

**The leadership of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa
during the 1980s and 90s:
The transition from apartheid to the democratic era
in South Africa**

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Abstract

This article will focus mainly on the history of black leadership of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa ('the Methodist Church') during the 1980s and 90s, a time when South Africa was experiencing a deep political crisis.

The Methodist Church had become independent of its British parent institution in 1882, and the 100th anniversary of this event was due to be celebrated during the early 1980s. Opposition to the system of apartheid was growing during that period in the country's history, and the leadership of the Methodist Church found itself challenged to oppose apartheid. As a result, the church participated in an ecumenical movement that challenged the policies and, to some extent, the legitimacy of government of the time. Participation in the ecumenical movement forced many leaders of other institutions to take a stand either against or in favour of apartheid.

As part of this discussion, this article reviews the involvement of five figures in the Methodist Church: Simon Gqubule, Khoza Mgojo, Ernest Baartman (known as "The Black Moses"), Stanley Mogoba and Mvume Dandala. It also reviews developments within the organisation that saw the election of its first presiding bishop.

The beginning (1981)

At its conference in 1980, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa appointed Simon Gqubule as its president elect and senior leader from that year. Gqubule was well known in ecclesiastical circles, as well as in the educational world, academia and politics. He is now understood to have been a pioneer of theological education in Southern Africa. His particular contribu-

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tion was the establishment of the Methodist Church as a theological institution that would later challenge apartheid.

When Gqubule started his term of office the system of apartheid was still in place, and a piece of legislation known as the Group Areas Act was its cornerstone. Gqubule went on record as saying that the act was similar to laws enacted by the German Nazi party, except that people were not subjected to the gas chambers (*Dimension*, November 1981:1). On this basis, he challenged the Methodist Church to “tidy up its own “Group Areas Map’.”

As part of this, he wanted the Methodist Church to disavow the system of racial discrimination that was prevalent in the country, which was also reflected in the appointment of ministers to the church’s circuits. He was heavily critical of the mass removals and resettlements of people that were one of the ugliest features of apartheid. Accordingly, the bishop posed a question to the Methodist Church: whether it wanted to die slowly, in physical and spiritual pain, in a resettlement camp (*Dimension*, November 1981:1).

His call on the Methodist Church to reject apartheid reiterated a similar call that had been made earlier that year at an ecumenical conference organised under the theme “Obedience ’81”. “I wish to call all our people to reject all that apartheid implies of residential segregation, segregated facilities, segregated schools and denial of South African Citizenship to the vast majority of South Africans,” the bishop wrote (*Dimension*, November, 1981:1).

He challenged the Methodists to consider taking action that would help to improve South Africa’s status as a pariah state. As part of this, he urged the church to call on the South African government to establish a single department of education for all race groups in the country. He also demanded that the state ensure fairness and equality of educational subsidies and provide equal educational facilities and opportunities for all races in this country. Private schools and universities should admit applicants on academic merit alone from the beginning of 1982 (*Dimension*, November 1981:1).

The Obedience ’81 conference was held in Johannesburg on July 1, 1981. A statement and a number of resolutions were adopted by 800 delegates who attended the summit. The statement and its resolutions were voted on and confirmed later that year at the annual conference of the Methodist Church in October, which coincided with the end of Gqubule’s term of leadership.

The purpose of the ‘Obedience 81’ conference had been to address the social ills of South Africa at the time (Madise 2000:77). Political conditions at the time were extreme. The apartheid state frequently used laws allowing for detention without trial to disable its opponents, and many people were leaving the country to seek refuge in exile. As a result of its participation in the conference, the Methodist Church made the following statement:

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God commanded His church to be a pattern of His way of love proclaiming salvation, expressing acceptance of one another in and beyond our own cultural and racial group. This church, from its local congregational level, is to be an undivided community practising deep and costly reconciliation. The whole church is to proclaim and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ with clarity and conviction, to offer caring ministries, which can recognise and heal the pain of His suffering people. The church is to be God's living visible Good News in a fragmented society. Trust between ministers and confidence in the laity is to be the cement of its programme. Truth, not expediency is to direct its course. Love is to permeate its every structure. Essentially we are a church of Africa and we must discover afresh the implications of our unique heritage. God seeks a free South Africa, delivered from the violence of oppression, revolution and war (www.methdoist.org.za/heritage/obedience-81: accessed May 28, 2014).

Gqubule was also the president of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the Natal Midlands. During his presidency of this movement, the apartheid government placed him under the house arrest for two years, between 1988 and 1990 (Gqubule 2010:16).

