

The Lives and Times of Stanley Mmutlanyane Mogoba

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Abstract

This article sets out to explore and celebrate the influential role that Stanley Mmutlanyane Mogoba played as a minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), the largest mainline Protestant denomination in South Africa. Not only does this essay discuss the background of Mogoba; it also explores his ministry. Furthermore, the essay navigates the place of the MCSA in the epoch of apartheid in South Africa; as well as the possible role of the black church in the present-day South Africa.

Keywords: black church; black theology; Methodist Church of Southern Africa; Stanley Mmutlanyane Mogoba

Introduction

It is indeed an intriguing privilege to offer a contribution in celebration of the existence of the Black Methodist Consultation (BMC)—a formation within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). As early as January 2015, the BMC sent a search party, led by the Reverend Mzwandile Molo, to find me and summon me to this annual convocation of the BMC, which is a part of my spiritual home, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. This article is thus, a revised version of the paper I read at the preceding annual convocation. This article provides the space and opportunity for me to pay a public celebratory tribute to Rev. Dr Stanley Mmutlanyane Mogoba (Uncle Stan). I, therefore, hope to show, in this essay that a few, indeed a few, are better suited, as opposed to me, to recite a public eulogy in honour of Rev. Dr Mogoba. The BMC saw it fit that I become a praise singer for Rev. Dr Mogoba. Therefore, I am thrilled to be rendering this eulogy, in view of the 40th anniversary of the BMC, and the context-sensitive theme of this convocation: “Let Thy Kingdom Come: Afrika’s Urgent Call!” The outline of this essay is as follows:



- The umbilical cord;
- The Bishop’s background;
- The arrest and calling to ministry;
- Black Theology;
- The Black church during Apartheid; and
- The present-day role of the Black church.

The Umbilical Cord

We may know Rev. Mogoba rightly so as a visionary leader of the MCSA and his involvement in the affairs of our country. It is thus necessary for me to shed some light on who he is to me and the MCSA. In my early teens, in the 1960s I went to Kilnerton High School, a prestigious Methodist educational institution at the time. I had to study there because this had become a family tradition. My grandfather, Samuel Dikgang Moseneke, who later became the minister, attended Kilnerton towards the early 1900s. He was called to ministry while at Kilnerton. My father too, attended Kilnerton, and so did Uncle Stan. By the time I came to Kilnerton as the third generation of the Mosenekes, Uncle Stan was a teacher at his *alma mater*, where his family members had also studied. He taught me liberation history alongside the prescribed history syllabus—something which would get him into serious trouble with the security police of the time.

More significantly, Uncle Stan was my confirmation class teacher. He taught me the Apostles’ Creed: *Kea dumela go Modimo Rara Mothatlotlhe. Mmopi wa legodimo le lefatshe...* (“I Believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth...”). Under him and Rev. Dugmore I learned to sing the *Te Deum: Siyakudumisa Thixo, Siyakuvuma ukuba ungu Yehova ...* (“We praise thee, O God: We acknowledge Thee to be the Lord...”). Uncle Stan arranged for my confirmation, and that of the other youths, which was to be conducted by Rev. Dugmore in the Kilnerton chapel on the koppie. Only in recent years (2015) did Uncle Stan and I, together with other Methodist Kilnertonians assemble at the chapel to remember our formation years. We are grateful to the Bishop of the Limpopo District, Rev. Thamba Mntambo for arranging the little pilgrimage.

In the history of South Africa, Uncle Stan and I were arrested, with him being imprisoned for three years, while his son and I had a heavier sentence—10 years in prison. Besides my father, Uncle Stan taught me at Kilnerton and at Robben Island all I knew about the character of our oppression and liberation struggle. He taught me that there was only one race: the human race. He impressed on me that inequality and discrimination were inhuman—and that we all have an inherent God-given dignity and equal worth. We have a right and duty to rule ourselves and to self-determination—and that we deserved peace and freedom in our lifetime. Uncle Stan also taught me that we have to be kind to others; especially the weak and the vulnerable. Moreover, we deserved to have good rulers,

because Apartheid rulers were not good. Leaders in the public space, like us, have to live an exemplary life, characterised by integrity and public honesty. Leaders have to serve others. Their calling is to serve the people and not themselves.

Uncle Stan taught us to be concerned about the fate of the African continent and its people, and also displayed this concern remarkably. He often reiterated what Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe taught—that we are a vanquished and dispossessed people—that we are a landless people—that we were, and had to be our own liberators. Our primary concern had to be the vital interests of Africa and its people. We had to remember that our struggle was continental; and not merely domestic. He asserted that Africa was for Africans in their, full non-racial amalgam—and that being African has little to do with one’s skin colour; but rather, with one’s loyalty and consciousness. Africans were for humanity and humanity was for God. In short, Dr Mogoba pleaded for the Lord’s kingdom to come to Afrika.

