

Is religious freedom misused in Zimbabwe? Steve Askin

"LOOK for the most beautiful garden in Chipinge," said the directions to the home of "Auntie Betsy" Snyders. Her bougainvillea-covered house and the tiny charismatic evangelical groups she and a daughter helped organise in the eastern highlands are unlikely flashpoints in a conflict over the role of religion in Zimbabwe's political life, and in neighbouring Mozambique.

Leaders of Zimbabwe's mainline churches — some conservative evangelicals, backed by groups in the United States, use religion as a cover for political organising against both countries' socialist governments. "In their fantasies they are working toward a day when this government will collapse and South Africa can establish a puppet regime," charges Revd Murombedzi Kuchera, General Secretary of the Zimbabwean Christian Council (ZCC).

Political leaders fear that churches may be used, as has sometimes happened in Latin America, to funnel covert aid to right-wing rebel groups. President Canaan Muzorewa said government respects religious freedom but would act harshly if it found evidence to support his suspicion that some people who come as missionaries are actually "on the payroll of South Africa".

Though reluctant to respond publicly, some evangelicals say these attacks actually spring from mainline churches' envy of their fast-growing churches. Conservative churches say they also feel pressed to endorse government policies or maintain silence. "This is a socialist country, so we're not free to publicise our work," said a white Zimbabwean official of the evangelical aid group, *Compassion Ministries*.

In a nation where apartheid-style minority rule was overthrown only seven years ago, white-black tension also fuels intra-church conflict. Revd Noah Pashapa of Harare's Central Baptist Church, a black evangelical, said many foreign missionaries and some local whites misidentify Christianity "with westernism, with colonialism, with an American way of life".

The religious right became a focus of debate here after an American fundamentalist, Revd Ralph Mahoney, returned home from a religious crusade here to write a tract attacking Zimbabwe as a communist tyranny and praising South Africa as an embattled island of democracy.

Black clergy reacted harshly. In an open letter to Mahoney, a group of black pastors who had supported the crusade denounced him for using their churches in "promoting apartheid" and said they would "close the door to any missionary" espousing similar views.

Revd Kuchera even suggested that government bar "religious right" preachers from the country, but Deputy Prime Minister Simon Muzenda told him this would provoke a dangerous backlash from conservatives, waiting to say, "look at this Marxist government cracking down on the church".

Zimbabwe's Marxist yet religious political leaders — most cabinet members

are practising Christians and the President has written two books on liberation theology — are, however, investigating several mission agencies.

The government officials say that Thomas Schaaf, a former missionary and agricultural extension worker in Mutare, was already under investigation when he rushed out of the country about 19 months ago and resurfaced in Washington as lobbyist for the South African-backed Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO). The same sources report that *Baton Rouge*, Louisiana — US based Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, is among those now being investigated for possible links to RENAMO, but authorities acknowledge that their suspicions are not backed by hard evidence.

The political-religious tension has penetrated even to the small tidy, colonial-style town of Chipinge on the eastern edge of Zimbabwe.

"Auntie Betsy" Snyders graciously welcomes visitors to a living room dominated by an oil painting of her late husband — killed in 1975, she says, by guerillas fighting for majority rule — and stuffed, mounted sailfish. But the 61-year-old great-grandmother quickly went "off the record" when asked about her work with *Shekinah Ministries*, a Pentecostal fellowship which broke away from Chipinge's white Assemblies of God church and has sought funds in the US for distribution of Bibles to RENAMO fighters inside Mozambique. Snyders would say only that she has stopped working with *Shekinah*.

As silent as her mother on Mozambique, daughter Lorraine Odendaal, former secretary to *Shekinah*, directed all questions to *Shekinah's* president, Michael Howard, an Assemblies of God pastor who would be briefly passing through Zimbabwe the following week en route from Malawi to Portugal, to the US.

"If I told you about our work in Mozambique, we would be stopped, forced out of Zimbabwe," said Howard when I met him at a comfortable suburban home in Harare, before refusing to talk in detail. Howard confirmed that he has travelled in "RENAMO-held" territory and said he has seen much evidence of atrocities by Mozambican government forces, but no signs of RENAMO anti-civilian violence.

Fund appeals distributed by churches in the US included an effusive seven-page hand-written 1985 letter in which *Shekinah* said Howard and two colleagues deliberately went into RENAMO territory, hoping to be kidnapped.

