

# **The historical foundation of the mission churches and African Independent Churches in South Africa: matters of the church and the environment**

*Mokhele Madise*

Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology,  
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

## *Abstract*

The missionaries established the Christian church in South Africa without access to any proper building structures. They discovered that the local people relied on the environment for their survival and sustainability, so the missionaries decided to do the same as a means to get the indigenous people to understand the importance of worship. However, it was not easy for the missionaries to adapt to the harsh African climate and conditions. The Africans had their own ways of withstanding these harsh conditions; taking shelter under trees and in caves was just part of their existence. So, to ensure that their work continued, the missionaries had no alternative but to do the same. Churches were therefore established under the trees. For some ethnic groups, these trees were significant, while for others, they carried no meaning at all. Nevertheless, the environment became part of the church structure, as trees, caves and water were used to establish the church.

Although the mainline churches regarded water as an essential source of life, they viewed it differently from the African Initiated Churches. The main focus of this article, therefore, will be on the use of water as an environmental resource by both the African Independent Churches and the mission churches. In this regard, Taung became a particularly significant place.

The article will focus on original material, as well as oral research from some areas where the practice of worshipping in caves and under trees is still observed.

## **Introduction**

This article is intended to examine the planting of the church in South Africa, especially during the missionaries' effort to convert the locals to Christianity, as well as during the establishment of the AICs. However, the focus will be on how Christianity was founded through environmental association. For many churches, particularly among the communities of local people, formal church structures were irrelevant. These communities are located in the North West and Northern Cape provinces respectively, but are about 250 kilometres apart. The points of discussion will focus on the background to the area of Batlhaping ba ga Phuduhucwana and Batlharos. The Christian mission by major Christian religious denominations occurred among the two tribes living in that area. Conclusions will be drawn from the discussion.

## **Methodology**

The research methods applied to collect data were basically based on oral tradition, where interviews were conducted with some of the people who experienced the planting of different church denominations, especially around the area of Batlhaping ba ga Phuduhucwana and Batlharos (these are Batswana people, who are commonly known as Batlhaping of the same descendants. Many of those interviewed were quite old, but they had vivid recollections and could still remember certain areas where there is visible evidence of worshipping practices, such as relics and ruins that exist down to today. The researcher has also been able to visit both the Methodist Church's archives in Kimberley and the United Congregational Church in Taung. Primary sources were scarce, although the few that were found were important as they provided the researcher with valuable information (probably missing or burnt) except the bits and pieces which had to be put together to come up with what took place then. In some cases the oral stories had to be compared with the written minutes of the quarterly meetings (in the case of the Methodist Church) and the council meetings (in the case of the United Congregational Church).

## **Background**

The area that is occupied by the Batlhaping people is bordered on the southeastern side by the westward-flowing Harts River and on the northwestern side, by the Kalahari Desert. One crucial determinant in this area is the ecological limitations of aridness. It seldom rains and the rainfall is seasonal, unreliable and minimal (Madise

2010:42). North of the Vaal is an area that is entirely cut through by valleys and surrounded by river beds, which are mostly dry. At the same time, modern irrigation methods have been adopted to control the flow of the Harts River. In the past, the Harts River used to flow as strongly as the Molopo River and the Kuruman River. The soil in that area is basically the same texture as that in the Kalahari Desert, so it retains very little moisture. Being a thunderstorm area, heavy rains and the resultant runoff can flood the river beds. Inhabitants of this region are commonly referred to as Batlhaping, Bathlaro and Barolong, and they form the three main tribes of Batswana who settled around the Northern Cape and the south-western part of the North West province.

### **Mission among Batlhaping and Bathlaro**

It is well documented that Robert Moffat started his missionary expedition among the Batlhaping in the area popularly known as Kuruman. However, it is less well known that the mission in that area did not take place under formal structures, as was the case in other areas of South Africa. The Batlhaping was the first tribe of Batswana to come into contact with the missionaries and its members were evangelised by Robert Moffat. Later this tribe split into two groups. The one group remained in Kuruman and were called Bathlaro-Tlhaping, while the other group (which retained the original name of Batlhaping) moved to the east. The latter group (which was the largest) regarded Chief Tau Mankuraone as their chief. They settled in the area west of Wolmaranstad (formerly southwestern Transvaal) on the banks of the Harts River and called their settlement Taung (Sebitloane unpublished notes).

