Article

Ecumenical Heroism from Below: The Pastoral Witness of Sibongile and Fanyana Mhlophe in South African Church History

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Abstract

This article examines the Reverends Sibongile Jessie Mhlophe and Fanyana Peter Mhlophe as exemplars of grassroots ecumenical heroism in South African church history. Drawing on biographical material, oral narratives, and pastoral practice, it argues that their ministry embodied an ecumenical vision through everyday practices, including shared worship, interdenominational cooperation, social engagement, and prophetic witness, rather than through formal institutional structures. Challenging elite-centred accounts of ecumenism, the study shows how unity was enacted amid apartheid's violence, poverty, and marginalisation. It proposes ecumenical heroism from below as a relational, embodied, and locally grounded framework that contributes to church history and ecumenical studies by rethinking Christian unity, leadership, and sanctity in contexts of struggle.

Keywords: grassroots ecumenism; pastoral practice; Fanyana and Sibongile Mhlophe; women's leadership; apartheid resistance; African theology

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Introduction: Rethinking Heroes in Church History

Church history has long been written from the vantage point of institutions, synods, confessions, and prominent ecclesial leaders. While such accounts remain indispensable, they often obscure how Christian unity is sustained in everyday pastoral and communal life, particularly under conditions of marginalisation and social pressure. Ecumenism is therefore frequently framed through formal agreements and organisational structures, even though it is expressed in practice through shared worship, pastoral solidarity, and communal care.

Recent ecumenical scholarship has begun to shift this emphasis by drawing attention to local, relational, and practice-oriented expressions of unity. In African contexts, ecumenism is increasingly understood as an embodied reality that is shaped by shared life, cooperation, and responses to socio-economic and political pressures (Hove 2025, 2–3; Gatebuka 2025, 4–5). This perspective resonates with ecclesiological reflections on the marks of the church (unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity), which call for visible expressions of unity in practice rather than solely in doctrine (Duncan 2011, 2–3). Yet, church-historical scholarship continues to pay limited attention to ordinary pastors, pastoral couples, and local ministers, especially Black and female leaders, as agents of ecumenical life.

This article advances a methodological and theological recovery of "ordinary saints"[1] as agents in church history. Drawing on biography, pastoral practice, and communal memory, it examines the ministries of Reverends Sibongile Jessie Mhlophe (born 30 November 1951 in Alexandra Township) and Fanyana Peter Mhlophe (born 1 March 1948 in Standerton, Mpumalanga) as expressions of ecumenical heroism from below. The two are a Baptist pastoral couple[2] whose ministry spans more than five decades. They served congregations including Temba Baptist Church, Mamelodi Baptist Church, Meadowlands Baptist Church, and Ekangala Baptist Church. Beyond congregational ministry, they provided leadership within the Baptist Convention of South Africa (BCSA)[3], contributed to theological education, promoted women's leadership, and cultivated ecumenical relationships across denominational boundaries. Their ministry began during apartheid and continued into the democratic era, making them important

1 In Baptist theology, "saints" refers not to an elite or canonised group but to all believers who are "in Christ," sharing in the new life of the Spirit and participating in the corporate body of Christ. Sanctity is therefore grounded in relationship to Christ rather than in moral achievement and is understood as a communal, lived reality within the church (Haymes 2014, 8–10).

2 The term "pastoral couple" is used in this article to describe a married couple whose ministry is exercised jointly through pastoral leadership, congregational service, mentoring, and community engagement. It does not imply identical ministerial roles but recognises a shared vocation and partnership in ministry.

3 The Baptist Convention of South Africa (BCSA) is one of the major Baptist denominations in South Africa and represents a network of autonomous Baptist churches committed to Baptist principles and congregational church governance.

but hitherto understudied figures in South African church history. The couple's witness took shape through shared pulpits, interdenominational cooperation, social ministry, and prophetic presence within the constraints of apartheid. By foregrounding such practice, the study contributes to church history and ecumenical studies by reframing unity as lived faith within contexts of struggle.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach and draws on biographical material, oral narratives, and ecclesial memory, with particular attention paid to the first-person account of Rev. Fanyana Peter Mhlophe as a primary theological source. Oral history is treated as both historical witness and theological reflection shaped by lived experience while remaining open to critical evaluation. In this sense, memory operates simultaneously as preservation and resistance, enabling marginalised communities to reclaim agency and sustain alternative visions of faith and identity.

In addition to autobiographical sources, this study incorporates testimonies[4] from colleagues, congregants, denominational leaders, and ministry associates who worked with the Mhlophes over several decades. These testimonies provide an important layer of corroboration and offer independent perspectives on their pastoral leadership, ecumenical engagement, and social impact.

Ecumenical heroism from below is proposed as a way of interpreting the past and as a framework for understanding Christian unity as a lived, relational, and contextually embodied reality in the life of the church.