At Robben Island, he continued to play the role of a father and mentor to me and the other young freedom fighters. He urged me to study, and that I did. He taught me English, as well as Latin, which he passed at university level. I needed Latin for my LLB degree so that I could become a practising lawyer. He confessed to me that he wanted to be a lawyer and not a teacher. His words spurred me on. I knew that I would have to study hard to become what Uncle Stan wanted to be. While at Robben Island, he also advanced rapport between the major liberation movements—the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the African National Congress (ANC)—and reminded them of their common history and common principal goals.

I had a rare privilege of being in the vicinity of Robben Island when Uncle Stan received his full conversion and calling to ministry. This came as no surprise. He has always understood the inextricable intersection between spirituality and justice, spirituality and our Blackness, and between Blackness and justice. Our God is a just God. God cannot be love, as every Methodist standing behind the pulpit would proclaim, and be unfair, unjust, uncaring, discriminatory and deceitful at the same time. Uncle Stan understood that social justice is at the core of contextual theology.

I was still in jail when Uncle Stan went to the Seminary, and came back home to a fully ordained minister of the church. Unsurprisingly, he became a vital cog in the liberation theology movement of the mid-1970s. In time, he rose to become our Presiding Bishop. From our days at Robben Island up to now, our family linkages have doubled and re-doubled.

The Bishop’s Background

This essay celebrates the influential role that Rev. Mogoba has played as a minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, the largest mainline Protestant denomination in South Africa (Smit 2008, 92–105). But, who is Rev. Mogoba? Where are his roots? He is a Limpopo son of the soil and his foundational homestead is in Sekhukhune (South African

History Online (SAHO) 2015). Rev. Mogoba was born in 1933 (SAHO 2015) and is now in his 80s. He began his elementary education at an early age and soon proved to be an exceptionally-gifted child, completing Standard 6 at the age of 12 (SAHO 2015). He proceeded to secondary school in Kilnerton in the 1940s (SAHO 2015). Like countless other young men of his generation, including my father, Rev. Mogoba had a personal and political awakening during his high school years (SAHO 2015). Rather than confining himself to any one particular area, he flourished in a wide array of extra-curricular activities, including debate, drama, and sports (SAHO 2015). He also joined the ANC Youth League (SAHO 2015). Yet, even so, church attendance was an important part of his life, as it had been throughout his upbringing. Mme Reneilwe, his mother, was the leader of the Women's Manyano (the Methodist Women's Prayer and Service Union) (SAHO 2015). His father, nate Reuben Tshomoko Sethulane, was a Methodist lay preacher (SAHO 2015). Therefore, his parents set an example of devoted service to the church, and their son followed diligently in their footsteps.

After high school, Rev. Mogoba encountered a challenge that was common to many of his peers at the time. Although he possessed the intellectual ability to excel in any profession that he might have chosen, Apartheid greatly narrowed his options. At the time, Mmutlanyane Mogoba's elder brother was studying at the University of Fort Hare (SAHO 2015). He later became Dr Ernest Mogoba. The reality of that era was that Black families were often unable to sustain financially the university aspirations of one child, let alone two (SAHO 2015). As a result, Mmutlanyane enrolled at the Pretoria Bantu Normal College, where he obtained a Teacher's Diploma (SAHO 2015). In so doing, he mirrored his father, who was a teacher at Sekhukhune (SAHO 2015).

Teaching presented Rev. Mogoba an opportunity to fuse two passions: politics and service. He challenged his students to understand the political developments in South Africa, and encouraged them to recognise that systematic racial oppression was not inevitable (SAHO 2015). He impressed on them that systemic racial oppression was a political choice and that different political choices were possible and morally inevitable in South Africa.

The Bishop later became a member of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and eventually became its President (SAHO 2015). In this capacity, he served as a Member of Parliament from 1997 to 2004 (SAHO 2015).

