

The churches' response to political violence in the last years of apartheid: the case of Mpophomeni in the Natal Midlands

Philippe Denis

School of Religion and Theology,
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Abstract

This article discusses the role of the Christian churches in the political conflict that engulfed the black township of Mpophomeni near Howick in the 1980s and early 1990s. It argues that, despite obvious limitations, this role was significant, much more than in other violence-affected areas of Natal. The dismissal of the entire workforce of BRT Sarmcol in May 1985, many of whom lived in Mpophomeni, and their replacement by scabs from Inkatha-dominated areas triggered a cycle of deadly attacks and counterattacks, which only ended in 1993. A collection of oral testimonies, gathered at the time of the conflict and supplemented in recent years as part of a community project, shows that the Mpophomeni residents felt supported by the Christian churches, which provided material assistance to the unemployed, procured land for their cooperative, buried the victims of their enemies, helped the refugees to settle, testified on the involvement of the police in the conflict and supported the efforts of reconstruction. Some residents interpreted their history in religious terms, using biblical analogies. The churches' involvement in the Mpophomeni conflict, however, must be put in perspective. They did not drive the struggle for justice and reparation of the Mpophomeni people; they only supported it. The main impetus came from the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), to which the majority of Sarmcol workers belonged, and from a wide range of anti-apartheid activists – including health professionals, cultural workers, academics and journalists – attracted to the township by the trade unions.

Mpophomeni was established in 1969 to accommodate the residents from Howick's "Black Belts" who were deemed undesirable in this "white" town of the Natal Midlands. A typical apartheid-era township, it went almost unnoticed until November 1982, when a successful bus boycott, prompted by a bus fare increase, revealed a surprisingly high level of solidarity and activism among its inhabitants.¹ In 1983 the residents started a rent boycott – which was to last for many years – over a rent increase backdated to 1978.² Similar protest actions were held in places like Clermont, Hambanathi and Imbali during the same period. These protests were the beginnings of the violent political conflict that was to inflame Natal in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with a toll of at least 12,000 lives, enormous loss to property and between 200,000 and 500,000 refugees.

In 1981 a community council comprising six councillors and a mayor, all Inkatha-aligned, was elected in Mpophomeni. At first the relationship between the councillors and the residents was tolerable. The mayor, Benjamin Ndlovu, supported the bus boycott and made representations to the KwaZulu government in Ulundi on behalf of the residents.³ What triggered the conflict was the strike at BTR Sarmcol, a rubber factory in Howick which employed 350 people from Mpophomeni, mostly married men, on 30 April 1985. The motive for the strike was the management's persistent refusal to recognise the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) to which most Sarmcol workers were affiliated. On 2 May 1985 the entire workforce – about 970 workers – was dismissed and replaced by scabs recruited in Inkatha-dominated areas. This ruthless response triggered a vicious cycle of attacks and counterattacks in Mpophomeni, which only ended in 1993 after more than 120 people had lost their lives.⁴ It took 13 years and numerous court judgments for the dismissed workers to obtain compensation for unfair dismissal.⁵

¹ *The Natal Witness*, 7 December 1982, quoted in P. Forsyth, *Pietermaritzburg Conflict Chronology. Political Developments in Pietermaritzburg, 1980-1986* (Pietermaritzburg: Project on Contemporary Political Conflict in Natal, University of Natal, 1991), 45. On this episode of the early history of Mpophomeni see Debby Bonnin, 'Class, Consciousness and Conflict in the Natal Midlands, 1940-1987: the case of the B.T.R. Sarmcol workers' (master's thesis, University of Natal, 1988), 353. See also D. Bonnin and A. Sitas, 'Lesson from the Sarmcol Strike', in W. Cobbett and R. Cohen, eds, *Popular Struggles in South Africa* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1988), 42-58.

² *The Natal Witness*, 7 March 1985, in Forsyth, *Pietermaritzburg Conflict Chronology*, 74.

³ Labour Monitoring Group (Natal), 'Monitoring the Sarmcol Struggle', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 11/2 (October – December 1985), 93-94.

⁴ On this labour dispute, apart from Debby's master's dissertation, see Labour Monitoring Group (Natal), 'Monitoring the Sarmcol Struggle', 89-112. The decision to sack the entire workforce was made in the belief that the company could afterwards rehire the

A widely publicised labour dispute

While not unique in the history of political violence in Natal,⁶ Mpophomeni's case was remarkable in many ways. Along with KwaShange and Nxamalala, it was one of the few homogeneous UDF/ANC areas in the Vulindlela district north-west of Pietermaritzburg, a sector almost entirely controlled by Inkatha in the 1980s and early 1990s. This was essentially due to the influence of trade unions to which nearly all the residents employed in Pietermaritzburg or Howick belonged. Through the unions, the influence of the United Democratic Front (UDF), constituted in 1983, started to be felt. The process was gradual. In the early 1980s most Mpophomeni residents avoided political involvement, although the few who belonged to Inkatha were not ostracised.⁷ All that changed with the Sarmcol strike in May 1985. Created to accommodate a group of black workers from Howick expelled from their homes by the Group Areas Act in the late 1960s and 1970s, Mpophomeni fell under the authority of the Vulindlela tribal authority and was administered by the KwaZulu government. Suddenly the residents developed an antagonistic relationship with the homeland authorities. They also resented the presence of the South African Police, who openly supported the Zulu traditionalist movement. Accused of being "scabs", the Inkatha members left the township to be replaced by hundreds of UDF affiliates fleeing violence-stricken areas in the Edendale valley and the surrounding areas. In the early 1980s Mpophomeni was home to ten to twelve thousand people. With the influx of refugees, the population of the township had more than doubled a decade later.

Mpophomeni was different from other black townships of the same size in Natal for another reason. The ruthless dismissal of Sarmcol's entire workforce, a third of whom resided in Mpophomeni, and the protracted court case that followed, attracted a high level of national and international attention. Never had a strike lasted so long in South Africa's recent labour history and never had a conflict of this nature created such a large movement of solidarity. The Sarmcol dispute became a case study for labour experts, anti-apartheid activists and academics. It mobilised seasoned church activists like Denis Hurley, the Catholic archbishop of Durban,⁸ and Peter Kerchhoff, the director of the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Social Christian Awareness (PACSA),⁹ as well as ordinary Christians such as Tony Balcomb, an Assemblies of God minister from Howick who discovered the reality of apartheid by befriending a Sarmcol shop steward who served the black Methodist congregation of Mevana as a lay preacher.¹⁰

This article discusses the role of the Christian churches in the Mpophomeni conflict. Despite obvious limitations, this support was significant, much more so than in other violence-affected areas of Natal. In Nxamalala¹¹ and KwaShange,¹² for example, two areas with a similar history, the institutional churches failed to exert an influence during the times of political violence. At the level of the region, it was only in November 1987 that the Natal Church Leaders Group, with church leaders such as Denis Hurley, Michael Nuttall, Peter Kerchhoff and Paddy Kearney, tried to mitigate the effects of the conflict by offering their mediation.¹³ In this paper we will examine what prompted the churches to intervene in Mpophomeni, how long they remained active in the township, and on what aspects of the crisis they chose to focus.