Literature Review: Ecumenism, Context, and Lived Unity

Scholarship on ecumenism in Southern Africa has primarily been shaped by institutional, theological, and political analyses of church unity, particularly in relation to the apartheid era. Foundational studies highlight the role of formal ecumenical bodies, most notably the South African Council of Churches (SACC), in articulating prophetic resistance and mobilising churches against systemic injustice. Within this body of work, ecumenism is presented as a public and moral project through which churches engaged the state and contributed to liberation struggles. Scholars such as Pillay (2017), Kgatle (2018), and Womack and Pillay (2019) demonstrate how the SACC functioned as a key agent of synchronised witness by enabling advocacy, policy engagement, and national

4 The testimonies cited in this article were collected from seven individuals who worked with, ministered alongside, or were influenced by Rev. Fanyana and Rev. Jessie Sibongile Mhlophe. Participants were asked four open-ended questions: (1) How long did you know the Mhlophes, in what context did you work with them, and what made their ministry unique? (2) Can you share an example of how the Mhlophes promoted unity or cooperation among churches and ministers? (3) How would you describe Jessie Sibongile Mhlophe's role and contribution to ministry and leadership? (4) What lasting impact do you believe the Mhlophes had on the church, community, or future generations of ministers? The testimonies were used as supplementary qualitative sources to corroborate and enrich the historical and autobiographical material discussed in the study.

influence, particularly through its coordination of joint ecclesial witness, engagement in social development and educational initiatives, the provision of bursaries, and its participation in peace-making programmes and public statements confronting apartheid injustices (Hofmeyr and Pillay 1994, 258). Systematic theological reflections reinforce this emphasis by framing unity as an ecclesiological and ethical imperative grounded in *koinonia* and shared responsibility in the *oikoumene* (Duncan 2011, 2–3). While this scholarship remains indispensable for understanding the public and political dimensions of Christian unity, it tends to centre councils, leadership structures, and official statements as the primary sites of ecumenical activity, with less attention paid to how unity is enacted in everyday pastoral and congregational life.

More recent work shifts attention towards local expressions of ecumenism. Werbner (2018) introduces the notion of "grassroots ecumenism" to describe forms of cooperation that emerge within contexts of conflict, vulnerability, and moral crisis. Teppo (2018) shows how ecumenical practice develops in lived social realities rather than through formal programmes, particularly in periods of transition and uncertainty. In African contexts, Gatebuka (2025, 4–7) argues that ecumenism must move beyond ceremonial or institutional engagement towards relational and mission-driven practice that is rooted in local communities. Similarly, Hove (2025, 2–5) demonstrates how local cultural frameworks shape ecumenical cooperation and emphasises relationality, mutual obligation, and shared life. These studies indicate that unity is sustained through practice, trust, and cooperation within concrete contexts rather than through formal agreement alone.

Despite these developments, church-historical literature seldom centres ordinary pastors, particularly Black and female leaders, as agents of ecumenical life. Even where grassroots dynamics are acknowledged, the focus often remains on movements, organisations, or broader social trends rather than on the everyday practices through which unity is sustained. At the level of local communities, youth movements, and working-class organisations, forms of struggle are frequently more radical and more ecumenical than those found in formal church hierarchies (Werbner 2018). This indicates a significant gap in the literature, namely the absence of detailed, practice-oriented accounts of how unity is characterised through pastoral relationships, shared ministry, and communal life under conditions of marginalisation.

This gap is significant for both scholarship and ecclesial praxis. Methodologically, recovering ordinary pastors and pastoral couples as historical agents requires rethinking how agency and credibility are recognised in church history, potentially revealing forms of leadership and unity-building that institutional analyses overlook. As churches grapple with fragmentation and social change, the witness of grassroots ecumenical figures remains instructive. Their ability to nurture cooperation through trust, friendship, and shared vulnerability illustrates how Christian unity can be lived out beyond formal agreements, particularly where institutional support is limited.

The article addresses this gap by proposing ecumenical heroism from below as an interpretive lens for reading the ministries of Sibongile Jessie Mhlophe and Fanyana Peter Mhlophe. Their work offers a concrete example of how unity is portrayed as lived holiness within contexts of struggle. By recovering ordinary saints as theological agents, the study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that foregrounds lived experience, relational practice, and contextual witness. In doing so, it reframes ecumenism as a practice sustained through everyday acts of care, cooperation, and shared mission rather than through institutional structures alone.

Historical Context: Ministry under Apartheid and Ecclesial Fragmentation

Having established that grassroots ecumenism emerges through shared vulnerability, conflict, and moral crisis, it is necessary to situate the Mhlophes' ministry within the historical conditions that shaped their work. Their witness unfolded during apartheid, a system that shaped political, economic, and ecclesial life. Segregation became embedded within Christian communities and theological institutions, which normalised divisions across race, geography, and access to resources. In this context, Christian unity could not be assumed; it had to be enacted deliberately, often in tension with dominant social arrangements.

Churches mirrored the logic of apartheid in their organisation and practice. Congregations were separated along racial lines, and access to theological education, financial support, and institutional networks remained uneven. Studies of the period show that faith communities responded in varied ways, including resistance, complicity, and negotiation, which revealed the contested nature of prophetic witness in ecclesial life (Masuku 2014, 151–153). For Black churches, these conditions created particular challenges. Limited resources, restricted access to formal theological training, and exclusion from dominant theological discourse shaped both ministry and identity. Pastors carried heavy responsibilities in communities characterised by poverty, state violence, and social instability, often without institutional support.

These realities are described in detail in Fanyana Peter Mhlophe's account of pastoral ministry under apartheid. He notes how structures of control extended into church life, including the placement and movement of pastors, which often required institutional approval and reinforced dependency (Mhlophe 1990, 53–55). Economic inequalities further constrained ministry. Many Black pastors received minimal stipends, lacked adequate housing, and had limited access to pension provision, which left their families vulnerable in times of crisis (Mhlophe 1990, 55–56). Such conditions shaped a form of ministry that was practical, community-oriented, and responsive to immediate human need. Mhlophe (1990) also highlights the tension between inherited theological frameworks and lived realities. The dominance of Western theological models often failed to address the social and political conditions faced by Black communities, which created a gap between doctrine and experience (Mhlophe 1990, 56–57). Pastors were

required to respond to political violence, economic hardship, and social fragmentation while sustaining congregational life. Ministry therefore took on both spiritual and socio-political dimensions, which required resilience, discernment, and contextual adaptation. These pressures exposed structural inequalities in church life and reinforced the need for cooperation across denominational boundaries (Mhlophe 1990, 57–58).

