

# 150 years of Methodism in Kenya

## Part 1

### “In the Beginning....”

2012 sees the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Methodist Church in Kenya. I have been associated with it for over fifty years, and was there when its Centenary was celebrated. In 1962 it was a very different church – missionary led, and quite tiny. When I was appointed there as a missionary in 1967, and stationed in the Meru District, the membership was a touch over 17,000. It became an autonomous Conference in 1967, and now it is at least ten times that size, if not more. It is today a thriving, dynamic church, with great vision and a magnificent history.

In the last seven of my twelve years of service there, I was stationed at Ribe, the cradle of the Methodist Church in Kenya. I often wondered what life there must have been like a hundred years before my time.

There were some clues. The graves of the early missionaries and their families were situated at the bottom of the hill where I lived and were in my care. They told a story in themselves of hardship and bravery, of tragedy and triumph. I found it moving and humbling to walk and work where those first missionaries had laboured. Then there was Charles New’s book about his ‘Life, Wanderings and Labours in Eastern Africa’, a copy of which I managed to obtain in 1972 when Richmond College closed. And in 1994, several years after I had left, came Barbara Wolstenholme’s ‘Not Dear To Themselves...’ – a must for anyone interested in the life and work of her great-grandfather, Thomas Wakefield, the pioneer missionary in Kenya, and who features prominently in this article.

But it all got off to a very shaky start indeed, and almost failed completely.

The story of the Methodist Church in Kenya cannot be told without first considering the work the Anglicans were doing two decades earlier. A Swiss missionary, Rev. Dr. Ludwig Krapf who belonged to the Basel Mission, had started work on behalf of the Church Missionary Society in 1844. He had set up a mission station at a place called Rabai, some 15 miles north of Mombasa in an area now known as Mijikenda, which means ‘Nine Tribes’. At the time it was known as Unika, which has connotations in Arabic for ‘wilderness’, which is how the Arabs of Mombasa saw, and to some extent, still see the hinterland of Mombasa. By 1846 Dr. Krapf had been joined by Rev. J Rebmann, and it soon became apparent that they needed even more help.

A certain Charles Cheetham of Heywood had read a book written by Krapf in 1860 about his experiences at Rabai. Cheetham was a wealthy man, and the Treasurer of the United Methodist Free Churches, a denomination which had work already under way in Sierra Leone. Dr. Krapf’s book fired his imagination. Cheetham got in touch with him, as he was in England at the time, and he also drew the attention of the UMFC Missionary Committee to Krapf’s work. The result was that Krapf was invited to address the Committee at a meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1860.

At that meeting, Krapf urged the Committee to action in helping the work in East Africa to move forward. The response was enthusiastic, and Krapf offered to give all

the assistance possible to the venture. He suggested that the UMFC should set up two mission stations, in areas to be decided later on the ground. He also recommended that four men should be appointed – two from the UMFC, and two from the Missionary Training Institution at St. Chrischona in Switzerland, where he had connections. Charles Cheetham and the Rev. Robert Eckett, Secretary of the UMFC overseas mission committee, duly went to Switzerland to select two men from the students there.

The two who were selected travelled to England to acquaint themselves with the UMFC, and they impressed everyone with their ‘piety, biblical knowledge and general deportment’. In the meantime, an appeal had been made to the UMFC, and eight men volunteered. Just two were chosen, Rev. Thomas Wakefield, and Rev. James Woolner. The stage was set for a powerful intervention by the UMFC into Eastern Africa.

After some rudimentary training from Krapf, the four men sailed with him on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1861 by P&O steamboat, bound for Africa. On 19<sup>th</sup> of August they arrived in Cairo. The small party awaited instructions as to how they should proceed, as there were political tensions in Mombasa between the Sultan of Zanzibar’s Governor there and a band of German missionaries who had landed in the area without permission. This had seemingly closed the door even for Krapf to return to Rabai, and join his colleague Rebmann once again. So, rather than waste time just sitting around and kicking their heels in Cairo, they optimistically started some language training in Kiswahili and Arabic.

