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A prophet on the periphery: Andile Madodomzi Mbete and the quest for alternative community

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This article explores the life and legacy of Andile Madodomzi Mbete, a revered minister of religion in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), through the lens of prophetic witness at the margins of society. Framed by the biblical motif of the 'prophet on the periphery' – in contrast to the court prophet of the Old Testament – and the MCSA's enduring call for the formation of an alternative community, the study positions Mbete as a contemporary embodiment of prophetic resistance. Firstly, the article examines the theological and historical role of prophets on the periphery in the Hebrew Bible, highlighting their critique of political and religious power. Secondly, it engages the MCSA's vision of an ecclesial alternative grounded in justice, inclusivity and transformation. Finally, it situates Mbete's ministry within the socio-political and ecclesiastical contexts of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, drawing attention to his contributions to faith, justice and communal liberation. The article argues that Mbete's legacy offers a compelling model for prophetic leadership today – one that speaks from the margins yet calls for a radical reimagining of both church and society. On a methodological level, the article draws from a combination of theological reflection, contextual analysis and qualitative inquiry, most important focusing on the sermons, autobiographical materials and Mbete's own theological reflections.

Contribution: The article contributes to HTS Theological Studies by offering a critical and contextual exploration of a marginal yet prophetic voice in South African theology. It deepens the journal's commitment to public theology, postcolonial analysis and African contextual theologies and stimulates discourse around alternative ecclesial visions rooted in justice, memory and liberation.

Keywords: alternative community; Andile Madodomzi Mbete; Methodist Church of Southern Africa; post-apartheid South Africa; theology; prophets on the periphery.

Introduction

This article critically examines the life, ministry and theological contributions of Rev. Andile Madodomzi Mbete, situating him within the broader tradition of prophetic Christian witness in South Africa. Framed by the biblical motif of the prophet on the periphery, those figures in the Hebrew Bible the likes of Micah, Amos, Jeremiah, Elijah, Elisha, and Hosea, who stood outside state-sanctioned religious institutions and issued radical critiques of power (Brueggemann 2001). The study is set within the biblical motif of the prophet on the periphery (Brueggemann 2001).

The central problem this study engages is the theological and ecclesial neglect of grassroots prophetic figures in post-apartheid South Africa with reference to Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). While scholars such as Villa-Vicencio (1992) and Maluleke (1997) have written extensively on liberation theology and public witness during and after apartheid, there remains a gap in scholarship attending to local, often non-institutionalised, prophetic voices like that of Mbete, voices that critique both political injustice and ecclesial complacency from below. This neglect is symptomatic of a broader theological crisis in post-apartheid ecclesiology, wherein churches continue to affirm a commitment to justice rhetorically, but often fail to embody it structurally or prophetically (De Gruchy 2004; Forster 2019). Methodologically, the article draws from a combination of theological reflection, contextual analysis and qualitative inquiry. It engages primary sources, sermons, autobiographical materials and Mbete's own theological reflections, analysed within a liberationist and postcolonial framework (Mosala 1989; West 1995). The study also examines the MCSA's ecclesiological vision – particularly its stated aim to become an 'alternative community' committed to justice, holiness and prophetic

witness (MCSA 2018) – and evaluates the extent to which Mbete's ministry embodies or challenges this vision.

The hypothesis guiding this research is that Rev. Mbete's ministry constitutes a praxis-based, prophetic theology that resists ecclesial domestication and confronts socio-political injustice through grassroots community engagement. This theology not only critiques the post-apartheid church's complicity in systemic inequality, but also offers an alternative vision of church leadership, one rooted in embodied solidarity, biblical justice and decolonial imagination (Chitando & Conradie 2018). By recovering Mbete's theological legacy, the article contributes to the revitalisation of prophetic discourse in Southern Africa and offers a contemporary model for ecclesial renewal grounded in the lived experience of the marginalised.

Rev. Andile Madodomzi Mbete: Life and ministry

Born in Ludiza Village, Willowvale, Rev. Andile Madodomzi Mbete's Methodist upbringing and theological formation at the Federal Theological Seminary (FEDSEM) shaped his deep prophetic consciousness (Mbete 2022: 6–11). He was collared on 04 November 1976 and began his ministerial journey at the age of 22, serving as a probationer in Parys (Vrede and Memel circuit) that same year (Mbete 2016:38, 42–43, 2017:43, 2019; MCSA 2025:38). He was officially ordained in 1982 (MCSA 2025:630) and over time rose to become a superintending minister and, ultimately, a bishop of two districts. In 1990, he was stationed in the Grahamstown Circuit as Superintendent. He was later transferred to East London, Mdantsane, where – in 1998 – he was elected bishop of the then Queenstown District (now the Kumkani Hintsa District), serving from 1998 to 2014. He later served as Bishop of the Grahamstown District, now known as the William Kama District.

During the years of active ministry, newspaper reports highlight Mbete's courageous involvement in grassroots struggles – particularly during periods of hostel violence in Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth – where political turmoil demands bold prophetic leadership and compassionate pastoral care (Daily Dispatch 2023; Manona 2017). He ministered in places marked by death and displacement, often negotiating peace when government and political actors failed to do so. Mbete's personality and charisma left an indelible mark on every community he served. In the 2 years before departing for overseas theological studies in Singapore, Mbete served in team ministry with Rev. Mvume Dandala in the Port Elizabeth North Circuit (1983–1985), demonstrating fearless pastoral presence amid the turbulence of apartheid. His ministry, marked by being present in moments of both celebration and crisis, unfolded in a context where the State of Emergency saw mass detentions and police shootings, with churches and funerals becoming key spaces of mourning, memory and resistance (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] 1998:23–35, 109–117).

Across Southern Africa – whether in Parys, Port Elizabeth or Khayelitsha (where Conference placed him and where he helped establish the first Methodist congregations) – Mbete's leadership was visionary, as affirmed by the MCSA in a public Facebook tribute noting him as the first minister to establish a congregation in Khayelitsha (Manona 2017).