Celebrating the milestone (1982)

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa's first conference was in held in 1882, when it became independent of the Methodist Church in London. The year 1982 therefore marked the hundredth year of independence from the mother church in Britain. At the celebration of the centenary, held in Johannesburg, the church's new president, Khoza Mgojo marked this milestone with the lighting of the candle, which he said was in itself the message.

"The flames of the candle will be flickering bravely in the church and churches around the Connexion. They will burn in the rural villages and relocation camps, in townships churches and affluent suburban complexes. In some districts they will burn in homes as families pray together," Mgojo wrote (Minutes of Conference 1982:378).

In that year, Khoza Elliot Mgojo had been elected as the president of the Methodist Church to follow Gqubule. Mgojo shared a passion for theological education with his predecessor, and both were teachers and scholars of theology at the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa.

In his conference speech, Mgojo reminded the delegates to the conference that the church intended to support the trade unions in their efforts to

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improve the conditions of the country's workers. He affirmed the legitimacy of conscientious objection and his desire that ministry should be practical and pastoral. He also insisted that the "joy of African worship" should become a reality in the organisation's churches around the country and that Methodists should "continue to live out the message of obedience" (Minutes of Conference, 1982:379).

At the conference he called on the Methodist Church to pray for "power in the church, a welling up of the Holy Spirit, touching the lives of the people and calling them to the ordained ministry as well as establishing signs of the kingdom of God in the troubled land of South Africa" (Madise 2000:86).

The "Black Moses" (1985)

On 25 July 1985, the apartheid government declared a state of emergency. 'Within the first six months of the Emergency, 575 people were killed in political violence – more than half killed by the police (<http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/state-emergency-south-africa-1960-and-1980>: accessed August 20, 2014). In the same year, Ernest Baartman was elected as President of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Baartman was often referred to as "the Black Moses" for the role he had played in establishing a formation in the Methodist Church in May 1975 in Bloemfontein, which came to be known as the Black Methodist Consultation (BMC).

As President, Baartman challenged the Methodist Church to take action to bring peace to South Africa (*Dimension* 1985:1). He further challenged all the delegates at the conference to be "proactive in their ministry". For him, the church ought to stand on the side of the powerless; to ask it to take 'a middle way' would render it ineffective or cause it "to stand nowhere" (Madise 2000:89).

Baartman's view was that the church could no longer afford to be neutral and that it was faced with a "context of war working for God's peace" (*Dimension* 1985:1). He believed that the church ought to recognise of the situation in which it was placed, failing which it would "show no faith". As he saw it, peace could only be achieved in South Africa if the issues of land ownership and rights to own land were addressed. These were 'the core problem', because denying a person ownership of the land was tantamount to denying his or her dignity.

Baartman also argued for the creation of a unitary South Africa and called for universal franchise. Giving every South African the right to vote might help to move the country from "prescription to negotiation", he said. We can understand this as meaning that the system of apartheid prescribed limited citizenship rights for most South Africans without their consent;

removing this restriction and a universal right of participation in the country's political processes would allow its citizens to negotiate a new political dispensation. If these conditions were not met, Baartman believed, the country would face further confrontation and violence (Madise 2000:89).

Baartman also called for the release of all the political leaders from prison; the apartheid government, he said, suffered from "a paralysing fear of black charismatic leadership". Addressing a perceived 'crisis' in black education following the Soweto Uprising of 1976 and later student protests which had led to calls for "liberation before education", he pleaded with parents to encourage their children to return back to school. As he saw it, it was the duty of the church to ensure that education was brought within the reach of the poor.

The "unfinished business"

Khoza Mgojo was elected for the second time as president of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in 1987. During this period of office his primary message was that apartheid was preventing God's dream from becoming a reality in the South Africa context (Madise 2000:87) – and that achieving this was "unfinished business". As Mgojo put it, apartheid was "like a snake which made a promise while at the same time it was sowing division and death among the people of South Africa" (*Dimension* 1987:1). South Africans would reap bitter fruit from a political arrangement characterised by "partisanship, sectionalism and greed".

To illustrate his statement, he said that "the church was playing a role of midwifery in apartheid as it had not managed to integrate the converts". The church behaved as if the converts belonged to separate groups and allocated them an "inferior" or "junior" status on that basis. He believed that the church might have acted on and influenced the unequal situations created by apartheid in its main dimensions: economic, social, political and religious.

In his view, the church's poor record in this regard had done a great deal of harm to Christian evangelical and societal outreach (Madise 2000:870). We can understand Mgojo as saying that the church's mission with regard to evangelisation and socio-political witness were not separate.