The role of the churches in the Mpophomeni crisis should, of course, not be over-estimated. The churches were only one component in a large array of civil society forces that were active in the township. The Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), for whose recognition the Sarmcol workers had laid down their

workers it wanted and get rid of the shop stewards. See 'The Sarmcol Case', *South African Journal of Human Rights*, 3 (1987), 415-416.

⁵ Victory!BTR-Sarmcol', *Workers Solidarity*, 9 (1999).

<<http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/africa/wsfs9/ws9.html>> (accessed on 20 June 2012).

⁶ On political violence in Natal, see A. de V. Minnaar, *Conflict and violence in Natal/KwaZulu: historical perspectives* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1990); R. Taylor and M. Shaw, 'The Natal Conflict', in J. Brewer, ed. *Restructuring South Africa*, (London: St. Martin Press, 1994), 35-52; Alexander Johnston, 'Politics and Violence in KwaZulu-Natal', in *Violence in Southern Africa*, ed. W. Gutteridge and J.E. Spence (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 78-107; J. Aitchison, 'The origins of the Midlands war' and 'KwaZulu-Natal: The pre-election wars of the 1990s', in R. Greenstein, ed., *The role of political violence in South Africa's democratization*, (Johannesburg: CASE, 2003), 47-72, 73-94.

⁷ Bonnin, 'Class, Consciousness and Conflict,' 205.

⁸ Paddy Kearney, *Guardian of the Light. Denis Hurley: Renewing the Church, Opposing Apartheid* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 231-233.

⁹ Entraine et Fraternité Archives, Brussels, Sarmcol Papers, Peter Kerchhoff to Jacques Briard, Pietermaritzburg, 1 November 1986.

¹⁰ Anthony Balcomb, 'Narrative, epistemological crisis, reconstruction – my story with special reference to the work of Kwame Bediako', *Scriptura*, 97 (2008), 50.

¹¹ Philippe Denis, Radikobo Ntsimane and Thomas Cannell, eds, *Indians versus Russians. An Oral History of Political Violence in Nxamalala (1987-1993)* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2010), 67-72.

¹² Information kindly provided by Mxolisi Mchunu who is busy completing a PhD thesis on the 'History of political violence in KwaShange and its effects on the survivors'.

¹³ Michael Mbona, 'On Embassy to Ulundi. The Natal Church Leaders Group's mediation attempts in war-torn Natal (1987-1990)', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 36/1 (May 2010), 141-162.

tools,¹⁴ and its parent body, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) – soon to become the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) – were the first to advise the strikers, negotiate with the management of Sarmcol on their behalf, bring food parcels and see to the needs of the workers and their families. Through union channels, reports on the Sarmcol strike were sent to anti-apartheid activists all over the world. Academics linked to the trade union movement (Debby Bonnin) or approached by them (Wendy Leeb and John Radford) conducted research on the Sarmcol labour dispute and the conditions of life in Mpophomeni with a view to providing evidence on behalf of the dismissed workers at the Industrial Court hearing due to take place in October 1986. Through the intervention of the unions, medical professionals provided care to the strikers and their families over weekends.¹⁵ Members of the Durban Workers' Cultural Local, a progressive cultural group, helped the strikers to publicise their cause through community theatre.¹⁶ Also prominent in the conflict were the violence monitors, in particular John Aitchison and his colleagues at the Centre of Adult Education of the University of Natal, Radley Keys of Peace in Natal (PIN) and, in the months following the Seven-Day War in March 1990, the Monitoring Group of the Midlands Crisis Relief Committee.

This article encompasses all the churches present in Mpophomeni or whose members became involved in the affairs of the township. As it happened, the Catholic Church was the first, and for almost a decade, the only one to possess a place of worship.¹⁷ As a result, a great many residents went to church there. The Anglicans and Methodists built a church in Mpophomeni later. The Zionists and other African independent churches also had members, but they worshipped in private houses. In contrast, in Howick Native Location, a black area in the centre of Howick, the Methodists were the strongest church group. When, in the late 1980s, the residents renamed their location, they called it KwaMevana in memory of Mevana Buthelezi, the Methodist lay minister who had started the first school for blacks.¹⁸ If a majority of Mpophomeni residents were Catholic in the mid-1980s, the same could not be said of the Sarmcol workforce as a whole. Furthermore, the Christian activists who expressed support for the dismissed workers, particularly those from the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA), came from a variety of church backgrounds. PACSA's involvement with the strikers is documented in two scrapbooks containing press cuttings and unions pamphlets, which they used to mobilise support for their movement.¹⁹

Oral testimonies

The present study is based on oral testimonies gathered during and immediately after the period of political violence and a decade or two later. The impetus for this research was the work of a community-based project called Zulu Mpophomeni Tourism Experience (ZMTE), which aims at attracting social investment and tourist interest in Mpophomeni through the development of an "ecomuseum" and a heritage site in Mpophomeni.²⁰ Since 2005, ZMTE has worked in partnership with the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work in Africa, a research and community development centre of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Between 2009 and 2011 they jointly conducted 21 individual and three group interviews to document the history of the township from its foundation in the late 1960s to the present day.²¹

Data collected earlier by researchers interested in the social history of Mpophomeni were also used for this article. Between May and October 1986, as part of a research project on the BTR Sarmcol workers, Debby Bonnin interviewed 22 former Sarmcol workers. Large extracts of these interviews were included in her master's thesis.²² In late August and early September of the same year, Wendy Leeb and John Radford administered a questionnaire to 126 randomly selected households in Mpophomeni to investigate the psychological effect of unemployment on the township's residents. Four publications, some of them with

¹⁴ On MAWU at the time of the Sarmcol strike, see A. Sitas, 'Black worker responses on the East Rand to the change in the metal industry', unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984; E. Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985); *Our History and Principles* (Durban, MAWU, 1986). Quoted in Bonnin and Sitas, 'Lessons from the Sarmcol Strike', 58.

¹⁵ Vanessa Kruger, 'Sarmcol Workers Cooperative (SAWCO) Health Project', in C.P. Owen, E.M. Thomson, *People's health. The way forward. Report of the 1988 NAMDA Annual Conference* (Johannesburg: NAMDA, [1991]).

¹⁶ Astrid von Kotze, "'Worker' Theatre in South Africa', *New Left Review* I/163 (May-June 1987), 83-92; *Organise and Act. The Natal and Workers Theatre Movement 1983-1987* (Durban: University of Natal Press, 1988), 79-100.