The Arrest and Calling to Ministry

Early in 1963, Bishop Mogoba was arrested and sentenced to three years' imprisonment for his anti-apartheid activism (SAHO 2015). I saw him soak up inhumane treatment at Robben Island. He had to wear shorts with no underwear. He wore sandals without socks in the cold and wet Cape winter. He slept on a felt mat on the freezing cement floor. No beds were provided. He had to take a cold shower in winter. The food portions were little and just about enough to keep the body and soul together. As though all this was not enough, Stanley Mogoba was subjected to corporal punishment. He was stripped, strapped

to a bench and forcibly whipped or lashed. He was thrown into solitary confinement. Prison officials believed he deserved to be punished in this brutal and inhumane way, claiming that they had evidence that Uncle Stan had helped two comrades, Japhta Kgalabi Masemola and Sedick Isaacs, in their plan to escape from Robben Island.

I must perhaps pause and ponder on the words of Albert Einstein (1879–1955): “[g]reat spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.”

The chronicle of Rev. Mogoba’s calling to ministry is well known. It was during this dark hour on the island, in solitary confinement, that the Rev. Mogoba truly met his God and answered his calling to ministry. In the depths of his ordeal, his warders could not extinguish his desire to deepen his understanding of God or his resolute belief that his worth as a human being was not something that the State had the power to crush or take away. Rev. Mogoba believed that dignity is inherent in every human being, fashioned in the image of God; and that it is not something that can be conferred or removed by any man-made government. In embarking on the ministry, he embarked on a quest to inspire others to live out this truth. This attitude strikes at the heart of Black theology.

Bishop Mogoba completed his theology studies while in prison (SAHO 2015). Upon his release in 1966, he was restricted to Sekhukhune and banned from working as a teacher, attending church services, or participating in meetings (SAHO 2015). Despite these grievous setbacks and the tragic loss of his wife and daughter, he was undeterred in his mission to serve the church and the community, and was appointed a probationary minister in 1969 (SAHO 2015). The security police forced him to leave his post, but he was determined to pursue his calling and enrolled at the Federal Theological Seminary, which had relations with the then University of Fort Hare in 1970 (SAHO 2015). He was finally ordained minister after completing his studies at Fort Hare and was awarded a scholarship to study African Christianity at Bristol University (SAHO 2015).

Black Theology

Black theology is a variant of liberation or contextual theology (Chimhanda 2010, 434; Molobi 2010, 44; Mwambazambi 2010, 1). It has been defined as “a direct ... response to a situation where Blacks have experienced alienation at political, economic and cultural levels” (Villa-Vicencio and De Gruchy 1985, 25). This theology first reared its head in South Africa in the 1960s and was, in part, inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States of America (including the voices of Martin Luther King and James Cone) and the liberation theologies of Latin America (Mwambazambi 2010, 1; cf. Tshaka and Makofane 2010, 533–534). During the Apartheid years, Black theology was a Christian fortress on which Black people could firmly plant their feet. It was an easily accessible tool to reclaim our cultural origins and humanity. We used it to liberate ourselves from oppression, and for building a new society that was in line with the tenets of the Bible (Molobi 2010, 44).

One reason Black theology resonated so strongly with our communities was its unequivocal call to action. Rather than asking us to patiently endure our lot, Black theology encouraged us to confront our oppressors and sow dissension (Leonard 2010). Not only did Black theologians grasp the basic truth that “no reconciliation [was] possible in South Africa without justice”; they also encouraged us to actively seek justice – to “stand up for [our] rights and wage a struggle against [our] oppressors” (SAHO 2015).

The Black Church during Apartheid

Black theology was most impactful for a decade: 1976 to 1986 (Molobi 2010, 44) when racial discrimination was rife. Most Black theologians of this time believed and operated from the premise that “God was on the side of the oppressed” (Villa-Vicencio and De Gruchy 1985, 25). In this way, the Black church was bestowed with a duty to give direction to its congregants, and to act as the loudspeaker through which its people could call out the injustices of the Apartheid government, and promote social and political change (Molobi 2010, 44). As a group of anonymous theologians in Soweto pointed out in 1985, the reason Black youth revolted was because they believed that social and political change was imminent. They were “acting courageously and fearlessly because they [had] a sure hope that liberation [would] come” (Leonard 2010). In the context of Black theology, Black communities’ hope for liberation signalled “the coming of God’s kingdom” (Leonard 2010). In many ways, the Black church was the light at the end of the tunnel that signified hope for a better day.

The Present-day Role of the Black Church

There is no doubt that the Black church fought a good fight during the trying years of exclusion and repression (Cone 1984). Church buildings became fortresses as they hosted protest gatherings and political funerals. It is in this context that we should understand the genesis and path of the BMC. Black and other progressive theologians took their biblical posts on the side of the marginalised and vulnerable (Vicencio and De Gruchy 1985, 25). They highlighted the hypocrisy of those who professed the Christian faith while supporting the Apartheid regime (Tshaka and Makofane 2010, 536). They garnered hard resources and supported non-violent uprisings and community or grass root programmes (Tshaka and Makofane 2010, 536). In short, ministers embraced the lot of their flock.