Prophets in the periphery in the Hebrew Bible

In Old Testament scholarship, the debate regarding peripheral prophets and central prophets remains ongoing (Johnson 2020; Smith 2017), especially concerning the interpretation and reception of the varied identities of prophets in later texts such as the New Testament (Brown 2015), as well as within contemporary schools of ancient text interpretation (David 2019). This article does not engage with the reception of the Hebrew Bible by New Testament scholars. Rather, its primary interest lies in the reception of the idea of peripheral and central prophets within the South African context, with a view to navigating the prophetic role of Andile Mbete (2022). Therefore, we first briefly draw a contrast between peripheral and central prophets as understood in Old Testament scholarship (Anderson 2017). Whether during the pre-exilic, exilic, or post-exilic periods, prophets may be categorised and distinguished as either peripheral or central, depending largely on their prophetic statements (Green 2016). These statements reflect their associations, ideological positions, ministries and their reception both within the Christian Bible and Modern Hebrew Bible scholarship (Kramer 2018). Some prophets like Isaiah, Samuel, Zechariah, and Haggai are associated with institutional spaces such as the temple or royal court and are thus classified as central prophets. Others, like Micah, Amos, Jeremiah, Elijah, Elisha, and Hosea, who are not linked to these religious or legal institutions, are conceptualised as peripheral or marginal prophets (Wilson 2019). It is important to note that both categories of prophets are essential for understanding the history of prophecy in ancient Israel (Thompson 2021). However, distinguishing between them remains necessary. While this article seeks to elevate the role of prophets on the periphery, it does not diminish the prophetic role or identity of central prophets. Instead, it deliberately emphasises the importance of peripheral prophets as a framework for exploring the prophetic legacy of Andile Mbete (2022).

Who was at the centre and who was in the periphery? In the study of Old Testament prophecy, a key area of scholarly debate concerns the social, political and religious positioning of prophets – specifically, which figures operated at the centre of power structures and which were situated at the periphery. Central prophets are often

identified as those connected closely to royal courts or the temple establishment, serving as official spokespeople who engage directly with kings and elites (Collins 2019; Smith 2017). These prophets typically had institutional backing and influenced national policy and religious practices. In contrast, peripheral prophets tended to be socially marginalised, operating outside formal power networks and frequently voiced critiques from the margins of society (Anderson 2017; Brown 2015). They often represented the concerns of disenfranchised groups and challenged dominant ideologies, offering alternative visions of justice and covenantal faithfulness. This distinction is important because it shapes how prophetic authority and legitimacy are understood, as well as how prophecy functioned in different historical and socio-political contexts (Green 2016; Wilson 2019). Understanding who was at the centre and who was in the periphery thus sets the stage for exploring the complex roles prophets played in ancient Israel and helps frame the discussion of contemporary prophetic figures like Andile Mbete.

Central

Institutions of power in ancient Israel were the temple and the courts. Could it be that the prophets at the centre functioned in these two centres of power? It would then mean that some prophets functioned in both the cultic and/or religious centre, as well as the political centre and/or the centre of the kings. When deemed a prophet, Samuel, who was dedicated to God as a baby, received his call and began his work as a prophet from the temple at Shiloh (1 Sm 1:24–28). Ahijah as 'the prophet of Shiloh' presupposes an idea of prophets functioning at the cultic sites, that is, Shiloh in this case (1 Ki 11:29–39). In addition, Ezra 5:12; 6:14 suggests that the prophets such as Zechariah and Haggai (and other prophets) were associated with the temple because of their involvement in the rebuilding of the second temple. Haggai could be included in the association with the temple because of the book's focus on the rebuilding of the temple. What about Jeremiah? His ministry centred at the temple, and he seems to have had some confrontation with the temple overseer, Passhur and also with the prophet Hananiah. Some prophets were associated with royalty and exercised some functions in royal families. Not only is Samuel associated with prophecy and deemed a prophet, but he also performed prophetic work. In the installation of the kings Saul (1 Sm 9–10) and David (1 Sm 16:1–3), it seems that he acted as a prophet. In addition, in the case of Nathan and Solomon (1 Ki 1:32–40), the involvement of a prophet in matters of royalty points to the involvement of prophets in political matters. Furthermore, what of Ahijah and Jeroboam (1 Ki 11:29–39)? A prophet appears to have been involved in political matters. It is also difficult to dispute the depiction of Elisha in the still-debated matter of Jehu (1 Ki 19:15–16; 2 Ki 9:1–13). However, for the present debate, a so-called prophet was involved in the enactment of Jehu. The case of Elisha with Hazael from Aram in 2 Kings 8:7–15 may also be included as a point of reference where one notices the involvement in political matters. Texts from the Deuteronomistic history allude to prophets who were involved in issues of governance. Nathan and Gad were closely associated with David. Not only in 2 Samuel 24:11 was Gad identified as 'David's seer' and 'the king's seer' in 2 Chronicles 29:25, but these identifications also appear in 1 Chronicles 25:5. In the present work, we do not intend to present an inner-biblical exegesis, but to show instances where deductions could be made about the association and involvement of some prophets (even debatable prophets) in the royal circles. Although one may at first glance think of Gad as being a peripheral prophet, it is difficult not to associate him with the space of power, especially when David assumed kingship. 1 Samuel 22:1–5 reads:

- David left there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; when his brothers and all his father's house heard of it, they went down there to him.
- Everyone who was in distress and everyone who was in debt and everyone who was discontented gathered to him, and he became captain over them. Those who were with him numbered about 400.
- David went from there to Mizpeh of Moab. He said to the king of Moab, 'Please let my father and mother come to you, until I know what God will do for me'.
- He left them with the king of Moab, and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold.
- Then the prophet Gad said to David, 'Do not remain in the stronghold; leave and go into the land of Judah'. So David left and went into the forest of Hereth.

The latter shows the function of a prophet to a king. So it was with various prophets in the centre.

Periphery

Since it seems that it was difficult for the differing and differentiated prophets to be associated with both the temple and the royal courts, it is necessary to give some attention to them.