¹⁷ J. B Brain, '*Proclaiming the Good News*'. *A Glimpse into the History of the Archdiocese of Durban 1950-2009* (Paris: Signe, 2010).

¹⁸ W. Silaule, 'Established at the Edge, Surviving at the Centre: A History of KwaMevana Township in Howick, with a Particular Emphasis on its Founding in the 1930s' (honours dissertation, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1966), 71.

¹⁹ Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal (hereafter APC), PC 11/1/5/1-2. On the history of PACSA, see *Journeying for Justice. Stories of an ongoing faith-based struggle, compiled by the PACSA 30th anniversary collective* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications and Jive Media, 2009).

²⁰ For an overview of ZMTE's activities see the project's website: www.zmte.co.za.

²¹ Two volumes of transcripts, one in isiZulu (213 pp.) and one in English (322 pp.) are in the possession of ZMTE. All the interviewees signed a release agreement form authorising their interview to be used in the archival collections of the Sinomlando Centre and made available as a public reference resource for research, teaching and publication.

²² Bonnin, 'Class, Consciousness and Conflict', *passim*.

excerpts of the responses, emanated from this project.²³ In preparation for the victims' hearings held in September 1996 in Pietermaritzburg, staff from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) interviewed – among many others – eight Mpophomeni residents who had witnessed human rights abuse or suffered from them between 1986 and 1993. The transcripts of these interviews were subsequently posted on the TRC's website.²⁴ In 1998, as part of an oral history project on the anti-apartheid struggle in the Natal Midlands, the University of Natal's Alan Paton Centre interviewed two former Sarmcol union leaders.²⁵ The same year a field worker of the Sinomlando Centre interviewed a Catholic priest involved in Mpophomeni politics in the mid-1980s.²⁶ Also worthy of mention is the work of Judith Singleton, an American anthropologist who did fieldwork between February 2004 and September 2005 in Mpophomeni for a thesis on sexual violence in contemporary South Africa.²⁷ Many of her informants had been involved, as young people, in political violence. Other sources on the history of Mpophomeni include newspaper articles,²⁸ affidavits in support of a court action²⁹ and data collected by violence monitors.³⁰

None of these interviews deliberately addressed issues of faith and religion. Those interviews conducted during or shortly after the period of political violence aimed at raising awareness about the plight of the dismissed Sarmcol workers and the victims of political violence in general. While efforts were made to maintain rigorous research standards, their ultimate goal was advocacy. The interviews conducted by ZMTE and Sinomlando aimed at documenting the multifaceted history of the township for the benefit of local residents, the museum's users and other visitors. They focused on politics and culture, not religion. The references to religion and spirituality were therefore quantitatively infrequent, but they had the advantage of being unprompted. The interviewers did not ask questions about the role of Christian churches or traditional rituals during the period of political violence. When the interviewees made reference to spirituality or religion, it was because they felt the need to do so.

In support of the Sarmcol workers

Before they were forcibly relocated to Mpophomeni, black people lived as labour tenants in farming areas like Lions River, Lidgetton, Tweedie and Cedara, as shack dwellers on the site of the future Midmar Dam in Zenzele and in a mixed-race area west of Howick called George.³¹ Only the inhabitants of Howick Native Location, an "African village" established in 1938 near the central district of Howick to house Sarmcol workers, were allowed to stay where they were.³² Judging from the interviews, the experience that the Mpophomeni residents had of church life in their previous locations was memorable. In George, Robert Zuma went to a school named after Pastor Danny, an Anglican priest.³³ According to one of Bonnin's informants, it was 'a terrible life to stay at George' with hardly any equipment and the constant fear of gangs.³⁴ But at least there was a mission school. Likewise, Stanley Mbambo, a union leader, remembered with fondness the Catholic farm school he attended at Cedara before moving to Mpophomeni.³⁵ In Zenzele, according to Michael Xaba, there was no church building, so on Sunday morning the various congregations made use of the Catholic school building; they were followed by the ZCC and then the Methodists.³⁶ It was then, perhaps, that the Christian churches developed the spirit of cooperation that would characterise their action during the times of political violence.

²³ W. Leeb and J. Radford, 'Research in the Black Township of Mpophomeni : Is There Hope?', *Reality* (January 1987), 17-20; , 'An investigation into the effects of job loss on the African township of Mpophomeni' (University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, October 1996), 38 ; 'The Sarmcol struggle and the effect of job loss in the community of Mpophomeni', Paper presented at the 18th Conference of the Association for Sociology in Southern Africa in Cape Town, July 1987 (Pietermaritzburg: Department of Adult Education and Psychology, University of Natal, n.d.); 'Ongoing effects of mass dismissal on the community of Mpophomeni', in *Workshop on Regionalism and Restructuring in Natal*, University of Natal, Durban, 28-31 January 1988 (University of Natal, n.d.) Paper No. 33.

²⁴ <http://www.gov.za/trc>, accessed on 10 May 2003. More than half of the 2nd day of the Pietermaritzburg victims' hearings (19 November 1996) was devoted to Mpophomeni.

²⁵ APC: 98ABP20-21.

²⁶ APC: 98A-04.

²⁷ Judith Singleton, "I love you." Coercion and Consent in Postapartheid South Africa", unpublished PhD, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University, 2008.

²⁸ For the period 1980-1986, see Paul Forsyth, *Pietermaritzburg Conflict Chronology. Political Developments in Pietermaritzburg, 1980-1986* (Pietermaritzburg: Project on Contemporary Political Conflict in Natal, University of Natal, 1991).

²⁹ APC: PC159-7-1 (28 April 1989).

³⁰ John Aitchison electronic archives, Mpophomeni, 1984-1991. I express my gratitude to Prof John Aitchison who graciously put his archives at my disposal. From Radley Keys, a Peace in Natal (PIN) violence monitor in the early 1990s, see also 'Mpophomeni: the ANC's dilemma', in A. Minnaar, ed., *Patterns of Violence. Case Studies of Conflict in Natal* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1992), 129-142.

³¹ Bonnin, 'Class, Consciousness and Conflict', 97-101.

³² Silaule, 'Established at the Edge'.

³³ Robert Zuma and other men, Group interview, Kenosis Conference Centre, Pietermaritzburg, 20-21 August 2010.

³⁴ Godfrey Lubazana, interview, quoted in Bonnin, 'Class, Consciousness and Conflict', 97.

³⁵ APC, 98APB20: Stanley Mbambo, interview conducted by Ruth Lundie on 15 September 1998 in Scottsville.

³⁶ Michael Xaba, interview conducted by Msawenkosi Xaba on 3 September 2010 in Mpophomeni.