Alongside these local realities, broader ecumenical developments reshaped theological understandings of mission and unity. The World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism, for example, reoriented mission towards participation in God's justice in the world, thus linking ecumenical witness to social transformation (Duncan 2024, 1–2). In South Africa, this reinforced the conviction that Christian unity could not be separated from the struggle for justice.

Mhlophe's later reflections on the Baptist Convention of South Africa provide insight into how church leadership navigated these challenges during and after apartheid. Writing on his role as president, he describes a period marked by conflict, transition, and engagement with processes of unity and reconciliation, particularly in relation to the Baptist Union of Southern Africa (Mhlophe 2007a, 34–35). These developments required confronting divisions shaped by race, theology, and institutional history (Mhlophe 2007a, 35–36). Leadership in this context involved more than administration; it required theological discernment and pastoral sensitivity as communities negotiated change. The emphasis on "called to serve" signals a shift towards missional engagement in response to changing social realities (Mhlophe 2007b, 59). Churches were encouraged to move beyond institutional maintenance and engage with communities facing poverty, inequality, and social transformation. At the same time, tensions persisted over leadership formation, organisational identity, and the relationship between unity and autonomy (Mhlophe 2007b, 59–60). These challenges underscored the ongoing need to align inherited structures with emerging missional priorities.

Mhlophe's reflections as general secretary further highlight internal pressures in the Baptist Convention. Concerns about theological education, financial sustainability, and ministerial support persisted, particularly in relation to younger pastors and the development of future leadership (Mhlophe 2007b, 59–60). Issues such as pension provision and resource distribution continued to shape the realities of ministry, even in the post-apartheid period. These concerns highlight the structural vulnerabilities that affected church life beyond political transition.

Within this fragmented landscape, ecumenism took shape as a practice rooted in necessity. Cooperation across denominational boundaries developed through shared funerals, joint prayer meetings, collaborative social ministries, and mutual pastoral support. Such practices were not formalised through institutional agreements; they emerged through relationships formed in contexts of struggle. Unity was forged through shared experience and sustained through trust. The Mhlophes' ministry must be understood within this context of imposed division and lived cooperation. Their work

reflects a form of ecumenism that is grounded in presence, care, and shared responsibility. Rather than emerging from policy or formal structures, unity was portrayed through everyday practices shaped by the demands of pastoral life under conditions of pressure and change.

Conversion, Formation, and Calling Across Traditions

Rev. Fanyana Peter Mhlophe's journey into Christian ministry began in Apostolic faith expressions that shaped his early spirituality and moral communal sensibilities. These traditions emphasised embodied faith, spiritual discipline, and communal belonging, and these elements continued to inform his pastoral practice even as his ecclesial affiliation changed. His transition into Baptist life did not involve a rejection of this background but a reorientation shaped by encounter and conviction. Conversion, in this sense, extended beyond doctrinal adjustment to include an expanded ecclesial perspective. This transition unfolded through Baptist evangelistic engagement, particularly through figures such as Reverend Makaunyane and Reverend Mashiane, whose witness combined theological clarity with pastoral credibility. Through these encounters, Rev. Mhlophe embraced Baptist ecclesiology, including its emphasis on congregational governance, believers' baptism, the priesthood of believers, religious liberty, scriptural authority, and the separation of church and state (Kretzschmar, Msiza, and Nthane 1997, 16–52). The relational character of this process shaped a form of Baptist identity that remained open and hospitable rather than narrowly defined. His formation therefore held together different traditions in creative tension, which enabled a ministry that was both rooted and receptive. Such development reflects a broader understanding of ecumenical formation as emerging through personal encounters, shared narratives, and relationships of trust across traditions.

Rev. Jessie Sibongile Mhlophe's journey unfolded alongside this process, marked by deep faith, resilience, and a growing sense of calling within a context that often limited women's leadership. She grew up in Alexandra,[5] one of South Africa's most diverse urban communities, where people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds lived side by side. Reflecting on her childhood, she recalls playing with children from various communities, including Chinese families living in Alexandra. This early exposure to diversity shaped her appreciation for human relationships across social and cultural boundaries and later informed her ecumenical outlook. The apartheid government's forced removals disrupted this environment when her family was relocated to Diepkloof, Soweto, while she was still a child. These experiences exposed her to both the possibilities of communal coexistence and the realities of racial segregation.

5 Sibongile Jessie Mhlophe, autobiographical narrative submitted to the author, 15 December 2025 (unpublished manuscript)

Her Christian formation was strongly influenced by her mother, whose faith was expressed through hospitality, generosity, and service.[6] Although economic responsibilities often prevented regular church attendance, she encouraged her children to participate actively in church life and frequently welcomed fellow believers into her home. Jessie later reflected that her mother's quiet resilience, particularly in the face of personal hardship, became an enduring model of Christian discipleship. It was within this environment that she developed an understanding of faith as both personal commitment and communal responsibility.

Her relationship with Fanyana Mhlophe emerged during these formative years and eventually developed into a lifelong partnership in ministry. Following Fanyana's conversion and entry into Baptist life, the couple formalised their marriage and became active members of Mabopane Baptist Church. Their shared experiences, including family challenges, pastoral transitions, and theological formation, laid the foundations for a ministry characterised by mutual support and shared vocation.