"What a reward we had when we preached to the commander and saw him and his friend take off their hats and kneel in the dust accepting Jesus," he continued. They said RENAMO president Alfonso Dhlakama told them "we need God, we want Jesus."

After that meeting, *Shekinah* was allowed by RENAMO to "move freely throughout their military camps and revival fires are burning hot", said a mailing from *Believers Church of Coalinga*, California.

The letter said "they expected to see RENAMO win their military struggle within two years, and want to outfit the entire army with bibles in the meantime!"

This Bible-running in a war zone may seem more reckless than sinister, yet it rouses the anger of church and government leaders alike in Zimbabwe, which maintains upwards of 6 000 soldiers in Mozambique to help fend off forces generally referred to as the RENAMO bandits".

If Zimbabwe found evidence that groups based in this country were working with RENAMO it would "ban them", said Information Minister Nathan Shamuyarira.

Catholic Justice and Peace Commission chairman Michael Auret fears that pro-RENAMO church people foster a climate in which "misguided and misinformed" American and European conservatives "are financially and morally supporting these murderers in their destructive activities".

Auret, who has had frank discussions with the Zimbabwe government on local human rights issues, recently denounced the Mozambique rebels, after he visited the scene of a "barbaric and brutal" raid on northeast Zimbabwe in which RENAMO men killed 11 civilians, including a husband, wife and four small children who were ordered out of their huts and shot down at "point blank range".

Only one missionary to Zimbabwe, Thomas Schaaf, has openly embraced RENAMO, and he did so only after leaving the country one step ahead of a CIO investigation.

Schaaf's fellow church members of the *One Way Christian Centre* in Mutare were shocked when he showed up in the US as a RENAMO spokesman, says pastor Duane Udd, a missionary from Washington State. Udd describes the independent charismatic church as totally "apolitical" and last year issued a public statement disassociating it from Schaaf.

Despite some questions about Schaaf from security police, Udd said the group's mission and medical aid work in Mozambique continues with official acceptance. In May, seven people, including an infant, were kidnapped by RENAMO from a mission in Mozambique operated by Udd's church and other charismatics. These were all subsequently released on August 18 in Malawi.

Though none of its critics claim to have firm evidence of RENAMO connection, suspicion probably falls most heavily on US-based *Jimmy Swaggart Ministries*, which funds relief programmes for Mozambican war victims inside the country and in neighbouring states.

Swaggart aides in the US refused to comment last year, when an official of the pro-RENAMO "Mozambique Information Office" said that the group was providing aid through churches in "RENAMO-held" territory.

David van Rensburg, the white Zimbabwean who coordinates *Swaggart's* aid for Mozambican famine victims and refugees in Zimbabwe, suggests that un-

lounded suspicions have been roused by mainline church officials who condemn his group privately but won't confront him publicly.

Van Rensburg would not comment or respond directly when asked if his group has links to RENAMO, but he said he has close and cordial relations with Zimbabwean and Mozambican officials and works only under official auspices in both countries. To underline the point, Van Rensburg displayed a pile of official correspondence with governments in the region, but refused to let a reporter examine them.

Citing a letter from Joe Chambal, Mozambique's Director of Religious Affairs, Van Rensburg said the government had even agreed to broadcast *Swaggart's*

TV programmes in Maputo. Interviewed two days earlier, Chambal had praised *Swaggart Ministeries'* relief work but said he had repeatedly informed Van Rensburg that the programmes would not be telecast. Chambal said Mozambique has questions about the motivations of some donors but, with four million people afflicted by war-induced famine, must welcome anyone who comes bearing gifts.

Nor has Zimbabwe turned away any mission groups, despite official fears. Because Zimbabwe recognises religious freedom as "a constitutional right and a political right" Information Minister Shamuyarira said evangelical fears of a "crackdown" here are likewise ill-founded.

Some church groups, ironically, take a

harder line than government. ZCC leader Kuchera argues for a moratorium on the sending of missionaries to preach in Zimbabwe. He has urged immigration authorities — who must certify that a person's skills are needed before granting permits to reside and work in Zimbabwe — to reject those missionaries who don't also bring technical skills useful in the country's economic development.

Baptist pastor Pashapa doesn't want government to step in but argues that churches themselves should sometimes turn away missionaries. In his view, Africa can be genuinely Christian only when Africans separate the essential core of Christ's teachings from the missionary's "western Christian civilisation mentality". □