Two missionary societies occupied this vast area of land, namely the Methodist Missionary Society (covering the area stretching from Kimberley and the surrounding areas) and the London Missionary Society (covering Kuruman and the surrounding areas). Long after the missionaries had settled there, other denominations also established themselves there, for instance the Catholics, Anglicans and the Lutherans, although the latter form a tiny minority. The area of Batlhaping and Bathlaro is surrounded mainly by thorny Mimosa trees. The inhabitants of this area used these trees in various ways. The primary use was usually for shelter and building kraals for their livestock. The kraals were primarily used to secure their livestock against predators such as jackals and lions. The other important use of this tree's wood was to make fires in the evening and during the winter season. During the missionary exploration, there were no formal structures to bring people together for worship and the missionaries also had no facilities that they could use for evangelising purposes. Trees thus became an option that the missionaries used for shelter and a place of worship. This was not unusual for Batlhaping, as they were used to gathering under the trees for their community and tribal meetings. This trend cascaded down to the mission services of worship from the beginning (Wing unpublished notes). It was interesting to note that all the denominations relied on the mimosa tree for shelter during their services of worship. One may even be tempted to think that this could have been influenced by the weather conditions which in many instances tended to be extremely hot during summer.

### **Caves and mountains as the point of church foundation of the AICs**

Africans have always viewed themselves as being one with nature and this outlook influenced the African Independent Churches. Unlike the mission churches, the AICs have used caves and the dormant flowing water mountains as their meeting places. However, these churches sometimes faced challenges that, in certain instances, were of a legal nature. On many occasions these churches did not follow a legal route to settle issues of land, since they believed that such issues were not to be taken to court. One of the major reasons for the refusal to follow the legal route was that many ministers of the AICs felt that they should be allowed to buy the land in their own names and then receive the title deeds. This resulted in many of the AICs – particularly those that practised the healing ministry in the traditional form – deciding to use caves as sacred places (Matsepe 2005:361).

Mountains and caves in the context of the AICs, especially the Zionist-type churches, are believed to be the dwelling places of God, gods and ancestors; therefore, they are declared sacred. Mountains were often viewed as meeting points between the visible and the invisible worlds, such as heaven and earth (Matsepe 2005:361). So basically anything that interferes with natural places evokes resentment and may produce a hostile reaction from the people concerned. Whatever takes place on the mountain or in the cave has special meaning to the people participating in those services and holding such beliefs. Sometimes these belief systems are derived from either a group of people or an ethnic group (in this case, the Batswana). Some of these mountains and caves are believed to be “Miracle Mountains”, for example the mountain known as Diremogolo. In certain instances, these places also become points of contestations between the church leaders and traditional practitioners (Matsepe 2005:362). The conflict around these places is also influenced by the period of use by both sides (the church leaders and traditional healers). It is indisputable that traditional healers have been using these natural places to perform healing rituals since time immemorial, but it is also true that the Zionist-type churches have embraced forms of traditional healing that many African people have become attached to. The

use of natural places by churches for healing purposes has also baffled other church leaders, as this phenomenon has never been practised before. The same can be said about the traditional healers, as they have been equally surprised by this practice among some of the church leaders (Matsepe 2005:362). While this may be the case for many people (both Christians and traditional practitioners), the church leaders who are engaged in this practice argue that what they are doing is legitimate and aimed at healing people. This justification is further endorsed by scriptural texts such as Genesis 1:26-31 and Psalm 24:1. The text in Genesis clearly states that human beings have been given dominion over the earth; this implies that people can use whatever is on earth for their own good. Psalm 24:1 simply states that the world and all that is in it belongs to the Lord, which evidently means that all the natural places and elements, such as mountains, caves, rivers, hills, forests and water, belong to God. It is further argued that human beings use these natural places in the service of God for the good of His people. The story of Namaan is a case in point: he was instructed by Elisha the prophet to dip himself seven times in the Jordan River to heal himself of leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14).

