

# **RHENISH MISSION SOCIETY IN SOUTH AFRICA: 1829 - 1965**

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## **1 Introduction**

I have been involved in researching the activities of the Rhenish Mission Society (RMS) (*Rhenische Missions-Gesellschaft* / *Rynse Sendinggenootskap*) in South Africa over well over thirty years. This research had mainly been to satisfy my personal curiosity, as well as part of my academic endeavours. I was fortunate to have had a grandfather who was a keen historian who seemed to have seen in me a willing disciple to convey much of what he knew. It was from him that I first heard of the RMS, to which he was very attached and how unhappy he was about their withdrawal from South Africa and the reasons why it was done. At a much later stage I was also to discover that my maternal slave ancestress was the eighth person to be baptised in the Rhenish Mission Church at Worcester and that an ancestor was one of the first pupils of the *Katechetenschule* that was established by RMS missionary Johann Friedrich Budler at Wupperthal. I guess, my parents' interest in mission work further spurred on my interest in mission work.

In my pursuit after coming to know more about the RMS brought me in contact with many missionary descendants and should mention the names of Dr Elfriede (Elfie) Strassberger, a fourth generation descendant of Rhenish missionaries, Mr Helmuth Meyer, the son of RMS missionary Gottlieb Meyer, the last RMS missionary at Steinkopf and with whom my grandfather was familiar, Mrs Dorothy Johnman (née Radloff), a descendant of three RMS missionaries and Prof. Lydia Baumbach and her aunt, Mrs Agnes Haldenwang, the daughter of Stellenbosch RMS missionary, Jacob Weber. All of these people, and many more, provided me with very valuable information of RMS missionaries. Other descendants were able to give me valuable photographs and other documents related to the RMS and today form part of *Van Wijk Rhenish Mission Collection*, which is currently housed at the Special Collections (Africana) of the Stellenbosch University Library (previously the JS Gericke Library). This collection is the largest collection of mainly photographic material on the work of the Rhenish Mission Society in South Africa.

## **2 The Rhenish Mission Society**

The "*Vereinigte Rheinischen Missions-Gesellschaft*" (United Rhenish Mission Society) was formed on 23 September 1828 in Mettmann, currently a suburb of the German industrial city of Wuppertal (without the "h"<sup>1</sup>), when three smaller mission societies at Barmen, Elberfeld and Cologne (Köln) amalgamated in order to utilize their available resources more effectively. The RMS headquarters was in Rudolfstrasse, Unter-Barmen, where it remains to today<sup>2</sup>. The RMS eventually became the largest mission society in Germany, as well as on the European continent. It is currently known as the *Vereinte Evangelische Mission* (United

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<sup>1</sup> Wupperthal, with the "h", refers to the Rhenish mission village in the Cederberg, near Clanwilliam.

<sup>2</sup> The Barmen society had already started a training seminary at the time of the amalgamation.

Evangelical Mission) after amalgamating with the Bethel Mission (est. in 1886) in 1971.

At the time of its establishment, four candidates at the seminary at Barmen were ready to be ordained and sent out to the mission field. The four Barmen missionary trainees were: Paul(us) Daniel Lückhoff, who was a former Elberfeld carpenter, Johann Gottlieb Leipoldt (sr), a shoemaker from Plohn in Saxony, Gustav Adolph Zahn, the son of a prominent Lutheran minister of Wasserthaleben, Schwarzburg-Sondershausen, who was also a carpenter, and Baron Theobald von Wurmb, a former gentleman soldier of Rudolstadt, in Saxony. The RMS leadership (*Deputation*), however, was uncertain as to where they should send their trainees. A pamphlet that circulated the area at the time was to give guidance in this respect. It mentioned the imminent return of the Rev dr John Philip to South Africa and that he was taking some French missionaries with him to South Africa. Consequently Philip was contacted and asked if he would take the Barmen trainees with him, to which he immediately agreed. Dr Philip was one of the large group of clergy and other dignitaries present when the four Barmen trainees were ordained in the old church of the *Unierte Gemeinde* (United Church) in Unter-Barmen on 4 July 1829. The very next day they set off for the mission field, via Rotterdam and England. Leipoldt, Lückhoff and Zahn were never to see their homeland again.

Their arrival in Cape Town on board the famous sail ship, the Charles Kerr, on 7 October 1829 marks the beginning of the work of the RMS in Africa. Philip was keen to keep the first missionaries under his guidance, however, their experiences during the voyage convinced them that they should abide by the instructions of the RMS leadership not to attach themselves to any other mission organization. This, and the advice they received from missionary supporters at the Cape, prompted them to retain their allegiance to the RMS.