As they waited with some apprehension there, a letter arrived from Rebmann saying that the situation had been clarified, and that permission had been given for them to travel to Mombasa. They resumed their journey, travelling down the Red Sea to Aden. On 12<sup>th</sup> November they left Aden on a rat-infested Arab dhow, which they found to be a very painful and trying experience. To add to their woes, food was scanty and unappetizing. Worse was to come as they passed by Mombasa where they had hoped to disembark, and were taken on to Zanzibar some ninety miles to the south where they landed on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1862.

The coast of East Africa was ruled from Zanzibar, and that was the gateway to the whole of the mainland. The Sultan at the time was Sayid Majid, and he treated the party with great kindness, giving them a document which allowed them to travel through his domain, and instructing his subordinates to treat them favourably.

It was decided that Wakefield and Woolner would wait in Zanzibar while the two Swiss men went with Krapf to Rabai. They landed in Mombasa on 20<sup>th</sup> January, and made their way to Rabai. There they met with Rebmann, to decide which of the Nine Tribes they would visit with a view to establishing a mission. It was decided that Kauma, the most northerly of the Mijikenda, would be the best place to start, as it bordered on Galla territory. (It had long been believed that the Galla people were the key to the evangelization of eastern Africa, but that is another story!). A visit was made, and the Kauma elders gave them permission to live there and start their work

Before the Swiss moved to Kauma, Krapf insisted that they should go back down to Mombasa and start some language study. Leaving them there, he returned to Zanzibar to deal with Wakefield and Woolner. They were to go to start work in

Usambara, in the north-east of what is now Tanzania, an area between Kilimanjaro and the Coast to south of Tanga. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, they left Zanzibar in a small boat, and by the evening lay to just off the coast, only to discover the next morning that the receding tide had left them stranded. As the tide turned, their little boat was swamped, and many of their possessions were washed overboard and lost. A passing naval ship, the 'Zenobia', picked them up and gave them refuge on board until they could find another boat, which took them to Pangani. This was a little bit further south than they wanted to be, but time was passing – it was now 16<sup>th</sup> February. They needed to get on with their work.

The Governor of Pangani was apparently something of a 'jobsworth' and would not accept the 'passport' from the Sultan as it was not addressed directly to him. Krapf decided to go to Mombasa and try to sort things out, leaving Wakefield and Woolner behind to assess the suitability of Usambara as a place to start their work.

Eventually a letter arrived from the Sultan, which gave the Governor a good dressing down, and the way was clear for the two men to proceed. They went first to Kipumbui, south of Pangani, but deemed it unsuitable as a site for a mission station. Then they travelled for two days up the river to Chogwe, but were met with a hostile reception, so returned to the coast. By 24<sup>th</sup> March they were back in Mombasa with Krapf.

Their next move was three days later when they set out to take a look at the Shimba Hills area, just to the south-west of Mombasa and home to the Duruma people, one of the Nine Tribes. Their aim was to see if that area was suitable for the setting up of their mission station. They hadn't gone far before both men were so unwell that they had to turn back to Mombasa. Their two Swiss colleagues were also suffering from the heat, and were unable even to study. To make matters worse, an incident occurred between the Royal Navy and an Arab slave ship which threw the town into a violent uproar, endangering life and limb. The Swiss had had enough, and on 14<sup>th</sup> of April, they left Mombasa, bound for home, never to return. It seemed as if the mission would never get off the ground.

Wakefield and Woolner stayed on with Krapf, but both were very ill. Wakefield recovered, but Woolner became weaker and weaker, and on 28<sup>th</sup> July Krapf sent him to Zanzibar to recover. In a seemingly dying state he was admitted to the French Catholic Mission hospital there, but after three weeks had recovered sufficiently to be able to stagger across the ward. However, he was deemed to be unfit to return to work with Wakefield, and so he returned to England via Bombay and the Cape of Good Hope.