Hosea

The general consensus is that Hosea prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the time of Jehu's dynasty (or Nimshide dynasty), which Jehu founded in 842 BCE. This places his ministry during the final years of Jeroboam II (788–747 BCE), suggesting that his prophetic activity likely fits the setting of an insider. Hosea 2:8 alludes to a time of prosperity: 'She did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine and the oil and who lavished upon her silver and gold that they used for Baal'. Similarly, the statement 'Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased, the more altars he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars' (Hs. 10:1 NRS) reinforces the image of economic flourishing. Additionally, Hosea 12:8 notes: 'Ephraim has said, "Ah, I am rich, I have gained wealth for myself; in all of my gain no offence has

been found in me that would be sin"' (NRS). These verses suggest a socioeconomic context marked by material abundance, although accompanied by religious and moral decline. At this stage, it is uncertain whether Hosea held a central position or operated from the periphery. The discourse surrounding the harlot wife, a dominant metaphor in Hosea's prophecy, could suggest that he was aligned more with peripheral prophetic voices, as such imagery likely would not have found acceptance among temple prophets who sought to preserve the purity of the cultic space. Nonetheless, Hosea also delivers strong denunciations of injustice and critiques the kings of the Northern Kingdom. Hosea 12:6–8 presupposes a nation failing in matters of justice, including corrupt traders complicit in the oppression of the vulnerable. This further supports the idea that Hosea may be classified as a peripheral prophet. However, the matter remains open to further argument and cannot yet be regarded as conclusive.

Not only did ancient texts receive attention and interpretation within other biblical writings – as evidenced by inner-biblical exegesis – but they were also received and reinterpreted by New Testament authors. Of particular relevance to the present study is the way these texts continue to be received by readers of the Hebrew Bible in South Africa, including those engaging them in the present year, 2025. Could it be that the prophetic voice of Andile M. Mbete resonates with the tradition of the peripheral prophets? If so, may we consider the possibility of framing his legacy within the paradigm of a peripheral prophet – one whose voice not only commemorates and challenges, but also inspires? Such a legacy may serve to cultivate a new calibre of prophets: Those who cry out for the beloved country and the world and who long – specifically – for a Christ-healed Africa, for the healing of the nations.

Andile Madodomzi Mbete against the background of the Hebrew Bible

Contextual background: Prophetic agency in apartheid South Africa

Apartheid South Africa represented one of the most dehumanising periods in modern African history, where structural and systematic violence was enforced through both state law and theological justification. In response, a prophetic ecclesial movement emerged, anchored in biblical imperatives of justice, liberation and solidarity with the oppressed. Figures like Beyers Naudé and Archbishop Desmond Tutu became global icons of this movement, offering theological critique and political advocacy that refused to separate faith from justice (Klassen & Solomons 2020:3; Thinane 2019:56). However, within this broader landscape, Rev. Andile Madodomzi Mbete's ministry represented a more grounded and contextually embedded prophetic witness. Deeply shaped by a praxis-oriented theology, Mbete's ministry responded to the immediate pain of communities, negotiating peace during hostel violence and ministering in spaces where institutional church structures had grown silent. Prophetic agency during apartheid was not merely a matter of public declarations but a lived theology that required physical presence among the marginalised, often outside official ecclesial endorsement. His work draws on the reflections of Mosala (1989), who describes prophetic praxis in South Africa as 'a theology from below' – a radical embodiment of the gospel in situations of exploitation and death. This understanding finds strong resonance with Rev. Mbete's approach to ministry: he stood in the gap when political and ecclesiastical leadership faltered. The contributions of Maluleke (1997) may be invoked and he reminds us that the prophetic in African contexts is relational and community-rooted, not institutionally sanctioned. Mbete's work thus echoes these scholars by refusing to spiritualise injustice or outsource the Church's responsibility to state structures. This position resonates with Foster and Bentley (2008:5), who emphasise that prophetic witness in the Methodist Church must emerge from the grassroots, engaging the political without becoming politicised and ensuring that the Church remains both spiritually vibrant and socially relevant. Theologically, prophetic agency is rooted in the biblical tradition of prophets like Hosea, Amos, Jeremiah and Micah, who were often isolated figures calling nations back to covenantal justice. Oduyoye (2004:72) describes prophets as those who are 'dislocated in location but rooted in vocation', a phrase that captures Mbete's method of ministering in spaces of social upheaval while refusing institutional compromise. Presiding Bishop Rev. Pumla Nzimande (2023:5, 2024:3) furthers this interpretation, urging the Church to rediscover its vocation as 'an alternative community'; not domesticated by power but radically shaped by its call to prophetic witness. In Mbete's life, this call was expressed not in grand gestures or televised crusades but in the quiet faithfulness of local intervention, presence and word – a reminder that prophetic ministry is not always loud, but it is always costly.

Prophetic leadership: Mbete's unique approach

Mbete's prophetic style emphasised direct engagement with social issues, articulating biblical messages relevant to African realities. His ministry notably lacked partisan political affiliation, maintaining an ethical clarity essential for prophetic witness (Manona 2017). He embodied the biblical tradition of prophets like Amos and Jeremiah, who boldly confronted injustices without aligning with political structures (Mosala 1989:57). Like the prophet in Isaiah 58:1, Mbete refused to keep silent. From the reflections in both the 2023 and 2024 addresses by Presiding Bishop Rev. Pumla Nzimande, prophetic urgency and agency require 'an awakening' of the Church to its calling. In 2023, Nzimande stated that the Church must rediscover its vocation as 'the voice crying in the wilderness', demanding justice on behalf of the dispossessed (Nzimande 2023:4). In 2024, she urged that 'we must not merely serve as chaplains to the state but stand apart in fearless solidarity with the poor and betrayed' (Nzimande 2024:6). Mbete's life is a concrete expression of this ecclesial vocation – refusing comfort, refusing co-option and speaking truth to power.