### **The significance of water in the AICs**

Water in both the mission churches and in the AICs is quite significant. The one reason water is significant for both these Christian denominations is baptism. But for the AICs, water has other important characteristics. For example, the AICs are often deemed to be custodians of African culture (Mofokeng 1990:47). Though this may be true, it is also important for the AICs to take issues of environmental care into consideration. On the other hand, mission churches are also starting to embrace issues of culture and tradition in the African context, which means that water is becoming an important factor for them in this regard too. In both cases, water is seen to be an important part of the church and the lives of the people. While, historically, water has been known to be used by animals and human beings to quench their thirst, it has also been used for the purposes of farming and manufacturing clay pots, enabling human beings to store food and other liquids (Lebeloane & Madise 2006:145). The historical discovery of water as a resource for therapy, healing and curative purposes is shrouded in mystery. No one seems to know when or how this was discovered, except that it goes back more than 4 000 years, when people were drawn to various sources of water (Lanz 1995:60). However, the other well-known purpose of water for human beings was to wash themselves, it was also believed to help heal their wounds.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, water played a prominent role as it was used for multiple purposes, including for baptism, drinking, healing and washing (Kunnie 1995:5). Water was also home to aquatic species such as fish (Lebeloane & Madise 2006:146). A number of other scriptural texts testify to the use of water to facilitate or complete many rituals, as in the baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:13-17). Another good example is when Jesus washed his disciples' feet (John 13). Although the latter text relates to servitude, it must be borne in mind that the AICs' purpose in using water is, among other things, to cure the sick by having the priests and prophets wash away the members' ailments and diseases.

South Africa is a country rich in natural water sources, such as fountains, springs and natural dams. In Limpopo province, the little town of Bela Bela (formerly known as Warmbaths) is well known for its natural hot springs. For many years, people have been visiting these hot springs with the objective of either cleansing themselves, healing their ailments and drawing water for drinking or even washing. In more recent times, these hot springs have been commercialised and guesthouses, hotels, holiday resorts and game farms have been built around them. Commercialisation has been viewed as destroying the naturalness of the hot spring water and the accompanying belief system of the local people.

Many of the AICs' theologies continue to attach much significance to the use of water. However, the perception is that this tradition has a scriptural basis (Lebeloane & Madise 2006:147). But this is a misconception, since confluences, fountains, rivers and springs and some of the natural resources have been used for therapy and healing in Africa since before colonialism (ZCC elder 2005). Moreover, the use of herbs growing alongside water sources for bathing, drinking and cleansing the environment is a tradition dating to long before the scriptural tradition (ZCC elder 2005). For many AICs, water is seen as a gift from the Creator and is understood to possess life-giving and life-invigorating power if it is blessed by either a minister or a traditional healer (*ngaka* or *inyanga*). Once the process of blessing the water has been accomplished, the water is regarded as *isiwasho* (holy water). Currently, both the AICs and the mission churches give people holy water, either to bathe in, drink or cleanse their environment.

While the use of water by the AICs is essential for many reasons, they have not made a clear statement about the effects of global changes on water sources. It is also interesting to note that other Christian denominations have not come up with any commitment to ensure environmental sustainability of natural water sources. At the same time, it is not reasonable to blame all the AICs for failing to adopt a resolution on matters of environmental sustainability because in some cases it is not easy to distinguish among the AICs which ones are genuinely authentic and apply a clear conscience on matters affecting the environment. These days there

have been complaints about some churches emerging and claiming possession of the power of healing using water.

On the other hand, mission churches tended not to have the powers of using water compared with the AICs. Mission churches have viewed water as an important environmental resource and have taken a stand through a statement of commitment to ensure environmental sustainability. In some cases, these mission churches took an individual stand on environmental matters, while also supporting the commitment made by the ecumenical church movement.