Out of the original five, only Krapf and Wakefield were left, and neither was in the best of health. But they resolved to remain, and get on with the job. The notion of setting up two stations had to be abandoned, so the question was: where should the new work begin? Kauma and Duruma were seen as non-starters. Krapf decided to have a look around, and in the end he made the decision that the Ribe tribe, another of the Mijikenda people who lived just a few miles north east of Rabai would be suitable.

So it was that early in July 1862, Krapf and Wakefield pitched their tent at Ribe, both of them quite weak and ill. Wakefield had brought out from England a prefabricated

iron house, which they took a month to erect. Nearby they built mud and wattle houses for their retinue of servants, and when that was done, Krapf, a sick man, considered his work there was done, and he left for Europe on 7<sup>th</sup> October. Wakefield, himself very unwell, was left alone to carry on.

When the news reached England that out of the five men, only one now remained, there was great disappointment. The missionary committee had done everything humanly possible in terms of planning and resources for the mission to succeed, confidently expecting God to bless the endeavour, and all seemed to have failed. What was to be done? Was Wakefield to be left to his fate, or brought home? Or was he to be reinforced with new colleagues?

Krapf was in no doubt as to what should be done. At least one more man should be sought as a companion for poor Wakefield, who had himself earnestly appealed for help. The situation was critical. A quick appointment needed to be made, but it had to be the right person.

In July 1862, just as Krapf and Wakefield had arrived at Ribe, Robert Eckett, the mission secretary of the UMFC died. He had been a very able man, who had taken a great personal interest in the East African venture, and his death was seemingly another blow to the embryonic work there. However, his successor, Rev. Samuel Barton entered into the situation with great enthusiasm, and set about straightaway to look for a man who could be sent to support Wakefield. Who would answer the call?

Then the Rev. Charles New came striding onto the scene.

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## Part 2

### “Pioneers! O Pioneers!”

Things were not looking at all good for the United Methodist Free Churches mission in Eastern Africa. Five men had set out full of hope, undergirded by the prayers and support of their Christian friends. Now, due to the ill-health of his colleagues, including the redoubtable Dr Ludwig Krapf, only Rev. Thomas Wakefield was left. He was desolate. Not in good health himself, he pleaded with the UMFC mission committee for a companion and fellow worker – and got one. That man was Rev. Charles New.

In his book, which is now hard to find, New tells how he came to hear the call to go to East Africa. Remember, there was no country of Kenya at that time. There was a mountain on the Equator, which could be seen from many miles away, which the Maasai called ‘Kenia’. But as far as country names went, the whole area from Somalia to the Portuguese territory of Mozambique was just ‘East Africa’. There had been no plan to go to the Ribe people – Wakefield was there almost by accident, though some would say ‘God’s providence’. As far as Krapf was concerned, as the visionary and motivator of the endeavour, his first choice had been Kauma to the north, and Usambara to the south. In the end, neither proved to be possible.

So Thomas Wakefield must have felt abandoned as he stayed behind at Ribe. His plight, however, had not gone unheeded. The Secretary of the UMFC, Rev. Samuel Barton was determined to get things moving again. He did not have to wait long for a positive response from Charles New. Let New speak for himself, as recorded in his ‘Life, Wanderings and Labours in Eastern Africa’.

“I had watched with great interest the progress of the mission to this point, but I had no idea that I should be called upon to take an active part in its operations. In the providence of God, however, I had the honour to attend the sitting of the Annual Assembly.” That was in Bristol that year, 1862. He continues “On my way thither, I met with an accident by rail which made a powerful impression on my mind. We came into collision with a luggage train. It was a terrible crash; many were injured, but I was unharmed. I felt that a life thus spared should be devoted to God.”

The only rail crash recorded in July 1862 was at Victoria on the 12<sup>th</sup> of that month. Details of it are scant, and probably buried deep somewhere in the railway archives. For New, however, it was a turning point in his life. He had been spared. But for what purpose?