The four missionaries all found a work place within less than a year after their arrival. Their work proved to be quite successful and laid the foundation for the extension of their work along the western regions of the Cape Colony and as far north into what is today known as the Republic of Namibia. Zahn became the assistant of the elderly LMS missionary, Arie Vos at Tulbagh, Lückhoff was offered a position as missionary at Stellenbosch and Leipoldt and von Wurmb established the RMS's first mission station on a farm in the Cederberg in January 1830, which they named Wupperthal.

The RMS officially operated nineteen formal mission stations in the former Cape Colony (later known as the Cape Province). The RMS missionaries exerted great influence in all of these areas, which is remembered in oral traditions to this day. Five of these mission stations were established by other mission societies and were later officially transferred to the RMS. These mission stations were: Tulbagh, which was founded by the Tulbagh Missionary Society in 1799, Stellenbosch, which was founded by the Stellenbosch Missionary Society in 1801 and the mission stations at Pella, Steinkopf [Kookfontein and Bijzondermeid] and Komaggas in Little Namaqualand. The Namaqualand mission stations were established by missionaries of the LMS between 1805 and 1829. The mission station at Worcester was established by the RMS in association with the Worcester Missionary Society, a local missionary society. Many of these mission stations had smaller outstations, where there was no resident missionary. Some of these outstations eventually

became independent mission stations. The mission stations at Sarepta, Matroosfontein, De Doorns and Richtersveld originated as outstations.

A clear Rhenish missionary sphere of influence can be distinguished mainly along the western parts of the former Cape Colony. These occur in five concentrations: The Cape Dune area near the foot of the Tygerberg Hills (Sarepta and Matroosfontein), the Boland (Stellenbosch, Tulbagh, Saron, Worcester and De Doorns), the Oliphants River and Cederberg regions (Wupperthal and Ebenezer), the Upper Karoo (Amandelboom, Schietfontein, De Tuin), and Little Namaqualand (Komaggas, Spektakel, Richtersveld, Steinkopf, Concordia and Pella).

Although the mission station at Rietfontein in the Kalahari, was geographically speaking, located within the borders of South Africa, the RMS had always managed it as an integral part of their mission stations in Great Namaqualand (now part of Namibia). When the RMS, however, transferred its work to the Dutch Reformed Mission Church during the first half of the twentieth century, Rietfontein was treated in the same way as the rest of the Rhenish mission congregations within the borders of the Union of South Africa, despite the fact that the majority of the congregation still wanted to remain part of the Rhenish Mission Church in South West Africa, as had always been the case.

### **3 Relationship between the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the RMS**

Throughout the time the RMS was operational in South Africa, it maintained a close relationship with the Dutch Reformed Church. The RMS operated as an inter-denominational mission society, which drew its missionaries from different denominational backgrounds, particularly the Evangelical Lutheran Church (*Evangelische-Lutherische Kirche*), the Reformed Church (*Reformierte Kirche*) and the United Church (*Vereinigte / Unierte Kirche*) in Germany. Missionaries were at liberty to manage matters in their particular congregations according to their particular ecclesiastical background and traditions.

The RMS in South Africa and the Dutch Reformed Church, then the largest denomination in South Africa, had always maintained a cordial relationship. Evidence of this is observed, amongst others, in the way in which most of the RMS congregations were governed, the catechisms (Heidelberg Catechism) that were used, the manner in which RMS missionaries were addressed and the layout of the liturgical centres within the churches. The RMS also willingly released some of its missionaries (at their own request or that of the DRC) to continue mission work under the jurisdiction of the DRC. One such missionary that was released to undertake mission work at Olijvenhoutsdrift (Upington) for the DRC, which was located within the so-called missionary sphere of the RMS, was the Rev. Christian Heinrich Wilhelm Schröder, to work among the Koranna and some Basters living at and around Olijvenhoutsdrift.

There a number of attempts by the DRC to take over the work of the RMS in the Cape Colony between 1880 en 1890, which was opposed by most of its missionaries. Social and financial conditions in Germany after World War I cused the RMS to seriously consider withdrawing from South Africa and transferring its congregations to the DRMC. After a report by Heinrich Driessler, the Barmen leadership assented as it considered the work in the Cape Province no longer to

be mission congregations. However, it did not think their Cape congregations were strong enough to constitute an independent denomination. Attempts to amalgamate all the German mission societies in SA, did not materialise. Since there was so much similarities between the RMS and the DRMC, it was thought feasible to transfer its work to the DRMC, with whom it had had a close working relationship. This decision was not welcomed in most congregations, but was accepted because it appeared to be the best/only workable arrangement. By May 1931 it was finally agreed that each congregation would be transferred upon the death or retirement of the serving RMS missionary. The formal transfer agreement was signed on 26 July 1932. They were then transferred as follows:

- De Doorns: August 1932
- Concordia: 4 March 1934
- Steinkopf: 31 March 1934
- Komaggas: 5 February 1936
- Tulbagh: 28 October 1940
- Worcester: January 1942
- Carnarvon: April 1943
- Stellenbosch: 5 March 1944
- Saron: January 1946
- Sarepta: 2 June 1947.

