

The Reverend Doctor Sox Leleki and his Role in the Black Methodist Consultation

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Abstract

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) is one of the mainline Christian denominations with a very good history. However, it was not immune from the larger political influence of South Africa that was polarised by apartheid. This article is intended to look at the formation known as the Black Methodist Consultation (BMC), which at that time had an individual member who played an important role in its development and activities. Sox Leleki was one of the key role players of this movement inside the Methodist Church.

Keywords: Sox Leleki; Black Methodist Consultation; society; ministry; church; liberation

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the BMC. In particular, it is about the contribution made to society by the Rev. Dr Sox Leleki (hereafter Leleki), the chairperson of the Connexional BMC from 2008 to 2014. In so doing, I propose to discuss the life and times of Leleki; to briefly say something about the BMC which is now 40 years old; to talk about some of the pressing social issues confronting South Africa today; to say something about the National Heritage Council (NHC) and its mandate; and to share with the reader how heritage and religion can, and should, be used to promote social cohesion and national identity, and to fight the demon of racism.

The Rev. Dr Sox Leleki

Msokoli William Leleki—Sox, to many people—was born in the small farming town of Riebeeck East. His father, from the Madiba clan, was a farm and garden worker. His mother was a domestic worker. He was one of five children—with three brothers and one sister.



Both parents were of humble origins and did not have the opportunity to receive a formal education, but they understood the importance of education for their children.

His taste for politics started at primary school in 1977, with discussions under a tree in the schoolyard about the death of Steve Biko. The conclusion of the debate was that *amaBhulu ayadelela* (the Boers disdained other people) and their education were designed to prepare black people to be, in the words of Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid, “Hewers of wood and drawers of water.”

Leleki later went to Ntsika Secondary School in Grahamstown where he quickly displayed his community development skills by initiating a campaign against a group of gangsters that was troubling the community of Grahamstown. He was also searching for a home for his political activism. While he was doing Standard 9 at Nombulelo Senior Secondary School, he joined the Azanian Student Movement (AZASM). After two months he joined the Congress of South African Students (COSAS). He was active amongst the students, leading a school boycott which demanded the replacement of a prefect system with a student representative council.

As a result of the school boycott the students could not write their senior secondary examination and they were to write it the following year as private students. During this time he kept himself busy by forming street and area committees in Grahamstown. He worked tirelessly with people like David Sandi, Maboy Zono and others to ensure that there were street committees in Grahamstown’s townships.

The initial objective of street and area committees in Grahamstown was not political: it was focused on peacekeeping and the promotion of Ubuntu. Under the influence of Matthew Goniwe, Sparrow Mkhonto and other activists, these committees soon took on a political dimension; the meetings linked the street and area committees to the then United Democratic Front (UDF) and were held at Rhodes University in the hope that the South African Police (SAP) Special Branch would not notice. The young Leleki was one of the volunteers who led the Million Signature Campaign of the UDF in Grahamstown. He ended up being the first chairperson of the street and area committees in the town, and those structures grew into a force to be reckoned with.

By then he had attracted the attention of the SAP Security Branch of the apartheid police. His house was searched many times by both the soldiers and the police, looking for what they called dangerous weapons. This situation was worsened by his contact with cadres of uMkhonte we Sizwe (the armed wing of the African National Congress), such as comrade Faltein who was known as “Rorwana” in Grahamstown. Leleki was a prominent speaker at the funerals of comrades killed by the *kitskonstabels* (police and soldiers) in the township.

In 1986, after having been on the run from the police and sleeping at hideout places in town, he was detained under the State of Emergency rules. During the time of his detention,

he worked as an employee of the Albany Council of Churches as a Dependant's Conference fieldworker. His responsibility was to take care of the families of the detainees.

The apartheid police decided to harass the younger brother of Leleki as well, and this brother of his ended up running away from home. As if that was not tribulation enough, his father passed away and left his mother to make preparations for the funeral. Although he had been promised that he would be able to attend the funeral of this father under armed guard, this did not happen and he sadly missed the funeral of his own father. Two days after the funeral he was transferred from St Alban's Prison to solitary confinement in the Kenton-on-Sea police station. He spent six months there where he was brutally interrogated and tortured. The police wanted him to take responsibility for the actions of Amabutho in Grahamstown.