“On my arrival at the Assembly, I found Mr. Barton anxiously looking out for a man for the East African Mission. He appealed to me, but so important a matter was not to be decided in an instant, and I hesitated. Having given the matter, however, my most serious consideration, I placed myself in the hands of the missionary committee.”

Many of us in later years had a very similar experience. In my own case, for ‘Mr. Barton’ read ‘Harry Morton’, who in 1967 was the Africa Secretary in the Methodist

Missionary Society. He came to Richmond College to meet those men who were about to leave that year, and appealed for them to 'offer for service overseas'. Like New, I had watched the missionary activity of the church from a distance. Now I was being challenged to engage with it.

But New goes on: "A severe trial, however, awaited me. Just as I was preparing to meet the committee, I received the startling intelligence of the death of my brother, who had been labouring as a missionary in Sierra Leone. It was a heavy blow to me, and I could not help thinking of my mother whose heart I knew would be rent in twain by this bereavement, and to whom the prospect of my own departure would now become doubly painful. My affliction was intensified by the thought of hers. I hastened at once to her side, that I might share, if I could not relieve, her sorrow. I found her greatly bowed down by grief, but meekly submitting herself to the Divine will. She interposed no obstacle to the course I was taking, so that my duty was plain. I met the missionary committee and was assigned to work in East Africa."

So Charles New was bound for Zanzibar, having decided to travel by what was known as the 'Overland Route'. The P&O Heritage website describes it thus.

"In those early years, before the construction of a railway from Alexandria to Suez, the transit across the isthmus was accomplished in a most primitive manner, along what was known as the 'Overland Route'. For the first part it was mostly a waterway, with goods and passengers being transported from Alexandria to the Nile by canal boat before continuing by river steamer to Cairo, and then disembarking once more for the land portion of the journey through the desert from Cairo to Suez, a distance of some 100 miles. It was a picturesque but bothersome exercise, every package being subjected to three separate transfers in passing from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, and about 3,000 camels being called upon to transport the cargo of a single steamer along the route. P&O sought to improve the route for passengers with company-owned rest houses and distracting excursions to Egypt's sights but it was, nevertheless, not for the faint hearted."

Not for the faint hearted? Nobody could have ever accused Charles New of that!

We find New on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1862 on the P&O steamer 'Ceylon', being seen off by his friends, who 'did their best, by hearty cheering, to keep up my spirits'. He describes it as 'a fine vessel' – indeed, it was only four years old, so at least he was travelling in rather more comfort than his predecessors had experienced on the Arab dhow which had carried them to Zanzibar just a year before.

The 'Ceylon' travelled via Gibraltar and Malta, and on Christmas Eve docked at Alexandria. From there, after some sightseeing, he took a train on Christmas Day for Cairo. Again, he went sightseeing, to the Pyramids and in the city itself, before leaving for Suez overland on the 28<sup>th</sup>. There, he boarded another P&O steamer, the 'Orissa', a slightly smaller vessel than the 'Ceylon'. That took him to Aden, where he arrived on the 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 1863.

The assistant British Political Resident at Aden was a Colonel Playfair, who had just been appointed to Zanzibar. He took New under his wing, and they travelled on from Aden together. They went first to Bombay, arriving there on the 11<sup>th</sup> January, and there they were stuck for two months. During that time, two Scottish missionaries

gave New hospitality – Rev. Dr. Wilson of the Scottish Free Church, and Rev. D. Williamson of the United Presbyterian Church. He was most grateful for their kindness.

The problem was finding the means to get from Bombay to Zanzibar. Playfair, being in the diplomatic service, eventually managed to get a passage on a Government mail boat which worked to Zanzibar and the Seychelles. He used his influence to obtain a passage for New as well, and they left Bombay on 11<sup>th</sup> March.

Their craft was a sail boat, and the north-east monsoon wind had almost finished. So the voyage took twice as long as normal, and it was not until 7<sup>th</sup> April that they eventually reached Zanzibar. Two weeks later, New was on board a dhow, bound for Mombasa, where, he says:

“I found Mr Wakefield in great straits – in circumstances, indeed, which would have necessitated his leaving the coast. My arrival therefore at this time was most opportune. Mr. Wakefield and I then set to work, doing our utmost to accomplish the object for which the mission had been organised.”

