converts. More than anything else Rev. Bhengu demonstrated the power of prayer that later saved his country. Many political figures rushed to get the credit for South Africa's political success. But the Christians who had prayed so fervently, quietly smiled, knowing Who really deserved the credit!

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