

REPORT

The Two Faces of “KwaSizabantu”

The South African “KwaSizabantu” Mission has been under criticism for many years. Numerous affiliated organizations in other countries have already distanced themselves from it. Bishop Martin Frische describes his experiences with the mission organization founded by the German-born missionary Erlo Stegen (1935–2023) for the Evangelical News Agency IDEA.

I have personally known the KwaSizabantu Mission (KSB) since 1978, when I visited the mission station twice myself. For more than 48 years now, I have followed the development of this movement in South Africa and worldwide. During this time, I have spoken with a great many former members and visitors of the mission. In my former role as Director of Trans World Radio South Africa, I also worked closely for a period with senior staff members of KSB.

I supported Radio Khwezi, the mission’s radio station, in applying for its broadcasting license. In addition, the two directors of Radio Khwezi, Muzi Kunene and Fano Sibisi, served as vice-chairpersons when I founded and led the Christian media umbrella organization, the Association of Christian Broadcasters (ACB).

Yes, it is true: those who visit the mission station often experience it as a “very special place blessed by God.” It is also true that visitors feel warmly welcomed. Precisely this positive public image, however, makes it difficult to engage seriously with critical questions and problematic experiences—especially when even factual inquiries or cautious criticism are dismissed outright as “slander,” “lies,” or a “malicious campaign.”

The principle originating in Roman law, *audiatur et altera pars*—“let the other side also be heard”—remains to this day a fundamental principle of every constitutional state. For Christians, this should be all the more self-evident. The Bible admonishes in Proverbs 18:17: “Whoever states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.” To my knowledge, the mission leadership has for more than five decades consistently refused any serious engagement with internal problems. Relevant documents and testimonies are in my possession and could, if necessary, also be presented in court.

Erlo Stegen’s Public Admission of Guilt

Little known is the fact that as early as 1977, under the mediation of the mission organization Youth with a Mission (YWAM), discussions took place between the then KSB leadership—including Erlo Stegen, his brother Friedel Stegen, Barney Mabaso, and Hilda Dube—and former mission staff. These discussions were held partly in public and partly behind closed doors. In this context, Erlo Stegen admitted that certain practices—such as speaking in trances, visions, and the confession of sins before pastoral counselors—had been overemphasized, and that the leadership structure had been too authoritarian. Messages received through visions and trance experiences had been understood as divine instructions and had exerted significant influence on the mission.

At that time, Erlo Stegen asked the participants present for forgiveness. About half a year later, however, he explicitly told me and another pastor in a personal conversation that he had not made these admissions because they were true or because he felt guilty, but—literally—“to take all weapons out of the hands of the others.”

While former staff members hoped that these YWAM-led discussions would lead to genuine and lasting change, others regarded the past as settled with the jointly signed declaration. Anyone who later asked about concrete changes was then—again literally—considered “unreconciled and resentful.”

Renewed Allegations

When the KSB Mission once again came under public criticism in 1999 and 2000, a group of South African theologians from various churches and free churches met in Pietermaritzburg (KwaZulu-Natal Province) under the leadership of Michael Cassidy. Cassidy is the founder of the mission organization Africa Enterprise, highly respected in many churches, and honorary chairman of the Lausanne Movement for World Evangelization. Over several days, we heard disturbing testimonies from people who reported spiritual, emotional, and also physical abuse.

On several occasions, we attempted to arrange a personal meeting with Erlo Stegen to discuss these allegations. He refused all such meetings, citing reasons that, in our view, were not tenable. As a result, the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa published a statement on 23 June 2000, which is publicly accessible. Among other things, it identified the following problem areas: unbiblical teachings, an unbiblical role of fear, physical violence, psychological abuse, spiritual abuse of power, and the destruction of family relationships, including marriages. IDEA Spektrum also reported on this in issue 28/2000.

Legal Proceedings

In the years that followed, further serious allegations became public. The South African news service News24 published a multi-part investigation entitled “Exodus.” At the end of 2020, the state “Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities” (CRL Commission) became involved and began an extensive investigation with numerous witness testimonies. I too was summoned to testify about my experiences and, in particular, about the Evangelical Alliance investigations from the year 2000.

Only after judicial intervention did the Commission publish—after almost three years—its final report, in which it cleared the mission of wrongdoing, contrary to numerous witness statements. Since we perceived this as a serious blow to the credibility of the testimonies and as a disregard for the victims, four other individuals and I myself filed a lawsuit against the publication of the report. This was dismissed in August 2023 by the Gauteng High Court in Pretoria on formal grounds; no substantive assessment of the allegations was made. An appeal initially remained unsuccessful.

However, on 19 November 2025, the Supreme Court of Appeal of South Africa in Bloemfontein, the country’s highest court of appeal, permitted the reopening of the case before a full bench of judges at the High Court in Pretoria. This proceeding was scheduled to take place at the beginning of this year.

At the beginning of December, I proposed an out-of-court settlement to the CRL Commission. The Commission agreed to withdraw its uncritical report on KSB, while we plaintiffs, in return, waived further legal action. As a result, the mission can no longer claim to have been fully exonerated by the Commission. The allegations raised over decades have therefore not been resolved.

Even Erlo Stegen's Brother Distanced Himself

It is also worth noting that over the course of roughly six decades, a large proportion of the senior staff in South Africa, Europe, and the United States have separated from the mission—partly by their own decision, partly as a result of critical statements.

Of particular significance is a written confession in my possession by Friedel Stegen, Erlo Stegen's brother and long-time leader responsible for the European KSB branches, dated 13 February 2020. In it, he apologizes, among other things, for having believed what was said about former staff members and having spoken disparagingly about them; for having followed his brother Erlo unquestioningly; for not having treated people with divine love and for having hurt them through harsh words and actions; for having become guilty toward women; and for having raised warnings regarding the handling of donated funds but not having achieved effective consequences.

Acknowledging the Suffering of Those Affected

Why this detailed statement? Because many people are still deceived by the outward appearance of the mission and do not want to acknowledge that numerous individuals have suffered severe harm—and that quite a few continue to suffer to this day. Denying these experiences deepens the suffering of those affected even further, as they are once again called into question and effectively accused of untruthfulness.

This behavior, which contradicts all Christian responsibility, should come to an end. It makes me deeply sad that for almost five decades I have warned pastors and leaders of Christian organizations against accepting invitations to KSB—often in vain. Warnings are ignored, not infrequently because people appreciate the special treatment they receive as honored guests. This also applies to political decision-makers who allow themselves to be blinded by outward appearances.

I do not deny that there are many staff members within the mission for whom faith in Jesus Christ and discipleship are important. All the more tragic, in my conviction, is the fact that to this day they have not received comprehensive biblical teaching as Paul describes it as his mandate, namely “to proclaim the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

The author, Martin Frische (Pretoria), served until 2024 as the first Bishop of the Evangelische Stadtmision in Southern Africa (ESSA).

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