It was at Kenton-on-Sea that Leleki received his call to ordained ministry, although without understanding the true meaning of it at the time. The day he received his calling he had absolutely nothing inside the cell except for an ant, which was a friend to keep him company. That day he made a covenant with God, and he joined the Methodist Church ministry, which he is still attached to. This is a truly moving story that needs to be known and understood.

He was eventually released from prison in September 1988. The break was, however, short-lived. He was again detained after three weeks for being in possession of study material about people such as Comrade Gugile Nkwinti (the then Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform). Leleki was released in 1989 under strict orders of house arrest. Some of the orders required him to report to the police station twice a day between 10:30 and 11:30 and between 13:30 and 14:30. It was exactly an hour to walk from his house to the police station. He was not allowed to be outside the premises of his yard except for the time he went to the police station. He was further required to be in the company of not more than one person. Even his mother and siblings could not talk to him at the same time. He was constantly under surveillance of the SAP Special Branch. This lasted until the day President Mandela was released from prison on February 2, 1990. From that day, he was for the first time free to go to church and mingle with other people. For Leleki, going to church was not for social gatherings but to meet other people as a free human being. The Methodist Church leadership was prepared to welcome him back as a full member; however, in his humility, he advised them otherwise. He preferred to start from scratch. He attended confirmation class for a period of six months.

Upon being received as a full member of the church, he joined the Wesley Guild. After six months he was elected a convenor of one of the "4C's for Christ" known as Consecration. This is where he developed his preaching skills. He became known for his critical and analytical thinking during serious debates. People like the late Rev. Mzwandile Soyamba played an important role in influencing him about the positive role of the church in society. The late Rev. Soyamba was popular among the youth for his sharp political mind when

dealing with social issues. He went back to the Albany Council of Churches as a justice worker, this time under the leadership of the late Rev. Dr Bob Clarke. He worked with Lindile Jela, the late Harrison Mangcangaza, Boniwe Zono, Fezile Cewu, and Msizi Kuhlane.

After the first democratic elections (in 1994), Leleki was approached by the national office of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) to relocate to Johannesburg where he was to serve as liaison officer in the office of the Rev. Abraham Maja. In 1995 he moved to Khotso House to start his new job of being the face of the SACC in the provinces. He was known as “Mr Fix-it” of the provincial offices. At that time the president of the SACC was the late Rev. Dr Mgojo and the general secretary was Dr Brigalia Bam.

In 1996 he embarked upon full-time ministry in the MSCA. His Phase One programme was done at Jabavu Centre, being stationed at Johannesburg/Alexandra under the superintendent minister, the Rev. Dr Donald Veysie. He was stationed at the Ivory Park section to exercise his pastoral ministry. During this time, worship services were moved from a shack to a proper church building. In his monograph on the Methodist Church in Ivory Park, Simangaliso Kumalo (2001) notes that ministers working in Ivory Park from 1996 to 1997 worked in very difficult circumstances as services were initially conducted in a poorly built shack and membership of the church was very low. When Leleki left, the circuit had grown to 50 members and included the youth.

His expertise and commitment continued to be recognised through election to higher office. In the Central District he was elected as deputy district coordinator of the Wesley Guild. From Ivory Park he went to Mount Coke Circuit in the Eastern Cape near King William’s Town under the superintendence of the Rev. Dr Simon Gqubule. Then he was elected regional coordinator of the Queenstown District of the Wesley Guild. From Mount Coke Circuit he went to Pretoria for one year and thereafter he went to the Tembisa Circuit in the Highveld and Swaziland District. In the Highveld and Swaziland District, he was elected the district president of the local Preachers’ Association from 2007 to 2009.

From 2009 to 2014 he was elected as the connexional chairperson of the BMC, and during his tenure the BMC carved a new niche for itself within the Methodist Church specifically and society in general. I will further discuss the BMC later in this article. From 2009 to 2012 he was appointed the first black dean of studies at Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary under the leadership of the late Ross Olivier, who was the president of the seminary at that time. His responsibilities at the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary included drafting the curriculum, appointing adjunct lecturers, supervising teaching and learning, teaching a missiology module, study skills, African studies and field education.

During his student days, Leleki was a critical thinker on social and political issues. In 2003 he completed his master’s degree in Theology (Leleki 2003) and his dissertation was titled: “The Methodist Church and Society in Transvaal (1948–1976).” Not content with that, in 2014 he completed his doctoral studies with the University of Pretoria in the field of church

history on the topic: “A Critical Response of the English-Speaking Churches to the Introduction and Implementation of the Bantu Education Act in South Africa” (Leleki 2014).