### **The significance of water in the mission churches**

Mainline churches have aligned their environmental awareness campaigns with the global environmental-consciousness organisations. Issues such as global warming, deforestation, desertification and water scarcity (which, in some cases, is caused by pollution) have become part of the agenda for these denominations. However, for the purpose of this article, the focus is mainly on water. Unlike the AICs, mainline churches do not use water in various ways, except for baptism and, perhaps, the minister washing feet of some colleagues and lay leaders during special services of worship. Some of the focal areas of the mainline churches with regard to water are discussed below.

Water is a scarce resource, and studies on global warming indicate that the Western Cape will be the worst affected province. Water sources must be judiciously managed and protected. Accordingly, the Department of Water and Environmental Affairs (DWEA) has been tasked to do resource studies and keep municipalities informed.

Water allocations will address development and environmental priorities, which are often in conflict, making water-demand management crucial. This involves, among other things, reduction of non-essential use of water, reuse of waste water and desalination. In addition, there are capacity problems relating to bulk services, such as supply, treatment, transmission and disposal, which need to be addressed at municipal and provincial level.

### **Mission churches' environmental plan**

#### *Industry and mining*

The mission churches believed that mining and industry are conscious of their use of water and water pollution. Some of the key areas that have been identified by the mission churches are the change in pH (acidity of the water), increased salinity, increased metal content and increased sediment load. Industrial contributions are more varied, depending on the industrial process, but can include poisonous and hazardous chemicals, nutrients, elevated salinity and increased sediment. For mission churches, these consequences of the mining industry endanger not only the environment, but also the fauna and flora.

Urban expansion is another avenue that contributes greatly to environmental deterioration ([www.sacc.org.za](http://www.sacc.org.za)). According to the mission churches, this adds to the deteriorating standards in wastewater management. In some municipalities, little or no treatment of wastewater takes place, such as in informal settlements. Where treatment is available, sewer reticulation may be inadequate or poorly maintained, resulting in uncontrolled releases, such as leakage and overflow into the natural environment. Urban runoff can contain high organic and nutrient loads that contribute to problems in urban streams and impoundments. The consequences are increased nutrient and organic loads, plus microbial contamination. Therefore, an urgent need exists for adequate and improved urban wastewater treatment to minimise the negative impact, including the cost of damage to our critical inland water resources.

At the same time, agricultural drainage – beneficial as it may be for the survival of human beings, animals and plant species – has its own side effects. Mission churches know that the irrigation return flows and seepage contain salts that include nutrients (fertilisers), other agrochemicals (including herbicides and pesticides), and runoff or effluent from animal husbandry locations such as feedlots, piggeries, dairies or chicken farms, which also contribute to contamination and pollution of water.

Land usage that involves the laying of impervious materials or paving surfaces in urban areas diminishes rainwater recharge to groundwater. Lack of the dilution effect that would otherwise take place can lead to a rise in solute concentrations in the existing underlying aquifers. At the same time, lack of control in overgrazing and clearance of natural vegetation increases the risk of soil erosion and the entry of sediment into surface waters ([www.sacc.org.za](http://www.sacc.org.za)). The mission churches therefore believe that the local population should receive basic education on the fundamental preservation of the environment.

### **Mission churches' plan to combat environmental pollution**

From the viewpoint of the mission churches, pollution of water resources diminishes water's fitness for use. This affects the resource directly by making the water less acceptable for consumption (either for food production or any other identified use), depending on the extent, severity and temporal nature of the pollution. It can also affect the resource indirectly by curtailing recreational activities in badly affected water bodies.

Overall, the use of inland waters will be restricted by the quality of the water in the system under consideration.