During Khoza Elliot Mgojo's second term in office, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa made significant changes to its governing structures. The role previously titled Chairman of the District became the Bishop of the District, for instance, and the highest position of leadership, the President became the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

The first Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church (1988)

After 1882, when it achieved independence from the Methodist Church of Britain, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was under the leadership of white people. For 82 years after that, black people were effectively excluded from leadership in the church. However, they quickly became pioneers of change within the church once they gained positions of leadership.

In 1988, Stanley Mogoba became the first Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, having previously served for some time as its General Secretary. Mogoba had been extensively involved in the South African society on many levels: politically, socially and economically, as well as in the religious arena. As part of a range of changes to its structures, the term of the highest office in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had been extended from one year to three years Mogoba served two terms as Presiding Bishop of the church.

Changes made during Mogoba's terms in office affected the higher structures of the church and cascaded down to its particular churches. Another change was that the period of sitting of the Methodist Connexional Conference was extended to reflect to that of the Presiding Bishop. The conference was therefore no longer an annual event, but triennial (Madise 2000:92).

On his accession as the first Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Mogoba gave an acceptance speech in which he outlined his main programme: the church would engage in "a renewal of Christian Hope so that transformation in the lives of South Africans could begin". As part of this, he made five suggestions for action which would facilitate the beginning of an era of dialogue over the country's future. Four of these concerned the broader political environment:

- The release of political prisoners;
- The granting of amnesty to exiles;
- The recognition of real freedom for all;
- The convening of a constituent national assembly;

His fifth recommendation concerned the church itself. He envisaged, he said, "the creation of a New Church for a New Africa" (*Dimension*, October 1988:1).

In Mogoba's view, the release of political prisoners would be the crucial first step of a political decision to engage in dialogue about the country's future. They might not agree on all questions, said Magoba, but "all South Africans desired a New Africa that was free of oppression, fear and violence".

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Several generations of opponents of apartheid had experience exile by then. In Magoba's view, the exiles should be granted amnesty to return home "as they had suffered enough". A major clampdown on freedom of expression was then in force. Repressing South Africans' freedom of expression, said Magoba, was "not a solution to the South African problems".

At that time, most of the main political groupings that were opposed to apartheid were banned, including the ANC, the PAC and AZAPO. Magoba's view was that all political movements should be unbanned, "so that people could think freely and critically and would not be forced to go underground" (*Dimension*, October 1988:1).

The five steps he had outlined would enable "a new transformation in the lives of South Africans to begin", argued Magoba. The "root problem" of South Africa was hatred, which he likened to a cancer that was consuming South Africa from inside and would gradually reduce it to "a mere shell". All these measures would be necessary, he appeared to be saying, if black people were to assert their human dignity. He noted some signs of hope, including the fact that Govan Mbeki, a senior ANC figure, had just been released from prison.

During his period in office, Mogoba extended his activities beyond the Methodist Church; he also played a key role in the formation of the Peace Accord Initiative. This involved the Methodist Church of Southern Africa with the South Africa Council of Churches. Mogoba was elected to the Continuation Committee, a working committee of the Peace Accord whose task was to consider effective ways to implement the peace processes at grass roots level, as a vice chairperson.

Mogoba's involvement with the Peace Accord brought him into contact with other key figures in the opposition against apartheid, including Desmond Tutu and Frank Chikane, both of whom were signatories of the Peace Accord on behalf of their respective Christian communities. The leaders of other religious denominations were also represented. Though the Peace Accord was led by the political figures, it was a religious and business initiative. Religious and business organisations had ensured that the Nationalist government did not play the role of both referee and player.

Several other developments took place within the Methodist Church during Stanley Mogoba's terms of office as Presiding Bishop. One of these was a transformation of the church under the slogan, "Journey to a New Land". The transformation was described as a shift from the old order to the new order. As part of this, the church structures at circuit level would be reformed by reversing the top-to-bottom mode of operation and introducing one that shaped the church from bottom to the top.

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Accordingly, the process of transformation started from the grass roots level; districts were instructed to take on the task of involving their circuits.¹ The separate black and white circuits at geographic circuit level were reformed and integrated as circuits that were not segregated on the basis of race (Madise 2005:93).

The “new order” also introduced a new form of leadership that did not involve the ordained ministry; instead a new leadership layer was added to the structure of the church – the position of lay leader at Connexional level of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (Madise, 2000: 93). The lay leader’s role would be to act as a deputy to the Presiding Bishop in the Methodist Church.