He authored several books which are: *The Last Mile to Calvary*; *The Last Step to Golgotha*; *Umjikelo wokugqibela ukuya eKhalvari*; *Inyathelo lokugibela ukuya eGolgotha*; and *A Burning Preacher*. He is in the process of completing two more books, namely, *I am a Christian*, and *Politics of Yesterday*.

The Black Methodist Consultation (BMC)

It would be difficult to discuss Leleki’s successes without reference to the BMC, which he chaired from 2008 to 2014. This movement was started in September 1975 and quickly positioned itself as the conscience of the MCSA. The BMC was founded at the height of apartheid because the church was a mirror image of the apartheid society in which it laboured. The BMC confronted racism both inside and outside of the Methodist Church.

BMC objectives include:

- Enabling black Methodists to be active agents of change and transformation, leading successfully across all structures of the MCSA and society;
- Encouraging black Methodists to fight for social justice and welfare of all people, but especially women and children, the youth, victims of abused power in the church and the broader community; and
- Promoting unity across ethnic and racial lines.

These objectives are very relevant to addressing the challenges that the church is still facing today in South Africa.

As a member of the BMC, Leleki had already taken the lead in debating important issues, for example, the transformation of the economy. One of the initiatives introduced during Leleki’s time as chairperson of the BMC was the establishment of a black history project with the intention to remember, capture, affirm, and celebrate the contribution of black ministers in the Methodist Church to the life of the ecumenical movements in general and the MCSA in particular. The objective of the project is to record the stories of the men and women who played an important role in black organisations and institutions with the intention of recording their legacy for generations to come.

Social Challenges Facing South Africa Today

As a society, South Africa has come a long way since the BMC was formed in 1975 to combat racism within the Methodist Church. Notwithstanding this progress, the nation is facing new challenges. These new challenges are poverty, inequality and unemployment,

which are frequently mentioned and are real and relate to the fundamental issue of transforming South African society. To this, other challenges can be added that lead to the breakdown of the moral fibre of society, namely, the erosion of values, corruption, and the scant regard shown for human life. Overall, the demon of racism still looms large over South African society and rears its ugly head at regular intervals.

The fundamental issue here is that if left unaddressed, these issues will eventually undermine the legitimacy of the democratic state, rend the fabric of society, nullify the gains South Africa has made and create the type of society no one wants to see for the next generation.

The church broadly (and this encompasses all religious denominations) has an important role to play in addressing many of the challenges that society is facing today. Under Leleki's leadership the BMC ensured that the church played a crucial role in the struggle for liberation. Equally, the BMC has a crucial role to play now in building the type of society people would like to see. For Leleki, it is imperative for the church to engage with the state, civil society organs and other role players to identify what must be done, and to form a substantive partnership.

Documenting and Conserving Our Heritage

In South Africa, the National Heritage Council (NHC) is one of many agencies in the public space, but it has an important role to play in promoting social cohesion, nation building and development. Since the establishment of the NHC in 2004, it has been an important task of this organisation to prioritise heritage so as to build the nation and national identity. The important areas that the NHC focuses on are:

- Policy development for the sector to meet its transformation goals;
- Public awareness and education;
- Knowledge production in heritage subjects that were previously neglected; and
- Provision of funding to projects that position heritage as a socio-economic resource.

Overall, the NHC plays an important advocacy and coordinating role in heritage matters in South Africa.

One of the flagship programmes is the development of national liberation heritage routes. The objective of the Liberation Heritage Route (LHR) programme is to identify, document, research, present and develop a series of liberation sites that are of local, provincial and national significance. The profiling of liberation heritage is part of the process towards preserving national identity and reconstructing the memory of the liberation struggle for current and future generations. Ordinary men and women are encouraged to document their stories, as these stories need to be told to others. The liberation struggle of South Africa

was a complex affair with many different facets that need to be told. It is important to bear in mind and remember to recognise the sacrifices people made for the liberation of South Africa. These stories are needed because they may encourage and inspire the younger generation to carry on building the nation.

In the words of Sir Seretse Khama (1970 in Parsons 2006), a “nation without a past is a lost nation. And a people without a past, is a people without a soul.” The NHC is motivated by the conviction that the promotion and conservation of both intangible and tangible heritage can promote social cohesion and national identity, and that doing this can stimulate economic development and job creation—especially in rural areas. This directly addresses the challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment that South Africa faces as a nation.