In 1963 the Minister of Bantu Education informed the Howick Town Council that it could acquire a portion of Montrose, the property of Guy Lund, a white man who had committed suicide on hearing that his farm would be expropriated.³⁷ In 1966 Howick was proclaimed white by the Group Areas Board and three years later the first residents of Zenzele and George arrived in Mpophomeni. At first there were only two rows of houses.³⁸ The process of settlement was gradual. Most Zenzele residents moved in the late 1970s.³⁹ The new occupants flocked to the provisional chapel erected by Antoine Weber, a priest of the congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who, in 1977, had entrusted the Howick Catholic parish to two young confreres in order to work full time in Mpophomeni in a new parish called St Anne's. The new congregation was so popular that the plans for the new church building – in what was then an open field in the upper part of the township – had to be revised to accommodate a larger congregation. Inaugurated in 1980, the Catholic Church was to become an essential feature of the township.⁴⁰ According to Edgar Weinmann, one of Weber's successors, in 1989 St Anne's Catholic parish had 5,000 members, about half of the total population of the township at the time.⁴¹

The holding of meetings by Sarmcol workers in the Catholic Church building left a deep imprint on the residents' memories. Asked when the 'war' started in the township, Nhlanhla Bhengu, spontaneously made reference to the Catholic Church:

The Mpophomeni war started in [May] 1985 with the Sarmcol strike, when they were striking at Sarmcol. They were chased away from the [factory's] gate and went to strike in the Catholic church in Mpophomeni. That was when people came to take their jobs and they started to attack each other. The fighters were those who took our fathers' jobs and our fathers fought back.⁴²

For Robert Zuma, also, it was there that everything started:

Let us start this from the beginning. They moved us from the community hall and we went to the Catholic Church. That was when they fired teargas at us. They fired teargas at us and shoes were lost only to be found another day. They were left in the mud.⁴³

Michael Xaba, a resident who kept a low profile during the conflict, concurred:

[The Catholic Church] played a critical role because meetings could not be held anywhere else. They were not allowed to have them in the community hall either. The Sarmcol meetings were held there because even the funerals were being held there. So they did an important job.⁴⁴

The written sources help us to refine the chronology and understand why meetings took place at St Anne's Catholic Church at an early stage of the conflict's history. The Sarmcol workers were dismissed on Thursday, 2 May 1985. The following Monday the company started to hire scab workers. A day later the union leaders convened a meeting in the Mpophomeni community hall to ask the residents not to scab. This was followed by a call for a consumer boycott in Howick and the arrest of five strikers on charges of intimidation. By then food parcels had started to be distributed and a clinic was set up to treat the families of the striking men. At this point the community council was still playing a supportive role in the community.⁴⁵

For about two weeks the union leaders managed to maintain discipline among strikers. It was the aggressive attitude of the police, who fired teargas after a mass rally in Mpophomeni on Sunday, 23 June, that sparked the violence. Sarmcol delegates had just returned from a MAWU meeting in Johannesburg. The residents retaliated by throwing stones and the following day they stopped a bus carrying workers, stoned it and killed two people, one of them employed by Sarmcol. In response, the commissioner of the Vulindlela district, T.E. Strachan, banned all meetings in Mpophomeni for twenty-one days.⁴⁶

³⁷ Bonnin, 'Class, Consciousness and Conflict', 103. On Guy Lund, see the documents donated by the Lund family to the Mpophomeni Museum.

³⁸ Michael Xaba, same interview.

³⁹ Bonnin, 'Class, Consciousness and Conflict', 103.

⁴⁰ Fr Paul Decock, interview conducted by Philippe Denis on 8 June 2012 in Cedara. Anton Weber died in December 1983. He was replaced by Derrick Butt, a priest of the same congregation, in 1984 and by Larry Kaufmann, a Redemptorist, in 1985.

⁴¹ APC, PC159-7-1: Application to the Supreme Court for a court order restraining the South African Police from assaulting Mpophomeni residents, Edgar Weinmann, Affidavit, 23 April 1989, art. 1.3.

⁴² Nhlanhla Bhengu, interview conducted by Thulani Mkhize on 9 June 2009 in Mpophomeni.

⁴³ Robert Zuma and other men, group interview, Kenosis Conference Centre, Bishopstowe, 20-21 August 2010.

⁴⁴ Michael Xaba, interview conducted by Msawenkosi Xaba on 3 September 2010 in Mpophomeni.

⁴⁵ Bonnin, 'Class, Consciousness and Conflict', 212-215, 353.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 354; Labour Monitoring Group (Natal). 'Monitoring the Sarmcol struggle' *South African Labour Bulletin*. 11/2, October-December 1985, 98.

It was at this point that Philip Dladla and other union leaders, many of whom belonged to the Catholic Church, asked the parish priest, Larry Kaufmann, for permission to hold meetings in his church hall. A theology lecturer at St Joseph's Scholasticate in Cedara, this young Redemptorist priest had only been in the Mpophomeni parish, on a part-time basis, for three months. Later in his career he became associated with the Institute for Contextual Theology, the theological think-tank that had produced the Kairos Document in 1985. Politically aware since the days of his training in Cape Town, Kaufmann was sympathetic to the cause of the dismissed workers. As he recounted in an interview, once the matter had been cleared with Denis Hurley, the Catholic archbishop of Durban, he was very willing to put the church hall at the disposal of the workers:

They had the use of the community hall, which actually was a very large hall, and they had made use of it, but very quickly the KwaZulu Government heard that the [Mpophomeni] Township Council had allowed the use of the community hall. Ulundi forbade the use of this to the Township Council. They had heard that the Township Council had allowed the use of the community hall. [An order came to] the Township Council from Ulundi to forbid the use of the hall. That is when they came to me. I knew it was the official policy of the [Southern African] Catholic Bishops' Conference to allow premises for the use of the community, especially those who were in need of buildings. I had a quick call to Archbishop Hurley, just to confirm that it was still the official position of the Bishop's Conference. I said that it was not just my permission to grant as parish priest. In fact this is in the teaching of the Church. By permitting the use of the hall I was simply implementing that policy.⁴⁷

A long-time opponent of the apartheid regime, Hurley had come out in open support of the worker movement after his election as chairperson of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC) in 1982.⁴⁸ He knew the risk of instability that the ruthless dismissal of Sarmcol workers caused to the region. On 26 June, the day before the ban on meetings in Mpophomeni, he paid a pastoral visit to the township, an experience that contributed to his founding, along with other church leaders, of the Natal Church Leaders Group in May 1988.⁴⁹ The Mpophomeni residents had on their side not only the parish priest but the bishop.