Mbete's forgotten strand: Prophetic ministry amid the fires of liberation

The narrative of Rev. Andile Madodomzi Mbete's ministry remains incomplete without recovering his deeply embedded fieldwork during the most volatile years of South Africa's political struggle. Often overlooked in the broader chronicles of ecclesial resistance, Mbete's grassroots prophetic ministry unfolded alongside Rev. Mvume Dandala in the early 1980s – a time when the Vaal Triangle (notably Sebokeng and surrounding areas near Parys) erupted in violent state-sponsored repression and when Port Elizabeth became a focal point of anti-apartheid mobilisation. In this crucible, where communities bore the brunt of township unrest and state brutality, Rev. Mbete emerged as more than a preacher. He became a shepherd of the people's pain, a pastoral witness to their grief and a theological voice of conscience in the wilderness of apartheid (Kumalo 2018:10–12; SAHO 2015). This commitment to being physically and emotionally present among the people demonstrates a distinctly African model of leadership rooted in proximity, lived experience and moral courage. While Dweba and Rashe (2021) do not use the term 'incarnational leadership', they emphasise that African leadership is most authentic when grounded in relationship, spiritual connectedness and the lived wisdom of elders who led by example, especially during times of societal pain and upheaval.

Following his ordination in 1982, Mbete was stationed under Dandala in the Port Elizabeth North Circuit (1983–85), during a period of bannings, detentions and killings under the State of Emergency (Berkley Center 2011; Kumalo 2018:11). In this context, churches became sanctuaries for activists and spaces of public mourning and memory, where Mbete's ministry stood as both pastoral care and theological resistance (TRC 1998). His imprisonment at St. Albans alongside Rev. Dandala and Rev. Soga of the Presbyterian Church and the chilling threats they received from apartheid police exemplify the high personal cost borne by ministers who dared to proclaim the gospel in a time of heresy and hate (eds. Nürnberger, Tooke & Walshe 1989:360–366). Mbete's place in the lineage of ecclesial resistance can be traced from the black locations of the Vaal Triangle and Sasolburg to the strategic corridors of Methodist policy formation, where his leadership later featured in the Grahamstown District (Berkley Center 2011; HeraldLIVE 2017; Kumalo 2018:10–11). As part of their ministry in Port Elizabeth during the upheavals of the early 1980s, Mbete and Dandala were instrumental in establishing a local branch of the Interdenominational African Ministers' Association of South Africa (IDAMASA) which showed emerging signs around 1983 (Kumalo 2018:11; Mchlauli 1999:61).

A critical ecumenical platform that fostered collaboration and solidarity among black clergy in the face of political and ecclesial neglect. Their prophetic witness was not confined to pulpits or policy statements; it extended to the painful trenches of ministry – such as officiating the funerals of children who died in the struggle. These acts reflect not only Mbete's incarnational theology but his deeply embodied ethic of pastoral courage and public lament. These recollections affirm that, far from being peripheral, Mbete stood at the very nerve-centres of prophetic witness and ecclesial governance in a transforming South Africa.

In addition, further comments regarding racial unity in Mbete's theological approach are in order. His theological approach was consistently shaped by the imperative of racial unity within the Church as well as the Southern African community. Thus, he maintained that a liberating theology needed to racial division during the apartheid South African regime. As Mbete (2017) said:

> The task facing the Church in South Africa then was how to express theologically the sinfulness of apartheid, [*and*] be in one mind with those who had been cursed and expelled from being citizens in their own land. (p. 64)

No doubt, therefore, the idea of unity stood in contrast to racial division and presupposed that ecclesiology and racial justice were inseparable. Mbete's emphasis on 'being of one mind' shows a conviction that the Christian faith demanded solidarity with those disenfranchised by apartheid, affirming that reconciliation and unity of the people could only be authentic when rooted in justice.

Vaal Triangle and greater Sasolburg involvement

In the years 1981–1982, Mbete served as a probationer minister in Parys (see MCSA 1981:420, 1982:516). Not only did the prophetic ministry and zeal within the broader Vaal Triangle region draw him to alternative ministry, but the prophetic calling also lend him to the political sphere as a prophetic political activist. The Vaal Triangle, made up of Vereeniging, Sebokeng, Sharpeville, Boipatong and Evaton, was the cradle of sustained political resistance in the early 80s towards the mid-80s (Rueedi 2015:399). The latter geographical location, under the Vereeniging leadership, became a crucible of political unrest, particularly around the infamous 'Vaal–10' arrests. During this time, Andile Mbete ministered as an unofficial chaplain to young political detainees, including political persons, among others, namely Ace Magashule and Mosiuoa 'Terror' Lekota who advocated for their release and thus provided spiritual counsel. Mbete's pastoral involvement lends itself to the hostel violence in Sebokeng, eventually necessitated and overlapping ministry and prophetic role into peace mediation efforts around Soweto.

Rev. Mbete the prophetic author

Mbete's authorship is a powerful extension of his prophetic ministry, reflecting his theological depth, cultural consciousness and commitment to equipping the Church for faithful and contextually grounded witness. His passion for preaching, teaching and critical reflection led him beyond the pulpit into the written word and media waves, enabling him to speak truth to power and guide communities grappling with questions of faith, identity and justice.

Through his books and public engagements, Mbete has become a prophetic educator for both clergy and laity, helping the Church reclaim its African soul. He is the author of several influential works, namely: *Ibuyambo* [Return to origins-black people's Garden of Eden]; *Umkhwahlazo* [Raspy sound-"rhu" sound] *Umkhosi WeMithika* [The Mithika Army]; *Intsika ZobuWesile* [Pillars of Methodism]; *Ichweba* [The port], Life in a Glass House, Methodism born in song and others. He has also contributed chapters to academic volumes, including 'Charles Wesley and contextual worship' in *Rediscovering Wesley for Africa* (eds. Malinga & Richardson 2006:115–120). Each of these writings reflects not only theological depth, but also his resolute prophetic lens rooted in lived experience, African spirituality and a liberative Wesleyan tradition. Mbete strikes a balance between academic theology and pastoral ministry, offering insights that speak to both scholars and local church leaders grappling with the complex realities of African Christian life in community settings. This study will discuss Mbete's works under separate sections below.