Sibongile's own sense of calling matured gradually through years of involvement in church ministry, women's fellowships, and congregational leadership. During her years in Mamelodi, she became increasingly active in developing women's ministries, encouraging spiritual growth, mutual support, and leadership among women. Her leadership gifts were recognised through her election as regional president of the Baptist Women's Department for four terms and later as national president for two terms. These roles expanded her influence beyond the local church and enabled her to contribute significantly to the formation and empowerment of Baptist women across South Africa.

A decisive moment in her vocation came when she experienced a call to ministry while reflecting on John 21:15–17. Following an interview process with denominational leaders, she enrolled for theological studies through the University of South Africa (UNISA). Her theological formation later expanded through postgraduate studies in Manchester, where she accompanied her husband after he received a scholarship. Upon arrival, she was also awarded a scholarship and successfully completed her studies, obtaining a master's degree. These experiences strengthened her theological confidence and equipped her for broader leadership roles in church and society.

Together, the Mhlophes embodied an ecumenical posture long before "ecumenism" became a dominant ecclesial term. Their lives reflected a ministry shaped by relationships, hospitality, and openness across traditions. In this respect, their experience resonates with later ecumenical approaches that emphasise learning from others and receiving gifts across ecclesial boundaries (Murray 2014, 1; Ryan 2021, 8–9). This formation provided the theological foundation for the ecumenical practices that later characterised their ministry.

6 Mhlophe, autobiographical narrative, 2025.

Ecumenical Heroism in Pastoral Practice

The ecumenical heroism of Reverends Sibongile Mhlophe and Fanyana Mhlophe is most clearly expressed in their everyday pastoral practice. Unity took shape in relationships, shared responsibilities, and the demands of ministry in divided communities. This practice reflects *koinonia* as a lived, participatory fellowship through which unity was displayed amid suffering and fragmentation.

A central expression of this commitment was their involvement in founding the Ministers Fellowship upon their arrival in Mamelodi. Independent testimonies consistently identified the Mhlophes as bridge-builders within church and community life. Mabatho Mohlamonyane recalled that they played a leading role in establishing the Mamelodi Interdenominational Evangelical Ministers Fellowship (MIEMF), which fostered cooperation among pastors and their spouses across denominational boundaries.[7] She further noted that the fellowship strengthened unity, mentorship, and collaborative ministry among churches. As Ngwedla Paul Msiza observed, Rev. Mhlophe "emerged as one of the principal leaders in this movement, working tirelessly to bridge denominational divides and unite the Christian community in Mamelodi."[8]

This forum brought together ministers from different denominations for prayer, reflection, fellowship, and coordinated ministry. Shared pulpits, joint funerals and weddings, and collective pastoral responses to crises formed part of ordinary ministry rather than exceptional events. These practices developed through relationships shaped by struggle and service rather than through formal agreements. Unity was sustained through trust, familiarity, and a shared sense of responsibility. This pattern reflects the insight that ecumenism is effective when rooted in grassroots participation, with local congregations acting as agents of unity (Gatebuka 2025, 6–7). Ecumenical practice also unfolded in less formal pastoral encounters through shared pastoral care, support during illness and bereavement, and collective responses to community needs. Such practices align with observations that ecumenism at the local level is sustained through relationships of trust and ongoing engagement rather than through institutional coordination (Hove 2025, 2–5).

Social ministry provided another site of ecumenical cooperation. The Mhlophes worked alongside churches and community leaders in initiatives such as soup kitchens, childcare centres, and ministries in hostels and informal settlements. These activities addressed immediate needs created by poverty, unemployment, and political violence. They also required collaboration across denominational and organisational boundaries. Ecumenism here took a concrete form through shared action directed towards the community's well-being. This approach resonates with frameworks of social justice advocacy that emphasise coalition-building, community participation, and sustained

7 Mabatho Elsie Mohlamonyane, written testimony submitted to the author, 10 June 2026.
8 Ngwedla Paul Msiza, written testimony submitted to the author, June 2026.

engagement in contexts of inequality (Klugman 2011, 146–148; Bradley, Werth, and Hastings 2012, 363–364; Jason, Beasley, and Hunter 2015, 263–266).

These practices did not remove underlying tensions. Differences in doctrine, liturgy, and church polity persisted, requiring ongoing negotiation, patience, and compromise. At times, denominational loyalties and resource constraints limited the scope of collaboration. Ecumenical life, therefore, involved ongoing discernment rather than simple harmony. This aligns with broader findings that local ecumenism is shaped by both cooperation and constraint, which require deliberate effort to sustain relationships over time (Gatebuka 2025, 7).

Rev. Sibongile Mhlophe's role further deepened the ecumenical significance of their ministry. Through pastoral care, community ministry, and interdenominational engagement, she expanded the scope of ecumenical practice by embodying partnership, shared responsibility, and inclusive participation. Studies of gender in African church contexts highlight how women often sustain pastoral networks and community life even when excluded from formal leadership structures (Jacobs and Naidoo 2025, 1–2). Several respondents[9] identified mentorship as a defining feature of the Mhlophes' ministry. They described the couple as spiritual parents who intentionally nurtured younger ministers, encouraged theological education, and provided leadership guidance across generations. Msiza reflects that "Their greatest impact is seen in the strong relationships they have cultivated and the many sons and daughters who have followed them into ministry."[10] This influence extended beyond local congregations, shaping future pastors and denominational leaders.