When the Sarmcol workers were looking for a place to meet, the priest of Howick's "white" Catholic parish, also a Redemptorist, gave them permission to use his church hall, at Kaufmann's request. As Philip Dladla recounted in an interview, the strikers had just arrived there, followed by the police, when town clerk Ron Robbins intimated that the meeting should be disbanded immediately for reasons of security. "With a large group meeting like this", he argued, 'they could go quite beserk in a matter of minutes.'⁵⁰ After this incident, the Sarmcol workers started to use the church hall in Mpophomeni for their meetings:

On Wednesdays [it was] for trade union meetings. On Wednesday evenings, we had an ecumenical interfaith service. On Friday mornings we had trade union meetings, plus the distribution of food. So they used it at least those two days for general gatherings and on Monday or Tuesday the doctor used to come free of charge and he would meet the sick patients in the sacristy.⁵¹

The willingness of the Catholic Church to provide material support to the dismissed workers further contributed to its good image among Mpophomeni residents. Whenever MAWU ran out of funds for food parcels, they would turn to Hurley for assistance. The archbishop was a remarkable fundraiser. Locally, the St Joseph Worker Funds would send bridging finance to the workers. As Leeb and Radford indicated in their study, income levels per household were exceptionally low in Mpophomeni when compared with other African townships in Natal. Many of the families were faced with potential starvation when their UIF benefit payments were terminated at the end of October 1986.⁵² In an interview, Bhekukwenza Ndimande, a former Sarmcol worker, mentioned "the donations some white people were bringing from the Catholic Church", but, he added, they were not enough and their children "ended up being deprived of education".⁵³

⁴⁷ APC 98 A-04: Larry Kaufmann, interview conducted by Isaac Mwansa on 6 May 1998 in Merrivale. On this episode, see also P. Kearney, *Guardian of the Light. Denis Hurley: Renewing the Church, Opposing Apartheid* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 231.

⁴⁸ Kearney, *Guardian of the Light*, 228-230.

⁴⁹ M. Mbona, 'On embassy to Ulundi: the Natal Church Leaders Group's mediation attempts in war-torn Natal (1987-1990)', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 36/1 (May 2010), 142.

⁵⁰ APC 98ABP21: Philip Dladla, interview conducted by Ruth Lundie and Sibongiseni MKhize on 2 April 1998 in Scottsville. See also Labour Monitoring Group (Natal), 'Monitoring the Sarmcol Struggle', 98-99.

⁵¹ Kaufmann, same interview.

⁵² Leeb and Radford, 'An investigation', 27-28.

⁵³ Bhekukwenza Ndlovu and other men, group interview, Emaphetlweni Conference Centre, Pietermaritzburg, 2 December 2010.

Hurley also raised funds for the Sarmcol Workers' Cooperative (SAWCO), the community project set up in November 1985 to ensure the economic survival of the dismissed workers.⁵⁴ Through his intermediation, the workers secured permission from the Oblates of St Francis de Sales, a religious congregation established in Merrivale, to grow vegetables on their property. When the Oblates of St Francis de Sales left the area in 1989, Hurley obtained funds from Misereor, a Catholic donor agency in Germany, to purchase their farm on SAWCO's behalf.⁵⁵ He came to bless the farm on 11 June 1990.⁵⁶ Twenty years later, Sixtus Ndlovu, a former Sarmcol worker, still remembered, in an interview, that the SAWCO farm had been 'sponsored by the Roman Catholics'.⁵⁷

Kaufmann's – and Hurley's – engagement in favour of the Sarmcol workers did not proceed without controversy. The country's divisions were mirrored in the church. When John Sampson, the managing director of Sarmcol, received a letter sent by Kaufmann in support of the workers, he summoned him to his office, accusing him of being manipulated by the union. The parish council of Howick's "white" Catholic parish – some members of which were managers of Sarmcol – protested so loudly against the Redemptorist's involvement in the labour dispute that Hurley had to come to his rescue.⁵⁸ At a clergy meeting, some of his fellow priests called him "naïve, idealistic and an embarrassment". Only the white Methodist minister, he recalled, was on his side. In the end it was in the Mpophomeni minister fraternal that he found the most support and encouragement.⁵⁹

Kaufmann's commitment to the cause of the Sarmcol workers came at a price. After police informers reported that he was to be a speaker in Mpophomeni on the tenth anniversary of the Soweto uprising, he was arrested at his Merrivale residence on 12 June 1986 – the onset of the second state of emergency – and detained in a police cell for two weeks. This experience, according to a fellow priest, left him very shaken.⁶⁰

The Anglican Church, which could not send to Mpophomeni a priest of Kaufmann's calibre and whose bishop, Michael Nuttall, had only recently arrived in the region, was not as involved in the affairs of the township as the Catholic Church, but it was in the news at least once: In July 1985 a group of 500 protesters invaded the Anglican synod on the university campus in Pietermaritzburg with a banner saying "Sampson our boss an Anglican – where do you stand: with the bosses or the workers?" John Sampson, the managing director of Sarmcol, was indeed a faithful Anglican. On behalf of the synod, Richard Craft, the bishop of Pretoria, expressed support for the workers.⁶¹

The church on the battle line

The Sarmcol strike and its violent aftermath were only the first part of the story. Worse was to come. A "war", as the Mpophomeni residents described it, followed, leaving a trail of deaths, injuries, torture, lost property and refugees. As we have already seen, two men, one of whom was suspected of being a scab, were killed in June 1985. Two more, including the son of a Sarmcol worker, lost their lives in August of the same year.⁶² Apart from a school boycott in January 1986,⁶³ the situation remained relatively calm for about a year and a half. It was the bussing in of two hundred Inkatha supporters to a rally in the community hall on 5 December 1986 and the abduction and assassination of three union leaders involved in SAWCO the following day that revived the conflict in Mpophomeni. Between October 1987 and July 1990 the township residents and refugees from other parts of the Natal Midlands faced attacks from neighbouring Inkatha-dominated villages, receiving no support from the police. In May 1991 a second wave of violence hit Mpophomeni, this time between two groups of local youths, dubbed "Umgovu" and "Umgoqo". There was no apparent reason for this violence, which resulted in random death and destruction, as the police once more remained passive. The violence mysteriously ended after

⁵⁴ On SAWCO, see Bonnin, 'Class, Consciousness and Conflict', 237, 355. SAWCO ran five projects: T-shirts and button making, agriculture, health, culture and bulk-buying.

⁵⁵ Kaufmann and Decock, same interviews. See also Kearney, *The Guardian of the Light*, 233.

⁵⁶ *Natal Witness*, 12 June 1990. The Sarmcol workers also received capital for agricultural equipment, for the salary of an agricultural advisor and allowances for the members. Support was received afterwards from the Farmers' Support Group of the University of Natal. External funding stopped in 1992. In 1995 the project still had eight members (Entraide et Fraternité Archives, Sarmcol Papers, 7).