Ibuyambo: A pilgrimage towards a spirituality cooked in African pots (2022)

In *Ibuyambo*, Rev. Mbete offers a theological reflection sparked by witnessing an ancestral ceremony at the Mbashe River in 2002–2003. This work serves not only as a theological treatise, but also as a deeply personal journal, chronicling his own spiritual journey and encounters as they intertwine with the broader tapestry of African Christian experience. Disturbed and intrigued by the rich cultural symbolism, including the act of a traditional beer jug floating on water and the utterance of 'Camagu', Mbete began to question the theological distance many pastors keep from the cultural lives of the people they serve. This book prophetically challenges the Church's alienation from African traditions and invites a re-engagement with ancestral memory through a critical yet respectful theological lens (Mbete 2022).

Umkhwahlazo

Released in 2022, *Umkhwahlazo* acts as a sequel to *Ibuyambo*, confronting the MCSA with piercing questions about identity, representation and cultural authenticity. Despite the numerical dominance of African leadership in structures like the Connexional Executive, Mbete raises the unsettling question: why does the Church still function in a predominantly European ecclesial mode? The prophetic critique here is not merely institutional – it is theological and cultural. He argues that black leadership without African rootedness reproduces colonial ecclesiologies that continue to alienate the African soul (Mbete 2022). De Gruchy (2006:102) supports such a critique, arguing that an ecclesiology that fails to embrace human dignity and local culture risks becoming an oppressive rather than liberative force. Mbete's confrontation with Eurocentric ecclesial norms is thus a recovery of what De Gruchy calls 'Christian humanism' – a Church shaped by compassion, community and cultural integrity.

Umkhosi WeMithika: Isikhokelo ngendlela yokulungisa intshumayelo nobuchule bokuyiphalaza [The Mithika Army: A guide on how to prepare a sermon and the skills to deliver it]

Driven by a spirit of inclusion and empowerment, *Umkhosi WeMithika* is a practical manual aimed at training local preachers, especially those with limited formal education. In this work, Mbete (2006c) embodies the prophetic educator who equips the voiceless to proclaim God's Word with confidence and contextual integrity. The book is both pedagogical and revolutionary, democratising the pulpit in true Wesleyan spirit.

Intsika ZobuWesile: Amabal'engwe Malunga nemvelaphi, iimfundiso kunye nemibhedesho yaseWisile [Pillars of Methodism: Brief stories about the origins teachings and liturgies of Methodism]

This work serves as a theological anchor in times of ecclesial change. By calling Methodists to remain grounded in Wesleyan values, Rev. Mbete speaks prophetically to a Church at risk of losing its doctrinal and missional identity. He reminds readers that prophetic renewal must never sever itself from theological rootedness.

Imfihlakalo ezingcwele: Holy mysteries

In his book *Imfihlakalo ezingcwele*, Rev. Andile Mbete undertakes a reflective and theologically grounded exploration of what he terms 'holy mysteries'. Through this work, he seeks to unpack the depth and significance of foundational elements of the Christian faith, including the nature of the Church, its sacraments and ordinances, key doctrinal positions, human sexuality and the broader landscape of Christian belief. Mbete approaches these themes not only as sacred traditions to be preserved, but as dynamic mysteries to be engaged with a Christocentric worldview, within the evolving context of faith and society.

Ichweba: Where the river joins the sea

A thoughtfully curated book containing a selection of Rev. Andile Mbete's (2018) sermons, public speeches and public lecture notes. Mbete positions this work as a practical guide and theological tool for young ministers, local preachers and lay leaders across denominational lines. He defends its usefulness by emphasising its accessible theological insights, rooted in real pastoral experience and shaped by the struggles and aspirations of Southern African communities of faith. For Mbete, *Ichweba* is where reflection and proclamation meet; a symbolic confluence of wisdom, faith and vocation.

Life in a glass house: A transparent prophetic witness

This autobiographical work offers a rare window into the joys and burdens of (active) ministry as a presbyter. Life in a

Glass House discloses the cost of discipleship and leadership in a public vocation. In this book, Mbete's reflections are honest, unguarded and prophetic in tone; reminding the reader that true spiritual leadership is lived under the gaze of both God and the people.

Methodism born in song

Rev. Mbete's latest book, *Methodism born in song*, is a theological and spiritual reflection on the role of hymnody in shaping Methodist identity and spirituality. In particular, it urges Methodist choirs to understand and embrace their role as co-leaders in worship alongside preachers; a recurring theme carried over from his earlier work, *Intsika zobuWisile* (Mbete 2010:36). Drawing from the legacy of Charles Wesley and African oral traditions, Mbete reclaims congregational singing as a prophetic tool for theological formation and liberation.

In this book, Mbete argues that music in the Church is not merely emotive decorative, but it is doctrinal, communal and political (Mbete 2022:8). This book reflects his deep conviction that a singing catholic (universal) church is a witnessing church and that Methodist theology must be lived, sung and embodied in context. In doing so, he continues his prophetic vocation by reminding the MCSA as a church in the Southern African context that its true calling lies in harmonising faith and justice through every form of expression.

Charles Wesley and contextual worship

In his contribution to Rediscovering Wesley for Africa, Mbete (2006b) explores how Charles Wesley's hymns can be reinterpreted in African contexts. This chapter advances his broader prophetic theology: that worship must speak the language of the people and echo their lived experiences (eds. Malinga & Richardson 2006:115–120). Worship, in Mbete's hands, becomes a site of liberation, cultural reclamation and theological re-imagination. This resonates with arguments in Charles Wesley: *Life, Literature and Legacy*, where scholars like John Tyson and S. T. Kimbrough Jr. observe that Charles Wesley's hymns were themselves contextually dynamic; crafted to communicate Methodist theology in accessible, affective and locally resonant ways (eds. Newport & Campbell 2007:148–152). Tyson notes that Wesley's hymns 'translated theological concepts into the idioms of the people', a methodology that Mbete extends into the African context by asserting the power of song as both theological and cultural resource. Hence, Charles Wesley's hymnic legacy becomes a foundation not only for doctrinal instruction, but also for contextual theological innovation even in postcolonial worship spaces.