Within this context, mission was approached collaboratively rather than competitively. Mission took shape through engagement with lived realities, in which churches responded collectively to social needs. This orientation aligns with perspectives that locate advocacy and community engagement at the heart of ecclesial practice, which enables churches to address structural injustice and contribute to social transformation (Jason et al. 2015, 264–266). The Mhlophes' ministry, therefore, illustrates how ecumenical heroism emerges through sustained relational practice, where unity is not constructed through institutional design but developed through presence and cooperative witness within contexts of vulnerability. The credibility of the church rested less on doctrinal alignment and more on its capacity to act together in the service of communities that face hardship and change.

9 Written testimonies from Mohanoa Emma Mabidilala, Kgaugelo Taukobong, and Ngwedla Msiza, submitted to the author, June 2026

10 Ngwedla Paul Msiza, written testimony submitted to the author, June 2026.

Prophetic Presence and Costly Unity

Funerals and pastoral ministry in the 1980s must be understood within a broader context of political upheaval and community resistance. As Welsh (2009, 296–297) observes, funerals during this period became highly politicised events that served as moments of mourning, as well as sites of mobilisation where grief, protest, and communal identity converged. Clergy played a critical role in this environment, often described as "turbulent priests," who, alongside their congregations, navigated the tensions of state violence, community expectations, and pastoral responsibility. In such contexts, ministry extended beyond liturgical functions to include comforting the bereaved, mediating conflict, and creating space for collective expression and resistance. Their presence took on a prophetic character, affirming both the dignity of the dead and the humanity of the living within an oppressive political order. It is within this historical and pastoral landscape that Rev. Fanyana Mhlophe's testimony should be situated.

"My 1984–1985 experience during the Mamelodi mass funeral"[11]

> I, Fanyana Peter Mhlophe, had just responded to a call from the Mamelodi Baptist Church to serve as its pastor. South Africa was burning, ignited by the oppressive government at the time, the Nationalist Party. This was in response to a peaceful march by residents who had gone to express their grievances against the high rents demanded by the municipalities.
>
> I was still having a hard time adjusting to the new environment. I received an invitation from Rev. Kobus Mei of the Afrikaans Baptist Church in central Arcadia. The invitation was an urgent call to meet with leaders from various organisations. The purpose was to seek God's intervention, as most people were dying from police brutality in our country. I responded and we gathered at that church for prayer. The host asked us to share items for prayer. One pastor requested that we ask God to protect the soldiers from the Communists, who were trying to force their way into South Africa. It became quiet in the room. I then shared my request. Let us ask God to protect our children and our brothers and sisters from the soldiers' brutality as they return to their beloved country. The room grew silent again. I knelt to pray, hoping that the prayers would continue. I then heard footsteps of other pastors leaving the prayer room. I also grabbed my Bible and left the room. It was then I realised that I had been the only Black pastor in the room. I drove like a maniac, fearing for my life. I later shared my experience with my family. It didn't occur to me that God was at work, preparing me for the baptism of fire. An experience that would lead me to a new consciousness with no turning back. This was going to be a discovery of my true self, theologically.
>
> On November 21, 1985, police killed 13 innocent marchers protesting high rents, service charges, and restrictions on funerals. Among those killed was three-month-old Trocia Ndlovu, and hundreds were injured. Police and the South African Defence Force

11 Rev. Fanyana Peter Mhlophe, personal narrative of his 1985 ministry experience, submitted to the author on 15 December 2025 (unpublished manuscript).

patrolled the townships. That massacre led to the victims being buried in a mass funeral. The mass funeral was organised by the Mamelodi Relief Committee in partnership with the representatives of the United Democratic Front (UDF). The funeral was scheduled for December 3, 1985. It was an emotional and pivotal event that drew over 50,000 mourners to the HM Pitje Stadium. Attendees included members of the SACC, diplomats from the USA [United States of America] and the UK [United Kingdom], and the parents of the detainees. The funeral served as a platform to defy the apartheid government despite bans on political activities. Crowds openly displayed ANC [African National Congress] flags and banners, with a coffin draped in ANC colors.

While the organisers were planning the funeral, some people were sent to invite pastors from different denominations. Two of them came to Mamelodi Baptist Church. They told me they had been informed that I had just become the new leader of the church. They handed me the invitation. I agreed to participate in the mass funeral. After they left, I remembered the verse in Job 1:21. I read that God had given, the Lord had taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Yes, God had given, but police and soldiers had taken, not God. I thought about declining their invitation, but the pamphlet had no contact details to shield myself and others from police brutality. The information they had about me and the safety of my family, and the church building was very important, so I was compelled to accept the invitation.

I then turned to prayer in search of a suitable sermon for the occasion. The Bible felt like a jungle. None of the books in my library could help. My efforts were a futile exercise because I was working against the clock, with the funeral scheduled for the next day. I shared my frustrations with Jessie, my wife. She helped by praying for me. I concluded that my training was not holistic. It lacked a contextual approach. I kept pleading with God to come to my rescue, as in Isaiah 64:1. I begged God to literally rend the heavens, intervene, bring salvation, justice, and make His power visible. Everything seemed fruitless. The next day, nothing had changed. God continued to be silent. (Ps 28:1). ‘To you, Oh Lord; I call, my Rock, do not turn a deaf ear to me. For if you remain silent, I will be like those who have gone down to the pit.’ No response yet.

On the day of the large funeral, Jessie took me to HM Pitje Stadium. Outside and inside the stadium, army vehicles with soldiers were parked, waiting for the commander’s signal for any orders. Since I was dressed in a clerical outfit, one of the organisers recognised me and directed me to sit under the shelter. I kept praying to God for guidance, but God remained silent. The programme moved quickly so the funeral could finish on time. While I waited for my turn, I saw two pastors approaching the stand where other pastors were seated. I then recognised them as members of the Baptist Convention. They were the late Rev. Phineas Mapheto and Rev. Gedeon Makhanya. I gained confidence because we were now three of us from the same denomination.