⁵⁷ Sixtus Ndlovu, interview conducted by Zodwa Maphanga on 11 June 2010 in Mpophomeni.

⁵⁸ Kearney, *The Guardian of the Light*, 233.

⁵⁹ Kaufmann, same interview.

⁶⁰ Kaufmann and Decock, same interviews. On the same night Theo Kneiffel, a German Oblate of Mary Immaculate, was arrested at Cedara and, despite frantic efforts by Cardinal McCann and the apostolic nuncio, expelled from South Africa three days later. On 12 June 1986 a group of theological students from St Joseph's Scholasticate went on a protest march in Pietermaritzburg. Twenty-one of them were arrested and detained for two weeks in Howick.

⁶¹ *Natal Witness*, 12 July 1986.

⁶² *Natal Witness*, 2 August 1985, quoted in Forsyth, *Pietermaritzburg Conflict Chronology*, 79; Indicator Project, 11 August 1985 (John Aitchison electronic database).

⁶³ *Natal Echo*, 30 January 1986, quoted in Forsyth, *Pietermaritzburg Conflict Chronology*, 86.

a last string of murders in March 1993. To this day, the causes of the second eruption of political violence remain obscure, with no proof, despite rumours, of a “third force” conspiracy.⁶⁴

As for the Sarmcol strike, the interviews reveal the deeply imbedded perception that the churches were on the residents’ side. Here again the Catholic Church was at the forefront, even though the Methodist Church, the Anglican Church and various African independent churches were said to have provided support to the victims of violence – according to the interviewees. An important factor of the Catholic Church’s relatively high profile in the township was the size of the Catholic congregation. Many dismissed Sarmcol workers belonged to it. A second factor, already alluded to, was the involvement of the successive priests, Larry Kaufmann and Edgar Weinmann, and of Archbishop Hurley, in relief work. Hurley was one of the celebrants at the funeral of the three murdered activists in December 1986, a ceremony made “excruciatingly cruel” by the authorities’ decision to release the bodies one by one, with no one being allowed to leave the church hall until the end of the ceremony on a particularly hot day.⁶⁵ Hurley came back to Mpophomeni two years later to bless the tombstones of the three murdered activists, the main speaker on that occasion being the recently-released ANC activist Harry Gwala.⁶⁶

There is, however, another equally compelling reason for the positive image of the Catholic Church among the Mpophomeni residents. Situated on the upper edge of the township, just under Haza and Shifu, the rural settlements from where armed gangs of Inkatha supporters came down to fight on several occasions, St Anne’s church was literally on the battlefield. The fighting took place a few hundred metres from the church hall. The Catholic priest was the first to be informed of the attack. He witnessed *de visu* the partiality of the police force and thus became a valuable source of information on the conflict.

Like other hot spots in the province, Mpophomeni had a war zone, an area attackers from outside tried to conquer and people from inside endeavoured to defend. As Mpophomeni resident Nhanhla Bhengu observed, the Catholic Church was in the middle of the disputed zone:

- Were the people who attacked the houses residents or outsiders?
- They were outsiders.
- How did they do it?
- It happened when they came to Mpophomeni. The moment we saw they were inside Mpophomeni, we responded. We had to shoot back at the people who were shooting at us next to the Catholic church.
- Where was the fighting spot?
- There near the Catholic church’s ridge. That was the fighting spot, but they also came inside Mpophomeni.⁶⁷

On Sunday, 19 March 1989, a crowd of Inkatha supporters, stirred to action by Induna Amon Dladla at a rally in Nxamalala, went on the rampage in nearby Haza to intimidate the people perceived to be UDF affiliates. This caused a number of inhabitants to flee to Mpophomeni, with the Inkatha supporters in pursuit. The township residents started to fear for their lives.⁶⁸

Edgar Weinmann was at St Anne’s parish on that day. He gave the following testimony in support of an application to the Supreme Court for an order restraining the police from assaulting Mpophomeni members:

On Sunday, 19 March 1989, I was at the Mpophomeni Roman Catholic Church in the afternoon conducting a ceremony in preparation for Easter Sunday. At approximately 15h00 while we were having a break, I saw a number of Mpophomeni residents gathering in the road below the church and pointing upwards to the hills above Mpophomeni. I was unable to see anything, but the residents told me that an armed group were coming down to attack them. I believe I was unable to see anything as a small hillock obscured my view. From the conduct of the Mpophomeni residents I realised that they were genuinely concerned.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ In late 1993 a team from the London-based Amnesty International came to investigate but found no evidence of involvement of white farmers or renegade policemen as some community members suspected. Chris Khoza, former ANC chairman, personal communication to the author.

⁶⁵ Kearney, *The Guardian of the Light*, 232. For a poignant description of the funeral, see W. Leeb, ‘Activists murdered, an old woman cries out and the people mourn’, *The Witness*, 12 December 2012. Larry Kaufmann heard Archbishop Hurley saying in the sacristy ‘I think I’ll wear a mitre. I’ll give these grieving people the dignity of the mitre, and I’ll be visible outside to the police surrounding the property’ (mail to Philippe Denis, 12 July 2012).

⁶⁶ *Natal Witness*, 12 December 1988.

⁶⁷ Nhanhla Bhengu, same interview. On the life of Harry Gwala (1920-1995), union leader, member of the Communist party and ANC regional leader, several times in detention, there is hardly any academic work. During the times of political violence, he was accused in various quarters of being a warlord.

⁶⁸ APC, PC159-7-1: Application to the Supreme Court for a court order restraining the South African Police from assaulting Mpophomeni residents, Stanley Mbambo, Founding Affidavit, 24 April 1989, art. 10.1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*: Edgar Weinmann, Affidavit, 23 April 1989, art. 2.1-4.

On that day nothing happened apart from the ruthless arrest of Pierre Cronje, a member of parliament who had arrived in the meantime to monitor the situation.⁷⁰ However, three weeks later, Inkatha supporters returned, and on this occasion, fighting took place. According to Weinmann,

on Sunday, 9 April 1989, I attended the service at Mpophomeni Church. Shortly after the mass had finished, I went off with a parishioner to visit somebody on their sickbed. When I returned approximately an hour later, I noticed a large group of people congregating on the hillside above the church. Two groups were fighting, one from Mpophomeni and the other [from] KwaShifu. [...] The fighting continued for approximately three quarters of an hour. A large number of Mpophomeni residents had gathered in the street below the Roman Catholic Church and in the yard of their homes and were watching the conflict. The fighting was going on in full view of the police unit above KwaShifu. I was most surprised that the police did not come earlier as that unit would have been in radio contact with other police units. Indeed, it appeared that it was only when the KwaShifu people were in danger of losing the conflict that the police arrived.⁷¹