Mbete viewed liberation as holistic transformation, a conviction reflected in his ongoing prophetic activism, writing and public theology. A defining feature of his work is his unapologetic use of African languages – especially isiXhosa – to challenge and subvert the dominance of Eurocentric theological discourse. By titling his books and sermons in rich isiXhosa idiom, Mbete reclaimed the cultural and spiritual authority that oppressive regimes had historically denied to indigenous languages. This reclamation aligns with Flores and Rosa's (2023:4) critique of 'raciolinguistics ideologies', which frame African languages as inherently deficient or inappropriate within formal theological and intellectual domains. Diko (2025:3) reinforces this critique by arguing that South Africa's colonial and apartheid legacies systematically marginalised indigenous languages, stripping them of cultural legitimacy and restricting their functionality in public and religious life. This marginalisation, Diko notes, was not merely linguistic but epistemic – severing language from identity and thought. Mbete's ministry directly confronted this rupture, offering a theological witness that not only dignified African languages but restored them as vessels of spiritual and intellectual authority. By writing and preaching in isiXhosa, while also demonstrating fluency in English, Greek, and Hebrew, Mbete seamlessly bridged cultural and scholarly domains in pursuit of a robust, accessible theology. He further employed meaningful African historical identifiers such as 'Azania' and 'Ethiopia' [black Afrika], underscoring his commitment to African consciousness and identity. This intentional use of language is not merely stylistic but a reclaiming of African knowledge systems, which, as Dweba and Rashe (2021:6) affirm, form the foundation of local wisdom that guides African societies. His characteristic opening statement in some of his sermons: 'I want to state my case, I want to prove my case and I want to close my case', echoed his youthful aspiration of becoming *igqwetha* [a lawyer], reflecting a methodical and persuasive preaching style grounded in rigorous argumentation (Mabuza 2024). Complementing this, Mbete has this frequent art of drawing from Methodist hymnody; not merely for emotional resonance but deliberate rhetorical and theological strategy (Mbete 2022:8). It is of course his personal conviction that Methodist hymns encapsulate doctrinal truth in totality; a powerful tool for teaching, affirmation and proclamation. In all of this, Rev. Mbete embodied a prophetic authorship and public theology that intertwined linguistic reclamation, contextual relevance, musical theology and doctrinal depth. Since 2022 to date, Rev. Mbete has extended his prophetic and pastoral ministry into the realm of higher education by serving as Chaplain and Spiritual Adviser at Walter Sisulu University (WSU). In this role, he provides spiritual and pastoral support to both staff and students, facilitates interfaith dialogue and leads campus worship engagements that promote a theology of justice, healing and African dignity. His work at WSU reflects a deep commitment to the spiritual formation of young leaders in post-apartheid South Africa. Recordings of his university ceremony teachings and theological reflection on the WSU's YouTube platform further attest to his evolving influence as a theological educator and public intellectual within the Eastern Cape's academic landscape (WSU 2025).

Towards an alternative community

Prophetic distinctiveness in the company of civic-Christian witnesses

In the landscape of South African civic and ecclesial leadership, Rev. Andile Madodomzi Mbete occupies a distinct prophetic space – one that simultaneously mirrors and departs from the paths taken by other faith-driven public leaders such as Rev. Makhenkesi Stofile, Dr. Zola Skweyiya and Minister Noxolo Kiviet. While these figures translated their theological or moral convictions into formal political action, Mbete's vocation remained resolutely grounded in the pulpit, township streets and sacred community spaces. In his book, *Ibuyambo*, Mbete singles out Stofile as his brother who has influenced his writings (Mbete 2006a:5). His prophetic ministry was thus not exercised in the halls of parliament, but rather in the valleys of people's suffering and hope. Beyers Naudé and Desmond Tutu significantly shaped both national and international discourses through prophetic public theology and political advocacy. In contrast, Mbete's witness remained deeply embedded in local contexts and ecumenical relations. His incarceration during the 1980s alongside figures like Rev. Mvume Dandala highlights his willingness to bear the cost of justice, demonstrating praxis that echoes biblical prophetic suffering (Kumalo 2018:4). While Naudé and Tutu often engaged the media and occupied international platforms, Mbete ministered largely off-camera, in community meeting halls, grief-stricken households and volatile streets where lives hung in the balance. Unlike many public figures, Mbete served communities from within, often without mass media coverage or institutional backup. He modelled precisely what Presiding Bishop Rev. Pumla Nzimande (2024:5) envisions in her appeal for prophetic agency within the MCSA – a minister who labours among the people, reviving the church of Christ not through spectacle or strategic messaging, but through presence, word and deed. 'Prophets don't wait for safe platforms – they enter the pain of the people with holy indignation and healing hope', she states, a sentiment deeply embodied in Mbete's decades-long ministry. This vision resonates with what Mabuza (2024) defines as prophetic theology, a theology that:

> … has to do with reading the signs of the times in order to understand what is happening and, having reflected upon the Scriptures, discern God's will in that given situation. (p. 187)