God responded like a flashlight to my plea. The Spirit whispered (Ecclesiastes 4:1), ‘I saw the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter.’ When the programme director called my name to speak, I knew that God had responded to my plea. The Spirit of God took me to the podium. I presented the Comforter to the mourners. His name was Jesus. He suffered the same injustice from the powerful until He was killed and buried. God raised

> Him from the dead. He is with us now. Take comfort – Jesus is coming back again to take us together with Him to eternal rest. All the departed are resting in Him. I sat down, my body trembling at what could be the response of the powerful. After praying, the procession was led by all the pastors to lay the departed to rest. After the funeral, Jessie took me home to rest. I then realised that my experience was the baptism of fire giving birth to a prophetic ministry, which allows the context to determine the approach to the ministry. The book of Matthew became the textbook as I led the church from the ground up. I began to listen to what the people were struggling with, then I consulted the book as I prayed to God for wisdom, strength, and guidance, and gave counsel to the listeners. To young prophets struggling with prophetic ministry, I commend the discipline of 2 Timothy 2:15 and the assurance of Hebrews 13:8: 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.'

Rev. Fanyana Mhlophe's narrative is a primary theological document that emerged directly from a lived encounter with state violence and pastoral responsibility. What unfolds in this account is not abstract theology applied to crisis, but a theology generated by the crisis itself. The shift, marked by his "baptism of fire," represents a decisive reorientation from inherited theological frameworks towards a contextual, responsive mode of ministry. Theology here develops through lived discernment, situated in the tension among divine hiddenness, human suffering, and pastoral accountability.

Central to this theological repositioning lies the decisive reinterpretation of Job 1:21, expressed in Rev. Fanyana's distinction: "God had given, but police and soldiers had taken, not God." This reframing rejects any theological framework that legitimises injustice or mystifies violence as divine will. It represents a clear rejection of theological fatalism. Instead, the reconceptualisation affirms that God is encountered in the struggle against oppression rather than in its justification. This orientation aligns with liberation theology, in which the divine presence is understood as active in movements seeking justice and restoration, rather than as a passive acceptance of suffering.

The narrative also illuminates the inseparable connection between ecumenical unity and prophetic witness in contexts of crisis. Ministers from diverse traditions gathered, participated, and led collectively at the mass funeral—a moment shaped by collective grief and active resistance. Their shared presence embodied a form of unity grounded in action rather than formal agreement. Ecumenical cooperation in this setting carried significant ethical weight. It expressed solidarity and pastoral responsibility in a politically volatile environment. Such unity involved substantial risk: clergy who chose to stand with affected communities faced surveillance and potential state repression. Their actions could place them in tension with more cautious ecclesiastical positions that prioritised institutional stability. Yet, this risk was embraced as intrinsic to faithful ministry. Unity was therefore not a neutral or symbolic ideal; it took shape through commitment to justice and the defence of human dignity.

The Mhlophes' prophetic witness points towards a form of costly unity in which ecumenism is illustrated through shared presence, moral courage, and sustained

engagement within contexts of suffering. This form of heroism arises through engagement in moments of crisis, where the church stands with marginalised communities and embodies hope, rather than through institutional design or formal agreement. The cost of such unity—the risk, the vulnerability, and the moral complexity—marks it as an authentic witness. Ecumenical heroism from below, therefore, takes concrete form in everyday relational practice and also emerges in moments when ordinary pastors embrace profound risk in the service of justice and community. This form of heroism shows that unity is most credible when expressed through costly commitment rather than comfort.

Gender, Calling, and Ecumenical Resistance

Rev. Sibongile Jessie Mhlophe's vocation took shape in a patriarchal ecclesial environment where women's authority was frequently marginalised, contested, or rendered invisible. Her calling emerged through sustained participation in pastoral life, community care, and shared ministry with her husband. Within restrictive structures, her calling developed through practice and presence rather than formal recognition. This pattern reflects a broader reality: institutional closure often displaces vocations into less visible spaces, where they continue through alternative forms of agency and discernment. Naming this calling publicly required theological conviction and moral courage, particularly in contexts where ministerial leadership was assumed to be male.

Rev. Sibongile Mhlophe's pursuit of theological education at the University of South Africa marked a decisive assertion of agency. Formal theological training became a strategic intervention that provided intellectual resources for fuller participation in preaching, teaching, and pastoral leadership. Within restrictive ecclesiastical environments, advanced education created spaces that would otherwise have remained inaccessible. Her formation demonstrates that theology is lived as well as studied, and that women's participation in formal theological reflection constitutes a form of theological agency. Through this process, Rev. Sibongile Mhlophe claimed pastoral authority with intellectual clarity and theological conviction.

Her reflections on the role of the pastor's wife illuminate the structural ambiguities surrounding women's contributions to church life (Mhlophe 1997, 178–179). She identified the absence of clear recognition and institutional support for women's pastoral participation, a gap that generates tension in congregations and pastoral partnerships (Mhlophe 1997, 179–180). Her analysis called for explicit recognition of women's roles, mutual respect, and shared responsibility in ministry (Mhlophe 1997, 180–181). This critique reframes gender exclusion as a structural problem that requires theological and institutional response. Her witness expanded ecumenical reflection by insisting that internal justice is integral to credible external witness.

