

'Siyahamba'--We Are Marching in the Light of God

This Sunday we sing "We Are Marching in the Light of God" as our recessional hymn. *'Siyahamba'* (Si-yah-hahm' bah) is a Zulu word translated as "we are marching/walking". It is a South African freedom song and is among the easiest learned of all Christian songs from sub-Saharan Africa. An understanding of the use and meaning of the freedom songs in their original context may increase their significance for us.

The freedom songs give voice to protest, struggle, and solidarity. The process of protest, struggle, and solidarity for black South Africans reached its zenith from the 1960s through the 1990s. The anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa captured the world's attention during the 1980s and these freedom songs were often sung during protests in the years immediately preceding Nelson Mandela's election as the first black president of South Africa in 1994.

Siyahamba ekukhanyeni kwenkos (the only lyrics in the hymn) is usually translated as "We are marching in the light of God." *Siyahamba* is a "zipper song": the lyrics consist of one phrase, repeated with permutations. This results in a structure that is perceived as cyclical rather than linear. *'Siyahamba'* contains layers of meaning. "We" is a word of community—the community of those living and the community of the living dead. In African traditional society, those who have died are still with us, and their witness may influence the actions of the living. "Marching" is an action that unifies the community, as they move physically and spiritually in the same direction. It is a bodily, kinesthetic response to the leading of the Spirit rather than a passive acquiescence.

"The Light of God" has meaning on several levels. While it is a symbol of creation and of Jesus Christ, the light of the world, it is also a common refrain in songs of healing or *ngoma* throughout Southern and Central Africa. According to Christian anthropologist John Janzen, "Let darkness be replaced with light" is coded language for "seeing clearly". God is the source of clear sight in the midst of the struggle, the source of discernment and truth. As we march, we can see our way ahead. Our path is clear. Where there is light, there is hope.

Anders Nyberg, composer and choral conductor, disseminated the freedom songs of South Africa to the Western world in the mid-1980s largely under the sponsorship of the Church of Sweden Mission (Lutheran). Nyberg took his Swedish choir, Fjedur, to South Africa in the 1970s. The synergy between the choir from Sweden, one of the most choral cultures in the world, and choirs from South Africa, the most choral culture on that continent, provided the energy to propel these songs throughout the world. Nyberg's transcriptions were sung throughout Sweden and disseminated broadly through publications in Europe and the United States. International meetings of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches provided opportunities for people to hear and sing these songs. The publication of Nyberg's collection *Freedom Is Coming: Songs of Protest and Praise from South Africa* (1984) captured the imagination of church choirs in the United States.

Should we sing liberation songs from other parts of the world, from times past? Yes! We should sing them for the sake of those who continue to struggle for political, economic, and social freedom, i.e., in solidarity for the oppressed. We should also sing them for ourselves as a way of identifying with those things that keep us from being whole persons, totally free in Christ. Addictions, racism, prejudice, wealth, and social status are among those things that keep us from being free.

Worship service 10 AM