Together, Nzimande's vision and Mabuza's theological framing capture the essence of Mbete's ministry: a prophetic witness rooted in praxis, discernment and faithful engagement with the struggles of the people. Figures like Stofile and Skweyiya, both stalwarts of South Africa's post-apartheid reconstruction, exemplified faithful Christian engagement in politics. Rev. Stofile, a Presbyterian minister, merged his ecclesial identity with his tenure as Minister of Sport and Premier of the Eastern Cape, often invoking theological imagery in public service (South African History Online 2011). Dr. Zola Skweyiya's legal and policy legacy, especially in crafting South Africa's social security systems, reflected a justice-oriented ethos rooted in his early Christian ethical education (The Presidency 2018). Minister Noxolo Kiviet, an advocate for women and education, also shares in this tradition of moral service, rooted in Eastern Cape activism and Methodism (News24 2023). Yet, Mbete's model of prophetic leadership is remembered as fiercely independent of party allegiance; he is not a party cardholder. As he once remarked, 'I am a minister of the Methodist first, but I am a priest of the community' (Manona 2017). This community-rootedness found further grounds in his theological exposure to Minjung theology during his studies in Singapore, which emphasised the lived experiences of the marginalised as primary sites of God's revelation. In this way, Mbete's ecclesial witness operated as a moral and spiritual barometer within a society teetering between post-liberation hope and neoliberal betrayal. Presiding Bishop Rev. Pumla Nzimande's 2023 and 2024 MCSA conference addresses speak directly to this kind of witness. In 2023, Nzimande lamented the domestication of the church, warning that its prophetic vocation risks being diluted in political convenience and theological timidity (Nzimande 2023:7). By 2024, she had sharpened that warning into a call for embodied prophecy – pastors and leaders who do not merely preach against injustice but live among the broken, risking their reputations, comfort and lives (Nzimande 2024:5). Mbete's life is a response to that call before it was articulated. Indeed, in the company of figures like Stofile, Skweyiya, Kiviet, Tutu and Naudé, Rev. Mbete's voice stands not in opposition but in complement. His life has testified to a form of public theology that does not demand the limelight, yet offers light. His ministry critiques not only government corruption but ecclesial complicity. Foster and Bentley (2008) similarly argue that the post-apartheid church faces the danger of moral complacency, where prophetic energy has been replaced by institutional comfort. In this regard, Mbete's life challenges the church to recover its prophetic edge by rooting itself in community suffering and gospel truth. It therefore calls the church to rise – not to dominate, but to accompany, to heal and to bear witness. It is a ministry that has, in Presiding Bishop Nzimande's terms, dared to revive the church of Christ by returning it to its people, to its pain and to its prophetic promise.

Rev. Andile Mbete's vision for post-apartheid South Africa

Rev. Andile Mbete's prophetic critique of post-apartheid South Africa is deeply rooted in both lived experience and theological reflection. His engagement with the new democratic dispensation was never celebratory without question. Instead, Mbete continues to maintain a sober realism, condemning the corruption, systemic inequality and moral degradation that threatens to taint the promises of liberation. His prophetic voice demanded that both the Church and the state pursue a more ethical and spiritually grounded path forward (Manona 2017). Mbete's time in

Singapore (1985–1988), where he studied theology at Trinity Theological College, significantly shaped his global vision and sharpened his prophetic consciousness. In Singapore, he encountered Minjung theology, which emphasises the agency of oppressed peoples in resisting systemic injustice. This experience expanded his theological imagination and offered a global lens through which to critique South Africa's own struggles. He witnessed the role of the Church in political renewal – particularly in how nuns led grassroots revolutions against dictatorship without violence. It was in Singapore that he came to believe deeply in the Church's ability to shape public consciousness and social transformation without aligning itself to partisan interests. Upon his return, he emphasised this model within the MCSA, advocating for the Church to become a moral compass in a society adrift in consumerism, factionalism and violence. Hence his prophetic critique extended beyond the ANC to a general collapse of spiritual and ethical leadership across all spheres of public life. Storey (2018) supports this critique, lamenting how both Church and society have struggled to cultivate a moral imagination capable of withstanding the seduction of neoliberalism. Mbete's call for ethical leadership thus echoes a broader theological concern for reclaiming moral clarity in public life. In this regard, he shared the theological anxieties of Presiding Bishop Rev. Pumla Nzimande. In her 2024 address to Conference, Nzimande (2024:7) lamented the Church's risk of being domesticated – co-opted by the systems it is meant to critique. Mbete's ministry reflects the very resistance to such co-optation, continuously reminding the Church that it must rediscover its identity as an alternative community rooted in justice, holiness and public accountability. His advisory role to the Eastern Cape government further demonstrates his commitment to public ethics. He remained politically engaged without being politically captured, offering spiritual wisdom to civil authorities while keeping the Church prophetically independent. Mbete's ministry, while rooted in deep theological conviction, also embodied Ubuntu ethics, 'I am because we are', which bares relationality, dignity and communal responsibility. As Dweba and Rashe (2021:6–7) argue, effective church leadership in Africa must reclaim indigenous frameworks of wisdom and relational care to counter Westernised Ecclesiologies and individualism. In this, his life is a living echo of Nzimande's challenge for clergy to exercise prophetic boldness, speaking truth to power in love and conviction. He too asserts in his writing that 'Christians are faced with the problem of reconciling God's omnipotence with the world's evil', a theological tension that undergirds his commitment to justice (Mbete 2022:24). In word and witness, Mbete insists that Christian agents must confront systemic injustice not as passive observers, but as active agents of God's transforming presence in the world. In all his work, Rev. Mbete called for a new moral imagination – one that rises from the ashes of betrayal and broken promises to proclaim that another South Africa is still possible. He believed that the Church, when rooted in African identity, communal solidarity and theological integrity, could lead the nation towards that vision. His voice joins a chorus of African prophetic leaders who refused to be silenced by political expediency, reminding South Africa that justice, compassion and holiness remain non-negotiable marks of true liberation.

Challenges and critiques

Rev. Mbete's prophetic critique extended to abuses within charismatic churches, particularly economic exploitation and moral scandals. This aligns with broader ecclesiastical self-examinations led by the South African Council of Churches (SACC) post-1994 (Manona 2017; Thinane 2019:68). His critique echoes biblical prophets' denouncement of false prophets and unethical religious practices (Jr 23; Ez 34). As De Gruchy (2006:88) observes, religion untethered from ethical responsibility becomes complicit in dehumanisation. Mbete's critique aligns with a Christian humanism that insists on integrity, transparency and justice as essential marks of authentic ministry. Crucially, Mbete's critique did not stem from mere ideological opposition, but from an informed theological formation, well rooted in ecumenical praxis and deep interdenominational engagement. His grounding in the ecumenical ethos of the FEDSEM of Southern Africa in Pietermaritzburg nurtured in him what he described as 'a forged unity', enabling him (and others) to traverse denominational boundaries with liturgical familiarity and fluency. As a result, he could lead worship with ease and depth in Anglican, Presbyterian and other ecumenical settings, not as an outsider, but as one shaped by a formative vision of church unity forged in struggle and hope (Mbete 2016:56). In line with Nzimande's 2023 inaugural address, which emphasises the need for a church that is an 'organism' rather than a rigid institution (Nzimande 2023:3), Mbete embodied the kind of spiritual vitality and responsiveness that revitalises the Church of Christ. In 2024, she further insisted, 'Our vocation is not to secure favour but to disturb the status quo with Gospel truth' (Nzimande 2024:6). Thus, the nuances of an alternative communitive and most importantly the prophetic work is cardinal.