A new era had begun, one which was to put the East African Mission onto sure ground, but which was not without more and serious problems in store. Charles New was just the man Thomas Wakefield had been waiting for, a man of incredible courage and determination, who was never easily deflected from any goal he set himself.

Two examples give the measure of the man. In an amusing account in his book he describes how he dealt with mosquitoes. Living in the little iron ‘prefab’ Wakefield had brought out from England must have been extremely uncomfortable, as the heat must have made it like an oven. However, they slept in it at night, but were plagued by mosquitoes. They thought that if they kept the fire going, and slept in a smoke-filled room, it would deter the wretched insects. But, says New, all that happened was that we were kipped *and* bitten. There was no respite.

In those days, nobody had made the connection between mosquitoes and malaria. Both men suffered from it dreadfully, and were fortunate that it didn’t kill them. Quinine was not an antidote. Rather it just gave relief. New’s attitude to malaria was that if he got it, he worked twice as hard, and swore that this was the best relief. Those who have ever had malaria can only gaze in wonder at the man! The fact was that for anyone working in East Africa in those days, malaria was a real killer, which at best prostrated you, and at worst was a death sentence.

The thinking at the time seemed to be that clearing virgin bush produced bad vapours (‘mal-aria’), and that those vapours caused fever. It is possible that there was a connection, in that if water collected on the newly cleared areas, the mosquitoes would breed there.

But there was a very serious test that came to the two men, which must have wrenched the heart out of them. In February 1864, the Rev. Edmund. Butterworth came to reinforce the mission at Ribe. He had carpentry skills, and brought with him a complete kit of woodworking tools which had been presented to him by his congregation in England. They were to enable him to build better dwellings and other

buildings – schools, perhaps, or dispensaries. Let New describe what happened on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1864.

“He was a fine young man of twenty-three; intelligent, cultured, noble-minded, heroic; a true missionary, who came to do or die. The fever seized upon him at once. He was soon prostrate. Again and again the attacks returned, each time with increased severity. At length the intermittent gave place to the remittent form of the malady; and a few weeks after his arrival on the coast he died. It was on a Saturday night, between twelve and one o'clock, that he breathed his soul into the hands of the God who gave it. We shall never forget that dread night. Alone with the dead, in the jungles of Eastern Africa, we watched from midnight till day dawn; and then, Sabbath though it was, we went to work upon a rude coffin, in which to enclose the remains of our departed colleague. It was a sad Sabbath morning's work. At twelve o'clock on that day the burial took place, committing "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," till the last great day when the blast of the trumpet shall be heard, and the dead shall rise into "newness of life." Such was one of the most mournful episodes in our life at Ribe.”

Wakefield and New used Butterworth's own tools to make his coffin. The account gives us something of the sense of their sorrow and loss as they went about their task. Butterworth's grave and headstone can still be seen at Ribe in the tiny cemetery mentioned earlier, and is a continuing and moving reminder of the tribulations of those early days.

Charles New went on to pack a great deal into the first twelve years of the East African Mission. He was the first European to climb to the summit of 'Kilima Njaro', ('kilima' means 'hill' or 'mountain' in Kiswahili) and prove to himself and the world that snow existed in the tropics. He was an assiduous explorer. He was also keen to expand the work begun at Ribe into what is now north-eastern Tanzania. In the other direction, however, the Galla beckoned. Still both New and Wakefield believed the Galla to be their primary goal, and work began at Golbanti on the Tana River, where the Pokomo people were prominent. That work has its own history, which is yet another story. In many ways, Ribe was a sideshow. They were there by accident. But the Galla work never really began, and Ribe eventually became their permanent base.