The position of the Lay Leader was established in order to allow lay people to play a meaningful role in the church; its purpose was essentially to “give recognition” to the lay ministry in the Methodist Church. The foundation of this position was rooted in the doctrine of the church, that is, in the centrality of its notion of “Priesthood of all believers”, which acknowledged that people of faith were called to God’s service either as individuals or collectively.

These were the main developments of Mogoba’s terms as the first Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

A new era

Mvume Dandala followed Stanley Mogoba as the second Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, on 23 February 1997. Dandala was known as ‘a man of peace’ by many people, including his colleagues in the Methodist Church. He also served two terms as the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

In his acceptance speech, Dandale identified three key challenges for the Methodist Church in the democratic era: the church needed to “become spiritual”, he said; it ought to address the problems of hunger and poverty in the country; and it should seek to enable people to learn the skills that would give them dignity. He paid tribute to people who had responded to the call made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to speak openly about their experiences under apartheid and who had found it in themselves to forgive the offences and transgressions they had endured under difficult circumstances (Madise 2005:94).

To address the problem of poverty, Dandala challenged the church to cultivate a “spirit of charity” in South African society. He asked people to sacrifice one meal a week, and give what they saved to those who were

¹ The Methodist Church’s structure is secular as opposed to other churches, which always refer to ‘diocese’ for district and ‘parish’s’ for circuit.

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hungry (*Dimension*, February 1997: 1). One problem of the acute shortage of skills prevalent in the wider black community, Dandala said that it was “not God’s will that any nation in the sub-continent should be a begging nation or dependent on others for their welfare or survival”.

Turning to the question of spirituality, the Presiding Bishop discussed what he described as the “dimension of materialism”, under the influence of which people were inclined to say that their whole purpose in life was based on what could be seen and touched. Rising out of this dimension, he said, would enable people to achieve the things that they had never thought possible. While Christians ought to focus their energies on the struggle against apartheid, they also faced influences that might distract them from their focus on truths and values that were acceptable to God.

Aside from the problems generated by apartheid, Dandala said, Christians faced the general problems of a moral existence. These included fidelity in marriage, trustworthiness, honour and respect for family life, the dignity of work, the ability to depend upon friends and neighbours, a sense of charity and other basic human qualities that had lost ground to the expediencies of the struggle against apartheid (*Dimension*, February 1997:1).

Dandala was concerned about what he saw as the deteriorating moral character of the country. With Dr Louw Alberts of the Dutch Reformed Church, he set about organising a conference that came to be known as the Rustenburg 2. The intention of the conference, they said, was to offer “a message of hope” to the nation. The conference was organised amidst allegations on the part of some that the church was “quiet on the moral standards of the country”.

Responding to these criticisms, Mvume Dandala largely agreed. “The church as an institution has found it difficult ... to deny that our country faces a moral crisis because of our ineffectiveness”, he said (*City Press*, 16 August 1998:19). The church was aware of elements of human life that it had failed to address after apartheid was abolished, he continued. The reason for this, he suggested, “was simply that the church had focussed a lot on the struggle of politics”. Where there was corruption in the government, for instance, Dandala said, Christians “could not say they were not part of it”.

As a result of Rustenburg 2, the Black Methodist Consultation (BMC) collaborated with the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and other Christian denominations. Dr Louw Alberts of the DRC remarked that he was “delighted” to share the helm of this development with Mvume Dandala (*City Press*, 16 August 1998:9).

Church leaders made it clear that the Rustenburg 2 conference would result in a declaration that would reflect the ideas of participants on the political, economic, and social challenges faced by the country in the post-apartheid era. The society all South Africans desired was one that was at peace

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with itself, and which ensured that all its citizens had the opportunity to earn a living and to enjoy a roof over their heads.

Conclusion

The Methodist Church in the 1980s and 90s found itself unable to turn a blind eye to the tumultuous events that unfolded during the last years of apartheid and the first years of the post-apartheid era. During the years before the end of apartheid, several of its leaders insisted that the church's role was to identify and respond to an unjust system of governance that segregated people on the basis of race.

However, it can be said that the Methodist Church's position as a denomination with regards to the system of apartheid was not a clear and outright rejection of that system. It could also be said that Obedience '81 was well intended, but that it did not in any way represent the general position of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. And finally, it could also be said that, like other Christian denominations, the Methodist Church was not unique in failing to come out with a clear and unequivocal statement against apartheid. Most of the other churches also failed to do so. In general, prominent church leaders who took the lead in articulating criticism and rejection of the system of apartheid, while their followers lagged behind.

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