Legacy and continuing relevance

Andile Mbete has made significant contributions to the development of democratic South Africa. From 2019, he was appointed as an adviser to the government of the Eastern Cape province in the Premier's office. For Mabuyane, the Premier, the decision to include Mbete was based on the observation that he is a man of religious faith with integrity. As recorded by Capa (2019:1), Mabuyane said: 'Mbete's role would involve managing issues of social cohesion and he would bring a sense of conscience in municipalities'. In response to the appointment, Mbete said: 'From time to time we will meet the premier when he seeks advice on serious issues, or we will take the initiative and invite him on serious matters he may not be aware of'. Additionally, Mbete (Capa 2019:1) stated that, 'I have done it in the church and with kings and chiefs, but I have never advised a political figure … [*and it*] will fall upon me to ensure the spirits and morality of the premier and his colleagues are well taken care of'. Both Mabuyane's and Mbete's sentiments express the idea of a

prophet fostering social cohesion and advancing the well-being of the communities. In this instance, the focus of the prophet is clearly on the community and its welfare. Mbete's theological writings, notably '*Ibuyambo*' and '*Umkhwahlazo*' remain influential, integrating African cultural insights with Wesleyan spirituality. These works enrich contemporary Methodist theological education and pastoral practice, promoting a contextual prophetic witness (eds. Malinga & Richardson 2006:115–120). This mirrors the concerns of De Gruchy (2006:115), who critiques the institutional church for often failing to embody the very humanity it preaches. He calls for a Christian humanism that affirms human dignity, cultural identity and moral courage – all of which are central to Mbete's critique offered in *Umkhwahlazo*. His legacy inspires a new generation of prophetic leaders committed to social justice, moral integrity and community transformation; precisely the kind of leadership Presiding Bishop Nzimande envisions: spiritually grounded, socially engaged and institutionally courageous. Mbete believes that the passing of the baton of faith from generation to generation is a biblical charge. He often illustrates this beautifully through the relationship between Paul and Timothy and through the maternal lineage of faith, drawing on the biblical image of Timothy's grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, from whom he 'sucked godliness and faith from her breasts', as echoed in the words of John Calvin King (Mbete 2019). Rev. Mbete's current prophetic visibility and influence in the Eastern Cape remains unparalleled. Prior to the MCSA resolution to formally withdraw chaplaincy services to political bodies, Mbete served as Chaplain to the ANC in the Eastern Cape province. Currently, he serves as an adviser to the office of the Premier of Eastern Cape and remains a revered adviser among provincial leaders, traditional authorities and the business sector. He notably officiated the installation of the late King Zwelonke Sigcawu on 15 May 2015 at eNqadu Great Place in Willowvale, Eastern Cape – an act symbolic of his proximity to traditional authority and civic responsibility. His inclusion among advisers to the Eastern Cape Premier further demonstrates how his prophetic witness continues to shape governance, spiritual ethics and communal renewal across societal boundaries. Even denominations like the Bantu Church of Christ, known for guarding their pulpits, recognise and welcome his voice – an indicator of his rare cross-denominational authority and respect.

Conclusion

A periphery prophet for an alternative community

Rev. Andile Madodomzi Mbete embodies prophetic agency within the South African ecclesial context, characterised by non-partisan activism, profound community engagement and theological depth. His ministry is not merely a historical reference but a present-day template for awakening prophetic urgency and agency; calling the Church in Southern Africa to be the alternative community Christ intended.

As we celebrate his legacy, it is fitting to sing the Methodist Xhosa hymnal 345 (MCSA 1926) (see Box 1).

BOX 1: The Methodist Xhosa hymnal 345.

Xhosa hymnal	Interpretive translation by authors
Uyeza! uyeza! umGwebi omkhulu, *Abantu bobona inKosi yezulu;* *babeya kuvuswa kwa semanchwabeni,* *babonakaliswe kwa sekukhanyeni.*	He is coming! He is coming! The Great Judge, People will see the Sovereign King; The dead will be raised from the graves, And will be appear in His light and glory.
Izinto esizibonayo zotShiswa, *amawa neentaba zonyibilikiswa,* *Ilanga locinywa, inyanga yophela,* *Abooni abakuba nakuzimela.*	All visible things will be burned, The hills and mountains will be melted, The sun will shine no more, the moon will be no more, Sinners will hide no more.
UmGwebi wofika nomkhosi omkhulu, *Umkhosi wezaKh' izithunywa zezulu;* *Amehlo omGwebi omkhulu obona* *Izinto zasese, izinto zokoona.*	The Judge will come with a Mighty Army, The Army of His Heavenly messengers; The eyes of the Great Judge will see, the secret deeds, the sinful deeds.
Abooni boba nelikhulu ivuso, *Bongcangcazelela obaKhe ubuso;* *Abangalungile botShatyalaliswa,* *Kwa sesihogweni somlilo botShiswa.*	Sinners will be extremely anxious, They will shiver at the face of His Presence; The unrighteous will be condemned, In the furnace of hell they will burn.
Yekani izoono, noyike, nilunge; *Liveni ilizwi lenKosi, nikhunge;* *Zithandazeleni, nifun' izibele;* *LixeSa kaloku, yizan' anamkele.* *Amen.*	Repent, fear, and be righteous; Listen to the Word of God and plead; Supplicate and seek His mercies; Now is the time, come, that He accepts you. Amen.

Source: Adapted from: Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), 1926, *Umbedeso namaculo amaWisile* [Liturgy and worship songs of Methodism], Methodist Publishing House, Cape Town

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Ndikho Mtshiselwa: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. Akhona Masiza: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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