All the RMS congregations were transferred to the DRMC besides Wupperthal and Matroosfontein.

## **4 Archival sources**

### **4.1. Dutch Reformed Archives, Noordwal Street, Stellenbosch**

There is an agreement between the DRC Archives and the URCSA that all archival material would be housed at Stellenbosch. This includes the records of the former Rhenish Mission congregations. The following archival material of the RMS is available at the DRC Archives in Stellenbosch for scrutiny by researchers:

	<b>Baptismal Registers</b>	<b>Marriage Registers</b>	<b>Membership Registers</b>
<b>De Doorns</b>	None	None	None
<b>Concordia</b>	1932-1937	1932-1937	1932-1937
<b>Steinkopf</b>	1888-1889	Geen	1888
<b>Komaggas</b>	1829-1905 1848-1859	1848-1859	1829-1905
<b>Tulbagh</b>	None	1840-1908	None
<b>Worcester</b>	None	None	None
<b>Carnarvon</b>	1848-1902 1904-1910	1848-1902	1886-1939 1904-1911 1922-1945
<b>Stellenbosch</b>	1831-1891	1839-1863 1864-1892	None
<b>Saron</b>	1904-1945	1847-1872 1872-1885 1885-1901 1901-1917	None
<b>Sarepta</b>	1910-1932	1905-1955	None

## NOTE:

**Stellenbosch Death Register** 1909-1938 at the DRC Archives in Stellenbosch

**Amandelboom registers** are available at the Williston Museum

Some **fragments of registers of Ebenezer / Ebenhaeser** are available at their Olifantsrivier church offices, near Lutzville

All the original **Wupperthal records** were destroyed in the disastrous fire of 2019

### 4.2. Documentation in possession of former RMS congregations

The researcher, Calvin S van Wijk, found original baptismal, marriage and membership registers at the church offices of the following congregations:

<b>Concordia</b>	Church office at Concordia
<b>De Doorns</b>	Church office at De Doorns
<b>De Tuin</b>	According to oral tradition some of the original Registers may be among the documents at Upington (Olijvenhoutsdrift) and Rehoboth, Namibia
<b>Matroosfontein</b>	Church offices of the Selfstandige Rynse Kerk, Elsiesrivier
<b>Richtersveld (Kuboes)</b>	Some of their documents may be found among the Komaggas and Steinkopf documents
<b>Sarepta</b>	Church office at Sarepta
<b>Saron</b>	Church office at Saron
<b>Steinkopf</b>	The original registers were destroyed in a fire in 1868. The Rev. Ferdinand Brecher attempted to record pre-1868 baptisms
<b>Worcester</b>	Church office at Worcester

### 4.3. Van Wijk Rhenish Mission Collection

The *Van Wijk Rhenish Mission Collection* / *Van Wijk Rynse Sendingversameling* is largely a photographic collection consisting of original photographs of Rhenish missionaries and of mission stations, as well as some documents, amongst others, the original diary of RMS missionary **Balthazar Dubiel** (du Biel). This collection had been compiled by Calvin S van Wijk over many years and was donated to the University Library of Stellenbosch University for safekeeping. It is housed in their Special Collections (Africana) Section. The compiler is currently in the process of digitizing and annotating each of the photographs.

The collection is arranged according to the name of the donors in order to acknowledge the different donors of the larger number of photographs. The collection is divided in the following sub-collections:

#### 4.3.1. Bam Collection

Donated by Prof Gustav Bam of Monte Vista, Cape Town

#### 4.3.2. Dubiel Collection

Donated by Mr Du Biel (Dubiel) and his cousin, Mrs Winnefred Sale (née Wehmeyer)

#### 4.3.3. Kupferbürger Collection

Donated by Johann Kupferbürger of Johannesburg

**4.3.4. Lind Collection**

Donated by Mrs Hildegard du Plessis (née Lind) of Mossel Bay. These photographs were mainly taken by RMS missionary Wilhem Lind or at his direction and include photographs of the Lind family, other RMS missionaries, mission stations at Rietfontein, Kalahari, and other mission stations in the former South West Africa

**4.3.5. Meyer Collection**

Donated by Mr Helmuth Meyer of Stellenbosch.

**4.3.6. Strassberger Collection**

Donated by Dr Elfriede (Elfie) Strassberger and her brother Reinhold Strassberger of Clanwilliam

**4.3.7. Van Wijk Collection**

Photographs and documents received from different people

**4.3.8. Weich Collection**

Donated by Mr Hellmuth FH Weich of Parow North and his brother Friedrich BR Weich of the Strand

**4.3.9. Zahn Collection**

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