

Volume 3 1991

During a recent 9 000 km Bible-teaching and literature-distribution field trip, one of our missionaries managed to deliver a pick-up-truck-load of Bibles, New Testaments and Gospel booklets to over joyed believers in various Marxist (MPLA-controlled) areas of Angola. During this eventful journey our missionary suffered a severe bout of Malaria, discovered areas where not even the pastors had Bibles, and learnt first-hand of the inspiring testimonies of suffering Christians whose faith had triumphed in spite of unbelievable hardships. This is what he reports:

The roads were terrible, even worse than the Beira corridor of Central Mozambique. Every town had security check points (road blocks) and most of the towns had been bombed. There was no infrastructure, no plumbing and no electricity. The socialist economic system of ration cards was still maintained throughout the areas I visited. In some areas the intense fighting made further travel impossible.

Much of the countryside is depopulated, with many towns swollen with refugees who had lost everything in the war. The whole country is divided between the communist MPLA-controlled North and West, and the UNITA Resistance-controlled South East. Many families have also been divided. Many individuals haven't even seen other family members for 15 or more years!

The civil war has also divided the churches. There has been virtually no contact between the believers in Marxist Angola and those in "Free Angola". The fear of being arrested continued to keep the believers apart. Nevertheless, the churches in Marxist Angola seem to be well organised, though divided into two main associations: The Association of Evangelicals of Angola (AEA), and the (World Council of Churches Affiliated) Council of Churches of Angola (CAI).

All the believers that I spoke to reported that the Church had grown in numbers and in faith. Despite the persecution and on going civil war the true Christians had stood firm in their faith. In fact, the evangelicals had suffered harsh restrictions and imprisonments under the (Roman

Catholic) Portuguese colonial rule even before the Cuban persecution began.

After the communist revolution of 1975, when the Portuguese abandoned their 500-year-old colony, and the Cubans invaded, quite a number of atrocities took place all over the country. These atrocities were committed mainly by Cubans in order to terrorise the people into submission and force them to support the MPLA cause. Certain members of the MPLA government and their local commissars openly declared war on the Church. The Bible-believing churches were not recognised by the MPLA government and evangelicals were restricted in their travelling and often prevented from preaching. Schools set up by the churches were not recognised, and Christian students were denied higher education. Missionaries were forced to leave Angola with just 24 hours notice. Others were jailed and interrogated, but most were released and threatened not to preach the Gospel. “There is only ONE god,” the Marxists declared, “the man with a gun — he has the power over life and death.”

Many pastors who preached during that time in the areas where the UNITA resistance operated were arrested by the MPLA, accused of “collaborating” and jailed. Many were never seen again.

The Marxist government then placed many restrictions on the Church by law. Christians were forbidden to hold open-air meetings, house meetings or to preach anywhere outside of a registered church. No new churches were to be built. The security police monitored pastors and scrutinised all aspects of church activities. All schools under church control were closed down and confiscated. Christian literature was confiscated and destroyed. Political meetings were often held on Sundays, and those who failed to attend were treated with suspicion and often arrested. Sports meetings were held on Sundays to attract young people, and what little food or clothing was available was often only sold on Sunday mornings, in order to entice Christians out of church attendance. Students were particularly intimidated, and those who spoke out against atheism or communist teaching were severely persecuted.

On occasions, the Marxist war against God was blatant. Churches were desecrated and destroyed. Pastors were shot and congregations were locked into their buildings, which were burnt down. However, the Roman Catholic and WCC related (CAI) mainline churches do not seem to have been affected by this. It was the independent evangelical churches which suffered the brunt of the open persecution.

During the last few years, the MPLA government’s official policy towards the churches has changed from hostility to tolerance. The economic failure of socialism, the devastation caused

by the resultant civil war, their military defeats suffered on the battlefields, and the inability of the commissars to intimidate Christians to forsake their faith has led the government to officially recognise the evangelical churches and ease many of the restrictions.

Another encouraging development is how the various evangelical denominations work together. The Baptist, Pentecostal and Reformed churches have one Theological Seminary in Southern Angola, where they all co-operate together on the basis of the authority of the Bible as God's Word and the Deity of Christ Jesus. As one pastor explained:

"Suffering taught us how to work together and most of all, how to live together. We had to stand together to defend the Faith against atheism and to keep our freedom."

Another declared:

"We fight a common enemy, let us put aside minor points of disputing and the pride, and let us work together for the furthering of God's Kingdom and glory." This is how the Church has survived under persecution, restrictions and intimidation.

The Church in Angola continues to face overwhelming problems amidst the social upheaval and wreckage of 30 years of war and 16 years of socialism. Some restrictions are still in force and some fighting continues, despite the announced cease-fire. There is a desperate shortage of Bibles, Christian workers, administrative, medical and evangelistic equipment and Bible teaching. Amidst this desperate need it was heartrending to hear of a shipment of \$40 000 worth of Bibles and Christian literature that was delivered by an overseas mission over four years ago. Apparently it was delivered to the wrong people, because it was all destroyed. As one pastor declared:

"We never received any of the literature that was sent to us by groups from all over the world. It never reached us."

As I attempted to establish a new network of couriers and evangelists in Namibia to distribute much-needed Bibles and Christian literature across the border into Angola, I was frustrated by the prevalent apathy. The churches in Ovamboland have almost no contact with the churches in neighbouring Angola — despite sharing a common language and tribal affiliation.

Not only were the church members in Ovamboland disinterested in their missionary responsibilities, but many of the pastors seemed more interested in worldly matters and making money than in the business of God's Kingdom. Nowadays, drunkenness, immorality and smuggling dominate life in Ovambo. What a contrast with the steadfast witness of the vibrant

Christian Church in Angola.

The Lord works in amazing ways. While distributing a truck-load of Bibles and Gospels in Angola, I found a congregation who had received a large consignment of Lomwe New Testaments from some well-meaning foreign visitors. However, as Lomwe is a language only understood 3 000km to the East — in Mozambique, I was glad to take these precious Bibles out for our next mission to Mozambique. I never thought I would transport Bibles out of Angola!

Pray for the Lord to thrust out more workers to this needy country, and pray for revival in Angola.