

South African "Zionists"

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [June 14, 2011](#) issue



Train station in Zion, Illinois. Photo by [Gidonb](#), licensed under [Creative Commons](#).

Every summer I relish spending lazy evenings watching minor-league baseball, which in my neck of Penn's Woods means following the State College Spikes.

Going to Spikes games for leisure does not mean that I escape my professional interests, however—as I learned when I first noticed the name of a talented young player, Gift Ngoepe. Taken together, those names point not only to a South African origin but also to roots in one of that country's many African-initiated churches (or AICs). Gift's mother was praying in a building of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) when she received a visitation from a woman prophet who assured her that her pregnancy would have a good outcome and that her son would prosper—hence the name Gift.

That story raises a number of questions about some current trends in Christianity. The ZCC itself—always pronounced zed, cee, cee—matters enormously for anyone interested in the world's rising churches. This emerging denomination is a classic example of an independent church founded and led wholly by African people, and since its foundation in 1924 it has been firmly intertwined with African culture and tradition. With perhaps 8 million members, it is a powerful group within South Africa, which is the most influential state on that continent.

ZCC members are easily spotted, with their distinctive silver star badges backed by a green and black ribbon. Every Easter, more than a million ZCC pilgrims gather for

several days of celebrations at the church's chief shrine in Zion City Moria. When southern Africans talk about "Zionists," they are usually referring to these churches, not to anything connected to the state of Israel.

But as with many African-initiated churches, some critics question how authentic their Christian views are. Just how, one may ask, did the ZCC acquire its strongly supernatural beliefs, its faith in prophecies, visions and healings, not to mention its dietary customs, which include an avoidance of pork products? ZCC members respect the power of ancestors, and some practice polygamy.

Certainly we can find biblical roots for many of these ideas. But is it not more likely that they represent a kind of syncretism, an accommodation of Christianity to primal African faiths, even to shamanism or magic? Modern African Christianity, according to this view, seems disturbingly primitive.

Yet understanding the ZCC's history places the church in a wholly different context, one that is still altogether African but also remarkably global and even American in character. Indeed, the story should make us rethink many of our assumptions about the modern story of globalization.

To take an example: just why is this church called Zion Christian Church? We might think it obvious: some early founder read his or her Bible and took the title of that great city in the Holy Land. In reality, though, this African Zion is named not for Jerusalem but for Zion, Illinois.

The ZCC traces its origins to John Alexander Dowie (1847–1907), an amazing spiritual entrepreneur and an exemplar of an earlier era of globalization. Born in Scotland, he worked in Australia before setting up shop in Illinois, where he founded Zion City north of Chicago and expected it to become the capital of a millennial kingdom.

Dowie himself was immersed in what we might call the proto-Pentecostalism of the late 19th century, with its deep commitment to healing (above all), prophecy and millennialism. Some startling photographs portray Dowie garbed as Elijah the Restorer. He dabbled in many of the alternative spiritual currents of the day, including Freemasonry and British Israelism. He even features as a character in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

To his credit, Dowie rejected the racial boundaries of his era and welcomed black followers. By 1908, some of these faithful were leading missions to southern Africa. One enthusiastic listener was Engenas Barnabas Lekganyane, who received a prophetic calling (together with a miraculous healing) and later founded the ZCC. His family continues to dominate the church, which is currently divided between factions led by two of his grandsons.

So let us ask again, where did the ZCC find its unusual views? There is really remarkably little in the ZCC thought-world that does not stem from Dowie himself, that "primitive" Scot. This includes the concept of the church's leaders as exalted or even messianic prophets, the centrality of healing and prophecy and the acceptance of polygamy. Even the church's prohibition of alcohol, smoking and pork can be traced to Dowie.

If the ZCC deviates from the norms of current Western Christianity, it cleaves very closely to the familiar sectarian practices of the Anglo-American world of a century ago. Whether they realize it or not, when ZCC followers like Gift Ngoepe come to North America, they are in a sense returning home.