The most pertinent question, however, is, has the Church reached a niche in the “new” South Africa? Some may assert that with the advent of participatory democracy, the Black church has relinquished its historic duty. But, has its role been wholly supplanted by the democratic government? Are there residual or perhaps substantive social issues that call on the Church to return to the trenches of the battle for social justice?

The burning question is whether Black theology has lost steam since 1994 (Vellem 2013, 6). Given its emergence at the height of the liberation struggle, some Christians may have interpreted Black theology only within the context of the anti-apartheid movement (Vellem

2013, 6). When the movement dissipated with the fall of Apartheid, some Christians adopted a passive attitude to the social and economic transformation that remained to be achieved in South Africa (Vellem 2013, 6).

I do not have answers to these difficult questions, I do not know—I must remind myself that I am no more than a mere part of the flock. I may be a leader in the Judiciary, but I am not a theologian. But common sense seems to suggest that in order to regain the vigour it enjoyed prior to 1994, Black theology must refocus its attention on the incomplete transformation, and rededicate itself to uplifting the lives of South Africans, who remain marginalised to this day. The church must sense the threats to our hard-won gains towards a just society. It must weigh in on the side of social and public righteousness.

To this end, I believe that the church has a pivotal role to play in the present-day society—precisely because its calling was not confined to fighting racial discrimination. The church is called upon to do more. Its essence is to liberate, through the Christian faith, those who continue to be oppressed and marginalised.

We are all aware that despite the elegant, and at times clumsy strides that our democracy has made, there is still much to be done. That many of our people are still oppressed is undebatable. In the same manner that the Black church was the saving grace of our country's dark past, it can also illuminate the dim corners of our challenged present.

Although our country is still contending with some drawbacks, these are, however, not the same drawbacks that the country experienced then. Black theology, however, is still relevant. As the much-overlooked theologian Prof Simon Maimela stated, “there will always be [people] who, for a variety of reasons, will feel . . . deprived, somehow oppressed and therefore in need of liberation, be it political, economic or socio-cultural” (Tshaka and Makofane 2010, 533). The contentious issues of transformation, restitution, and reparation of land, and gender justice fall under this umbrella. There are constant challenges of migration and refugees and the pitfall of xenophobia. New forms of slavery, related to human trafficking, drugs, and prostitution have come to the fore. Threats to the environment are real, which are threatening to extinct humans over time. Global and domestic inequality is increasing as advanced technology is harnessed to create even more wealth for those who are already wealthy. The church cannot simply fold its hands. True, tangible liberation is yet to be achieved. As such, Black theology could be an effective tool in curbing the prevalence of these social and economic ills.

The church has a vital role to play on two additional fronts: The first is to re-install personal agency in its flock. Personal responsibility and accountability must be a vital tenet of the Christian faith. The State has fundamental obligations to alleviate poverty and induct a better life for all. That, however, does not, and cannot mean that our salvation in this world may come only from the State. There is, indeed, a hallowed space for personal agency, personal choice and free will, which is an indispensable adjunct of our self-worth and human dignity. If we were to regain that ethos of personal agency, we would plant our

vegetable gardens. We would buy and plant trees rather than beer. We would replace broken windowpanes in schools that our children attend. We would not litter. We would use natural resources sparingly and judiciously. We would assume much of the duty to change our lives and those of our neighbours.

The second possible role relates to moral regeneration. Few vehicles are better positioned than places of worship to change our collective moral compass. The church can best lecture us on ethical leadership, servant leadership, good governance, and accountability.

Conclusion

I trust that the church, particularly the MCSA, will rediscover the heritage that liberation theology offers, in order to revive its activities and to show face. We believe that the world, and everything in it, belongs to God and that we are placed in our respective positions, not for self-gain, but rather to serve. Similarly, Christianity tells us that stewardship is based on integrity or the “goodness of creation” (Chimhanda 2010, 440). Rev. Mogoba’s life exemplifies these principles. Despite his many accolades, he remains a faithful servant of the Lord and of our people. Despite worldly recognition, he remains a man of abiding integrity. And despite the many obstacles he has faced, he epitomises a steadfast belief in God, and His power to overcome all difficulties. Faithful steward, thoughtful scholar, committed leader and humble servant best describe Rev. Dr Mogoba. I am privileged to sing the praises of his remarkable achievements and contributions. Those of us who have crossed his illustrious path have not been the same as we are the better for it.

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