No loss of life occurred during this episode, but several residents were assaulted by the police and some of them suffered torture while in detention. Weinmann was not the only minister of religion to support the – eventually successful – application of the residents to the Supreme Court. Moses Dlamini, the Anglican rector, testified that, on 9 April 1989, he had seen the police, instead of offering mediation, “driving the Mpophomeni residents back by sjambokking them”.⁷² Petros Mbhele, a minister of the African Ethiopian Church of South Africa, declared that on 8 April 1989, as he was preparing for the church service, the police tear-gassed his congregation. “I can only guess”, he commented, “that this was part of the police harassment of the residents of Mpophomeni that day.”⁷³

The last incident that we will mention here – and perhaps the most dramatic – was the attack on the Catholic Church, which was accused of being too supportive of the ‘comrades’, by a group of assailants from Shifu during the Seven-Day War in March 1990⁷⁴ and its defence by the Mpophomeni residents. Sizwe Duma, who took part in the fighting, gave the following testimony:

It started on a Tuesday and it went on till the Wednesday of the following week. I only managed to sleep eight hours for the whole week. [...] We could see [the Inkatha supporters] coming from Chief Mkhize’s side [...] It had started to rain heavily for thirty minutes and there were floods of water all over. Everyone sat at home. When the rain stopped, our enemies came to burn the Catholic church. The Catholic priest had been burying comrades killed by Inkatha warriors from Haza and other places. People used to come to the Catholic church and the priest accompanied them till they got a place of refuge. [...] Our opponents burnt the church pulpit on that day. But they did not succeed in burning the whole church. We went there to fight them and drive out Inkatha. What I remember about that day is that we were scared to go close to the bus shelter next to the church. This shelter is still there. We were scared because we were fighting Inkatha with traditional weapons. [...] Bear in mind that they fought us with real guns.⁷⁵

A reference to a possible attack on Mpophomeni in the minutes of a meeting of the Natal Church Leaders Group on 21 June 1990 shows that the members of this informal body – including Archbishop Denis Hurley, Bishop Michael Nuttall, the Anglican bishop of Natal, Peter Kerchhoff, the director of PACSA, and Paddy Kearney, the director of Diakonia in Durban – were informed of the situation in the township at the time. At the same meeting they discussed how to approach Chief Buthelezi in an attempt to offer a mediation service between the ANC and Inkatha.⁷⁶

Like Hurley, Nuttall paid regular visits to Mpophomeni, mostly to support Moses Dlamini, the Anglican priest. These were difficult times, he remembers:

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*: Pierre Carel Cronje, Affidavit, 21 April 1989. Pierre Cronje, a member of the recently launched Democratic Party, was locked in a police van for about an hour by riot police officers during an unrest incident in Mpophomeni. He raised the issue in parliament a few days later.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Edgar Weinmann, Affidavit, 23 April 1989, art. 7.1-7.

⁷² *Ibid.*, Kenrick Dlamini, Affidavit, 24 April 1989, art. 4.3.

⁷³ *bid.*, Petros Mbhele, Affidavit, 24 April 1989, art. 7.2.

⁷⁴ During the last week of May 1990 a coordinated attack by Inkatha warriors resulted in the loss of at least 80 lives and left 20,000 people homeless in the Edendale valley east of Pietermaritzburg. A session of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was dedicated to this episode in September 1996 in Pietermaritzburg.

⁷⁵ Sizwe Duma, interview conducted by Musawenkosi Sibiya on 27 July 2010 in Mpophomeni.

⁷⁶ Michael Mbona, “The Church and political violence in KwaZulu-Natal. An evaluation of the Natal Church Leaders Group’s ecumenical response (1987-1996), unpublished master’s thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2009, 131. On the Natal Church Leaders Group, see Michael Mbona, “On embassy to Ulundi: the Natal Church Leaders Group’s mediation attempts in war-torn Natal (1987-1990), *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 36 (2010), 141-162.

We had an Anglican presence in Mpophomeni during the time of troubles, but we were not involved with the Sarmcol issue and its consequences in the same direct way as the Catholics were. We had no Larry Kaufman nor Archbishop Hurley! I was still quite new to the diocese, living in Durban and trying hard to find my feet. [...] Our resident priest, Moses Dlamini, was both terrified and brave, living in the priest's house right next door to our church of the Good Shepherd (Umalusi Omuhle) which was situated on the far eastern edge of the township. I did my best to support him and his wife and family through those dreadful years – a pastoral role, I guess, rather than a strong prophetic one, but surely important. My episcopal colleague and I never missed an annual confirmation service, and Dorrie [Bishop Nuttall's wife] and I remember being stopped once by the security police, who searched the car and were very suspicious of the crozier box and the box of confirmation booklets in isiZulu!⁷⁷

God's benevolence

The oral narratives and the written sources indicate why the Mpophomeni residents saw the Christian churches as supportive during the long period of trial that followed the dismissal of the Sarmcol workers. They provided material assistance to the unemployed, procured land for their cooperative, buried the victims of their enemies, helped the refugees to settle, testified on the involvement of the police in the conflict and supported the efforts of reconstruction. Did this perceived support translate into religious beliefs? If the churches were on the residents' side, did this mean that God was also on their side? The material gathered for this study provides some answers.

Let us preface this section by saying that the Mpophomeni residents did not wait for the time of political violence to recognise God's hand in moments of success. Being able to pay *lobola*, for example, was a sign of God's support, as Robert Dhlomo expressed it, when asked to introduce himself:

[A contractor in the laboratory] helped me to open a bank account because God is great. Every time I was paid, he would take R5 from me to save and gave me R2. This R5 would go straight to the bank. In 1969, the second year after I started to save money, I paid *lobola* for this woman. The following year I finished to pay *lobola*.⁷⁸

During the conflict the Mpophomeni residents and other dismissed Sarmcol workers made use of the religious language learnt in church to make sense of the burden of their experience. They saw themselves as the people of Israel en route to the Promised Land, as Lawrence Zondi, the Sarmcol workers' *imbongi* – as Debby Bonnin called him – said at a general meeting of the workers:

My brothers, you all know that we are also people who are guided by the Lord's words. The Bible says when the Israelites left Egypt they were promised the land of honey and milk, where they would be in a land of perpetual happiness. We have always heard this story when priests tell us about it in the church. We had never thought that something similar to the experiences of the Israelites will happen to us. When the time came for the children of Israel to leave the bondage of Egypt, it was only then that paradoxically their problems and hardships began. Similarly, we really started experiencing severe hardships when we left Sarmcol. It was on the day we left Sarmcol that it became a reality to be without pay. We in fact decided on that day that we are going to leave Sarmcol premises without collecting our pay. Some of our brothers in the factory jumped and came to me and asked 'Bhuti Zondi, are we going to go home without our pay this time?' Even some of my sons at Mechanical, also jumped, and asked if we leave without our pay how are we going to get home? My brothers, we are in a war here. All the time you knew that we will have to fight at some stage. In a war situation, you don't choose when to fight and under what conditions.⁷⁹

In a similar way Idah Xaba, a Mpophomeni woman, compared the besieged township residents to the army of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, when it was confronted with the superior power of the Moabites. "The battle", a prophet was reported as saying to Jehoshaphat, "is not yours but God's" (2 Chronicles 20:15). As observed in other oral societies, Idah Xaba did not quote the Bible directly but made reference to a set of biblical narratives

⁷⁷ Bishop Michael Nuttall, email to the author, 9 May 2013.