The joint theological work of Reverends Fanyana and Sibongile Mhlophe, particularly their contribution, "Can a Woman Lead?", confronts assumptions that leadership is inherently male (Mhlophe and Mhlophe 2000, 104–108). Drawing on scriptural

interpretation grounded in lived experience, they showed that women have long exercised leadership in churches, even when formal structures withheld recognition (Mhlophe and Mhlophe 2000, 118–120). Their engagement with Genesis 1:26 positions the *imago Dei* as the theological basis for shared vocation and mutual participation in leadership (Mhlophe and Mhlophe 2000, 118–120). This move reframes the debate by grounding leadership in theological anthropology. Where all bear the image of God, shared vocation follows as a theological necessity rather than an optional concession.

Research in African church contexts confirms a recurring pattern: women sustain pastoral networks, community care, and spiritual formation while remaining excluded from formal office (Mhlophe and Mhlophe 2000, 118–120; Jacobs and Naidoo 2025, 1–2). Cultural assumptions and inherited theological paradigms continue to reinforce male-dominated leadership structures. Rev. Sibongile Mhlophe's ministry both reflects and challenges this tension. Her practice constitutes a form of resistance expressed through faithful presence, relational leadership, and visible impact. Her witness shows that agency develops through sustained participation and credibility in practice, even where formal recognition remains absent. Over time, such contributions accumulate and exert increasing pressure on exclusionary structures.

Sibongile Mhlophe as a Pioneer of Women's Leadership

Rev. Sibongile Mhlophe's contribution extended far beyond her role as a pastor's wife or ministry partner. Over several decades, she emerged as a significant advocate for women's leadership within the Baptist Convention of South Africa and the wider church. Her ministry consistently challenged assumptions that confined women to supportive or secondary roles while encouraging women to participate fully in the life and mission of the church.

One of her most significant contributions was her leadership within the Baptist Women's Department (BWD). She served four terms as regional president and two terms at the national level, providing leadership, mentorship, and theological formation for women across the denomination. Through conferences, rallies, and training initiatives, she encouraged women to recognise their gifts and participate actively in ministry and decision-making processes, an influence that continues within Baptist women's ministries today. Her commitment to women's empowerment was expressed not only through preaching and teaching but also through practical initiatives aimed at increasing women's confidence and participation in public life. During her years in Mamelodi, she encouraged women to acquire driving licences so that they could participate more fully in church activities without depending on male family members for transport. She also promoted women's fellowship groups, leadership development initiatives, and community outreach programmes that strengthened relationships among women while fostering spiritual growth and mutual support.

Her influence extended beyond Baptist structures. Testimonies[12] from colleagues describe her as a strong advocate for women's participation in leadership and decision-making. She encouraged professional women to use their skills in service of the church and actively supported younger women in developing confidence, independence, and leadership capacity. Her ministry challenged prevailing assumptions about gender roles and created opportunities for women to contribute more fully to church and community life. This commitment also found expression through international partnerships. Through collaboration with Baptist partners in Germany, she helped facilitate leadership development opportunities for women and organised a study visit to Germany in 2004 for a group of women leaders. The programme provided exposure, training, and leadership formation while strengthening international ecumenical relationships. Participants later described the initiative as transformative for their ministry and leadership development.

Perhaps the most visible expression of her leadership was her pastoral ministry at Ekangala Baptist Church between 2013 and 2021. Serving as senior pastor while her husband led Meadowlands Baptist Church, she demonstrated that women could exercise effective pastoral leadership within Baptist congregational life. Her ministry challenged cultural and ecclesial assumptions regarding women's leadership through preaching, pastoral care, community engagement, and congregational oversight.

Several respondents also highlighted her role as a mentor to women ministers.[13] She encouraged women pastors to preach, teach, study theology, and embrace leadership opportunities with confidence. Through her example and personal encouragement, many women entered ministry and developed leadership capacities that might otherwise have remained unrealised.

Rev. Sibongile Mhlophe's witness proves that ecumenical heroism from below was not only expressed through interdenominational cooperation but also through the struggle for greater inclusion within the church itself. Her ministry embodied a vision of unity that included empowering women, affirming diverse gifts, and creating opportunities for broader participation in the life of the church. In this sense, her contribution represents an important and often overlooked dimension of grassroots ecumenism in South African church history.

In the South African context, Brigalia Bam's account shows how women confronted sexism directly within church structures. She recalls her emergence as a Christian woman who spoke against exclusion in ecumenical spaces while holding together faith, activism, and feminist conviction. (Bam and Sisulu 1995, 21–22). In another context, the case of Teresa Urrea illustrates how women's paths to sanctity are shaped by contestation, recovery, and the politics of memory, as efforts to recognise her holiness

12 Sophia Makweya and Mohanoa Mabidilala, written testimony submitted to the author, 13 June 2026.
13 Sophia Makweya and Mohanoa Mabidilala, written testimony submitted to the author, 13 June 2026

exposed the complexities of reconstructing female sanctity from fragmentary historical traces (Hopgood 2005, xiv–xv). These examples reinforce the argument that ecclesial recognition often lags behind lived vocation, particularly in relation to women.

The partnership between Reverends Sibongile and Fanyana Mhlophe offers a concrete model of shared ministry that departs from hierarchical clerical patterns. Their vocation was grounded in collaboration, with authority exercised through mutual discernment, relational accountability, and recognition of complementary gifts. This model challenges dominant forms of pastoral leadership and demonstrates the viability of alternative patterns grounded in shared responsibility. Their ministry embodies a vision of leadership shaped by trust and partnership. Jessie's contribution is integral to this shared vocation, and it formed part of the theological and practical foundation of their ministry. Their partnership demonstrates how authority may be exercised through mutuality rather than hierarchy.