### **Scientific evidence of pollution is supported by the mission churches**

Mission churches have come out in support of the scientific evidence that has proven that an increased salinity can lead to salinisation of irrigated soils, diminished crop yields, increased scale formation and corrosion in domestic and industrial water pipes, and changes in the biotic communities. Salinity can arise naturally or from activities such as mining, industry and agriculture. Humans can generally tolerate moderate salinity, while other species may not be able to do so. Churches – especially mission denominations – agree with the scientific evidence that high salinity can cause fatal intestinal and renal damage. Salinity is often the major limiting factor in determining fitness for use, compared with wetter countries, where an option of dilution is available to them. Waterborne diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery, skin infections, intestinal worms, cholera, trachoma and schistosomiasis (bilharzia) arise because of the presence of bacteria or parasites in the water ([www.sacc.org.za](http://www.sacc.org.za)). These diseases are attributable to poor sanitation practices. Low oxygen levels occur when bacteria in the water decompose organic matter, using oxygen, which is also required by other biotic components of the aquatic ecosystem. Higher concentrations of organic matter in water – arising from animals, humans or plants – can occur naturally as well as from poor waste-disposal practices. High concentrations are due to an accumulation of nutrients (mostly nitrogen and phosphorus compounds) in the water. The nitrogen: phosphate ratio, at higher proportions of phosphorus, will promote growth of potentially toxic cyanobacteria. Anthropogenic sources of nutrients in water commonly arise from domestic waste treatment, over-application of fertilisers, and certain industrial and mining processes. Mission churches believe that the use of chemicals such as ammonia and nitrate are toxic to aquatic fauna, particularly fish, and can lead to excessive plant and algae production, as was the case with the water hyacinth problem in the Hartbeespoort Dam in the 1970s and 1980s.

The consequences are further depletion of oxygen from the water, compounded by mass mortality of the aqueous biota that requires oxygen. Cell rupture of dying cyanobacteria releases their toxic content into the water. Suspended solids are insoluble sediments carried by the water that arise from excessive erosion, destruction of riparian vegetation, construction activities, overgrazing, and industrial or domestic discharges. Large quantities of solids, either suspended in the water, or as deposited sediment, can alter the habitat of some aquatic organisms, with a resultant change in the composition of the stream-bed community. Change in the stream-bed characteristics can impair the feeding efficiency of fish (impaired visibility, burial of food in silt), compromise breeding, impair their respiratory functions, and impede gaseous exchange that is essential for the life of all aquatic fauna and flora. Lack of light prevents photosynthesis.

Hydrocarbons can have toxic effects. Oil films block or smother animal respiratory organs. Hydrocarbons include petrochemicals, such as lubricating oil, petrol, paraffin, diesel, greases and tar, synthetic organic solvents (not necessarily classified as hydrocarbons), and the oils and fats of biological origin from food processes (which are also not true hydrocarbons). Acidification occurs when the pH of the water is lowered as a result of mining, industry, acid rain, waste disposal, or certain natural biological processes (such as the decomposition of fynbos in the southwestern Cape). Lowering of the pH can mobilise metals such as cadmium and lead, which, in turn, can have an adverse impact on aquatic ecosystems and water users. Solid litter takes many forms, both non-biogenic (plastics, cans) and biogenic (vegetation, cellulose-based paper). Besides being unsightly, they can degrade to release hazardous substances, deplete oxygen and obstruct watercourses, causing flooding upstream and draining downstream.

The mission churches have also identified other quality problems as important but still requiring further investigation, namely:

- bioactive materials such as endocrine disruptors
- environmentally stable products such as herbicides and pesticides
- trace elements (essential and adverse)
- radioactive contamination

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that environmental issues are critical for the survival of human beings, animals and plants. Various Christian denominations have not ignored the role they have to play in bringing about awareness of environmental issues to the various communities they serve. In some cases, environmental destruction may result from unconscious actions on the part of people, while in others it is the result of conscious behaviour. For example, after using natural resources, people need to be conscious of leaving those resources in the same condition in which they found them, thus avoiding endangering those resources. On the other hand, industrialisation, mining and agriculture may inadvertently (unconsciously) endanger the environment.

Therefore, although the AICs and the mission churches value the environment for different reasons, the preservation of natural resources is vital for the sustainability of all species on earth.

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