⁷⁸ Robert Dhlomo and other men, group interview, Emapheteleni Conference Centre, Pietermaritzburg, 2 December 2010.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Bonnin, 'Class, Consciousness and Conflict', 262.

aimed at discerning whether the battle belonged to God or not.⁸⁰ She made the following observation during a group interview:

One Thursday we asked to go to a prayer, one of those where the women of prayer get strength. We went up the hill to pray, following the text of Jehoshafat which says: ‘God, please can you take over this war from me because now it is not my battle. The battle was not for us but it was for God.’ We asked God to give us strength to face the war.⁸¹

The Mpophomeni residents spontaneously used religious language to explain how, despite all odds, they managed to survive. “God helped us to create our township the way it is”, Jhoba Mtshali declared, “because Inkatha never managed to penetrate the township.”⁸² For Martha Nxumalo, one of the first residents in Mpophomeni, the same applied to the country as a whole. “Mandela also survived by the grace of God.”⁸³ “It was very difficult,” declared Jabu Ngcobo, a younger woman, “but with the help of God we were saved from all of that. I also thank the current government who is helping to improve us to develop the township.”⁸⁴

Saying that God was on their side does not mean that the situation was easy to accept. The faith of the Mpophomeni residents was put to the test. God, observed Jorosty Cele, works in mysterious ways:

Sometimes the boys went to fight and you did not know if they would come back. When they left, we prayed. One day, I shall never forget, Our Almighty worked in his mysterious ways. That day there were two funerals of youths. The children were busy protesting. As they came back from the cemetery, they were still protesting. I saw that they did not arrive and went to check where they had gone. I saw the police and the children looking at each other. They were waiting for each other’s first move. The police carried guns and the children carried stones. I did not know what to do.⁸⁵

Conclusion

Three elements explain why the Christian churches – for a long time, essentially the Catholic Church – played a widely recognised supportive role in Mpophomeni when hundreds of Sarmcol workers lost their jobs after the April 1985 strike and when, with the active complicity of the police, the township suffered attacks from armed groups from the surrounding villages. The first is that, until the late 1980s, half of the population, including union leaders and UDF activists, worshipped in the same place, namely St Anne’s Catholic parish. This created the conditions for actions of solidarity to take place. The second factor was the presence of two priests, Larry Kaufmann and Edgar Weinmann, who chose to side with the Mpophomeni people at the risk of being criticised by the white sectors of their church. Until the last day of apartheid, one should remember, most white parishioners supported the social and political status quo. A third factor was the unwavering support of Archbishop Hurley, who paid pastoral visits to Mpophomeni, buried the four slain SAWCO activists in December 1996 and raised funds for SAWCO’s agricultural project in Merrivale.

Remarkable as it was, the churches’ involvement in the Mpophomeni conflict must be put in perspective. They did not drive the struggle for justice and reparation of the Mpophomeni people; they only supported it. The main impetus came from MAWU, to which the majority of Sarmcol workers belonged. In 1985 and 1986 a wide range of anti-apartheid activists – including health professionals, cultural workers, academics and journalists – were drawn to the township by the trade unions. The churches’ most important contribution to the Mpophomeni people’s struggle for survival in the face of unemployment, poverty and external attacks with the complicity of the security forces was to provide a space where they could meet and plan defensive actions. During the last decade of apartheid, bona fide religious meetings were one of the few open-air public meetings that were not banned. In addition, together with the unions and other solidarity groups, the churches provided material support to the dismissed workers and they contributed to the development of their cooperative’s agricultural project.

An important limitation on the churches’ involvement in the Mpophomeni conflict was that the clergy and, to some degree, the church members themselves remained, intentionally or not, unaffected by the undercurrents of violence affecting the township at the time. They only had a superficial knowledge of what was happening in the community. We have seen that political violence started in reaction to the hiring of scabs by the Sarmcol management in May 1985. Archbishop Hurley arrived immediately and Larry Kaufmann, the

⁸⁰ I owe this insight to my colleague Gerald West, Professor of Old Testament at the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal. For a similar case, see G. O. West, ‘Reading Shembe ‘Re-Membering’ the Bible. Isaiah Shembe’s Instructions on Adultery’, *Neotestamentica*, 40/1 (2006), 157–184.

⁸¹ Idah Xaba and other women, group interview, Emaphetelweni Conference Centre, Pietermaritzburg, 2 December 2010.

⁸² Jhoba Mtshali and others, group interview, Emaphetelweni Conference Centre, Pietermaritzburg, 2 December 2010.

⁸³ Martha Nxumalo, interview conducted by Msawenkosi Xaba on 2 September 2010 in Mpophomeni.

⁸⁴ Jabu and Bongumusa Ngcobo, 11 June 2009, interview conducted by Thulani Mkhize on 11 June 2009 in Mpophomeni.

⁸⁵ Ceresty Cele and other women, group interview, Emaphetelweni Conference Centre, Pietermaritzburg, 2 December 2010.

Catholic priest, put the parish hall at the disposal of the strikers. The churches, however, did not take action when uglier forms of violence, such as the necklacing of suspected *impipis*, were taking place.⁸⁶ They probably ignored the not infrequent episodes of sexual violence committed by “comrades” against their girlfriends, which were reported later.⁸⁷ And like the leaders of the ANC, they did little more than bury the dead when the rival gangs of Mbovu and Mgoqo terrorised the township in the early 1990s, causing more casualties than during the skirmishes between UDF and Inkatha in the preceding period.

⁸⁶ On 9 October 1989 a fifty-two-year-old man was stabbed to death after allegedly being accused of being an *impipi* (Police Unrest Report, 9 October 1989 and *Natal Witness*, 10 October 1989, quoted in Aitchison files). In 2005 a woman by the name of Mpumelelo described to Judith Singleton the story of a necklacing she had witnessed when she was ten years old (Singleton, “I love you”, 156). On the culture of ‘own justice’ and ‘people’s justice’ see Keys, “Mpophomeni”, 133.

⁸⁷ On sexual coercion in Mpophomeni in the last decade of apartheid, see Singleton, “I love you”.