We can build all the houses in the world and provide unlimited access to healthcare and education, but if the soul of our nation is not healed, if our children grow up disconnected from society—without a sense of their place in the world, without values, without a sense of purpose and without understanding of what it means to be African—then we will be in serious trouble.

The role of the missionaries in South Africa was complex and controversial. However, there can be no doubt that they had a formative influence. In many cases the educated Africans produced by these institutions went on to challenge European notions of Africans and African achievements. Methodist institutions such as Clarkebury and Healdtown, which contributed directly and indirectly to our freedom, need to be included in the network of sites that form the National Liberation Heritage Route, and they should be marketed effectively as part of the tourism attractions of the Eastern Cape.

This is, of course, not something that the NHC can do alone. It requires all stakeholders and agencies to work together: the Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture, which is responsible for the identification and conservation of heritage sites in the province; the South African Heritage Resources Agency; and the national and provincial tourism authorities. There is also a need for stakeholders such as the BMC and MCSA to participate. This also feeds into the Home of Legends project that the NHC is working on with the Eastern Cape Office of the Premier. The NHC has a team of researchers preparing solid academic research that will underpin the concept of the Eastern Cape as the Home of Legends—not just in politics, but also in sport, culture, education and religion.

Social Cohesion

Preserving South Africa’s tangible heritage—for example, historical church buildings—is one aspect; implementing programmes that genuinely promote social cohesion, is another. The churches are important stakeholders in the protection and promotion of the country’s tangible heritage—important mission buildings, for example. However, they are even more important stakeholders in helping to promote social cohesion in South Africa through the people’s intangible heritage. This is something Ndikho Mtshiselwa (2015) suggested last

year in an article titled, “The Emergence of the Black Methodist Consultation and its possible Prophetic Voice in Post-apartheid South Africa.” He argued strongly that the church in general and the BCM in particular have a critical role to play in the deconstruction and reconstruction of black identity in South Africa.

Not everyone will necessarily agree that the basis of this needs to be the promotion of Black Consciousness, as he suggests. There is nothing wrong with people having different approaches to the issue. However, I am sure we can all agree on the need to give serious attention to the societal challenges facing the country. Pervasive and persistent institutionalised racism will not be removed by “band-aid” cures. We will not halt the terrible scourge of rape and sexual abuse with spasmodic days of activism. Nor will we end xenophobic outbursts, the breakdown of societal values and many other social ills without critical reflection, identification of the substantive issues involved, and sustained programmes to address these.

We need to ask ourselves hard questions: What does it really mean to be a South African in the 21st century? Can we truly talk of a South African nation? If not, what do we need to do to construct one? How do we re-establish family and societal values? In that process one has to agree with Mtshiselwa’s (2015) conclusion that there is a need to deconstruct and reconstruct what it means to be black South Africans in the 21st century and that the Methodist Church, like other churches in South Africa, should play a leading role.

Leleki (2013, 31) puts it very well in his BMC Chairperson’s Report when he says:

To have been colonized is a fate with long-lasting and unfair results, especially after democracy had been achieved. The status of the colonized people, such as we were, has a danger of failing to recognize our God-given abilities and talents. The fierce struggle we have to wage and win before we can claim to be free is to discover the African mirror through which we can see ourselves and not use the ones given to us by our colonizers when they were in the land-grabbing business.

There are indeed a large number of areas in which the church should be taking the lead in re-establishing a moral basis for the economy and society. The church in general needs to recapture this important role and use it to address the many socio-economic challenges South Africans face today. In this instance, genuine and authentic religious leaders are needed to give direction to society. Recently, South Africa saw disturbing signs: religious leaders were getting their followers to eat grass, drink petrol, and eat hair and live snakes. Authentic religious leaders have a role in addressing these types of things. Surely the Methodist Church needs to be at the forefront of a discourse on the role of the state and the church and the question whether churches should be registered. Another discourse centres on the issue of spirituality and culture. Can people practise their cultural beliefs like *ukwaluka* and *imbeleko* and still call themselves Christians? What is the Church’s stand on *ukuthwala*?

Conclusion

It is important that the present generation of the Black Methodist Consultation constructs its vision and mission in light of present-day societal challenges. The Rev. Dr Leleki indeed discovered his mission and fulfilled it. It is time for South Africans to begin to embark on a mission of building a non-racial nation—a democratic, non-sexist, united and prosperous society.

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