Not least among his many achievements, New was invited by the Royal Geographical Society to join the Livingstone Search and Relief Expedition. It was 1872, and he was, in fact, bound for home and furlough at the time. He had got as far as Zanzibar when he heard this, and all things being equal, he would have done anything rather than head into the interior. He wasn't very well, and really wanted to get back to England. He wrote:

“A search for Dr. Livingstone, however, was a matter of such great significance, that, from the first, I inclined towards the expedition. In such an undertaking it appeared to me that if we succeeded we should be serving not only Dr. Livingstone, but the cause of Africa, and, indeed, of humanity at large.”

He did hesitate slightly, as he knew nothing of his would-be companions. He didn't at all fancy two or three years in the heart of Africa with people he might not like! In the end he decided to go, even though that too got off to a very shaky start. Before

they even set off, news came that Stanley had met up with Livingstone anyway. Even so, a relief expedition was planned, and New was asked to take charge of it. However, personalities clashed, and by the time things had been settled, Stanley arrived in Zanzibar and took control of everything, leaving New high and dry.

New was, of course, upset, and wrote a letter to 'The Times' which was published on July 27<sup>th</sup> 1872, just ten years after the start of the East African Mission. It aroused considerable controversy, and a falling out between New and Stanley, though New stuck to his guns and in the end was vindicated.

All this gives the measure of the man, a man who had an inner, steely core, the kind of man who was needed for the hour - a 'kairos' person.

Time would fail me to tell of other pioneers of the work – of Thomas Carthew at Ribe, J.B.Griffiths at Mazeras, and their work with freed slaves, and Udy Bassett, another man of steel who had campaigned and been imprisoned in Britain for his work for free education. There was the Houghton family, murdered by the Maasai at Golbanti. There are many others, too numerous to mention here, some of whom lived very short lives as malaria and other diseases took their toll. There was R.T. Worthington, who as District Chairman in 1912 made the decision to open up a new area of work in Meru. By then, the mission had become the United Methodist Church, and had been in Kenya for fifty years. But those crucial and earliest years, with all their setbacks, were undergirded by the resolve and determination of Thomas Wakefield and Charles New.

Mention must be made too of their faithful servant, Tofiki, who was a Muslim. He travelled with them wherever they went, and looked after their every material need by cooking, cleaning and laundering. They could not have managed without him. His descendants still live at Ribe. In the 1970s, I visited their home, and found a piece of Wakefield's 'prefab' there. It was a cast iron roof ridge, and it was being used as a feeding trough for their chickens! I do regret not offering to pay for its reclamation!

Something else I found in that period was a bell. It had been cast at the Whitechapel Foundry, and was dated 1861. Neither Wakefield nor New, as far as I know, mention it, but it must surely have been brought by Thomas Wakefield as the mission bell in 1862. I do not know its whereabouts now, but I left it in store at Ribe when I returned to Britain in 1979.

Charles New died in February 1875, during an arduous journey on the way back from a visit to the Chagga people who live near Kilimanjaro. A few miles from Rabai, he collapsed with dysentery and fever. Ironically, he sent a messenger to Rabai for a bottle of port, which was used as a cure for the dysentery, but by the time the messenger returned, New was dead. He was buried in the little graveyard at Ribe, the stone with the inscription on top of the grave. He was only thirty-five years old. In 1975, on the centenary of his death, I conducted a memorial service at the graveside.

Thomas Wakefield laboured on until 1887, when he returned to England and to circuit life. He was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1889. He died on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1901, aged sixty five.

As we celebrate with the Methodist Church in Kenya, and give thanks for all that has been, and is still being achieved, let us never forget those early, precarious, risky days, when all seemed set to fail. Let us give thanks for the lives of those brave men, Wakefield and New, and especially for the former, whose wife Rebecca and infant son Bertie died at Ribe, and are also buried there. But that is another story, which has already been told in Barbara Wolstenholme's 'Not Dear to Themselves...'\*,

*Andrew Mackenzie*

*June 8<sup>th</sup> 2012*

\*Some copies are still available from her at 10 Myrtle Drive, Kirkham, Preston PR4 2ZJ