Discussion: Ecumenical Heroism from Below

The lives and ministries of the Mhlophe couple invite critical analysis of the relationship between institutional and grassroots expressions of ecumenism. Bodies such as the SACC and other ecumenical councils have articulated prophetic witness, coordinated responses, and engaged with the state during national crises (Pillay 2017; Kgatle 2018; Womack and Pillay 2019). Yet, such engagement typically operates at a distance from everyday pastoral life, relying on formal representation, policy processes, and established leadership structures. The Mhlophes' ecumenical practice developed through a different route: relationships, shared vulnerability, and local trust in specific ministerial contexts. This distinction reflects a growing recognition that lived expressions of unity at the community level frequently generate significant transformative potential (Hove 2025, 6–7; Gatebuka 2025, 6–7).

The uniqueness of the Mhlophes' contribution becomes clearer when compared with nationally recognised ecumenical figures such as Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, and other prominent church leaders of the apartheid era. While these leaders exercised significant influence through public advocacy, national church structures, ecumenical councils, and engagement with the state, the Mhlophes practised ecumenism primarily at the grassroots level. Their ministry was rooted in local congregations, neighbourhood networks, ministerial fellowships, women's organisations, and pastoral relationships. Through ministerial fellowships, mentorship, community outreach, and collaborative pastoral care, they cultivated forms of Christian unity sustained by everyday relationships rather than by institutional platforms. Their witness demonstrates how ecumenism was lived and embodied in ordinary pastoral practice and reveals a dimension of South African church history that has often remained overshadowed by national ecclesiastical narratives.

This contrast connects to wider theological developments in ecumenism. O'Gara (2014) characterises the contemporary ecumenical moment as one from which there is "no

turning back," thus emphasising that the pursuit of unity remains intrinsic to the church's identity and mission. The practices embodied by the Mhlophes therefore belong within the ecumenical movement, not outside it. They constitute forms of reception and enactment occurring at the local level, where unity is sustained through ongoing relational engagement.

Grassroots ecumenism, as demonstrated in the Mhlophes' ministry, yields significant insights for contemporary church practice. Unity grows through shared life and sustained care; it takes shape in concrete situations where cooperation becomes necessary. In communities shaped by poverty, violence, and exclusion, ecumenical credibility rests on how effectively the church responds to lived realities. Harmon (2010) argues that ecumenism cannot be confined to institutional leadership; it requires the participation of ordinary believers whose daily practices sustain the church's unity. This characterisation resonates closely with the Mhlophes' ministry, where unity emerged through relational engagement rather than formal agreement. Social movement scholarship supports this observation: at the grassroots level, forms of struggle are frequently more radical and more ecumenical than those within hierarchical structures (Werbner 2018).

Simultaneously, critical caution is necessary to avoid romanticising grassroots ecumenism. Conradie (2013) notes that ecumenical movements become domesticated when controlled by technocratic processes, which generate gaps between official declarations and lived practice. He identifies particular difficulty in translating ecumenical texts into shared life when institutional structures remain disconnected from local realities (Conradie 2013, 13–16). These limitations highlight the constraints that face ecumenism when detached from everyday contexts while affirming the continued necessity of institutional frameworks for broader coordination and witness.

A more integrated perspective emerges in Koopman's (2013) work, which describes the church's unity through the concept of "embracing catholicity." This vision calls for lives marked by trust, faithfulness, and responsibility in shared communion. Koopman (2013, 96) argues that both institutional structures and grassroots practices prove necessary for the realisation of unity. Unity remains inseparable from holiness, which is understood as a commitment to justice, dignity, and reconciliation in the world (Koopman 2013, 98). This framework enables the simultaneous affirmation of formal ecumenical dimensions and lived, relational dimensions without collapsing one into the other.

Within this interpretive horizon, ecumenical heroism from below functions as a constructive theological framework. It directs attention to forms of unity presented through practice, relationship, and shared responsibility within contexts of struggle. Their example recasts leadership away from institutional authority towards presence, moral courage, and relational accountability. Ecumenical heroism from below transcends mere description. It provides a lens for interpreting Christian unity that maintains fidelity to both theological vision and lived practice. By holding together

institutional insight and grassroots experience, this framework reimagines ecumenism as a relational and justice-oriented practice grounded in the everyday life of the church.

Conclusion: Remembering Ordinary Saints

The ministries of Sibongile Jessie Mhlophe and Fanyana Peter Mhlophe require a rethinking of how agency is identified in church history. Prevailing historiographical approaches privilege institutions, councils, and prominent leaders as the primary drivers of ecclesial transformation. While such perspectives remain necessary, they provide only partial accounts of how Christian unity is formed and sustained. Attention paid to pastoral lives situated within local contexts reveals a different register of ecclesial practice, one where unity is enacted through relationships, shared responsibility, and sustained presence under conditions of marginalisation and pressure. Recovering such figures addresses a significant historiographical imbalance and extends church-historical inquiry into underexplored domains.

The Mhlophes' ministry reveals a form of ecumenical life grounded in shared practice, cooperation, and moral courage. The framework of ecumenical heroism from below demonstrates that institutional and grassroots expressions of unity are not competing realities but complementary dimensions of Christian witness.

The recovery of Sibongile Mhlophe's ministry extends ecumenical reflection by establishing gender as a constitutive dimension of unity rather than a peripheral concern. Her witness demonstrates that justice in ecclesial life cannot be separated from broader commitments to Christian unity. Ecumenical practice that fails to address internal inequalities fundamentally compromises its theological claims and moral credibility. The inclusion of women's experiences, voices, and leadership, therefore, remains integral to any account of unity that seeks to be both faithful and credible in contemporary contexts. The testimonies of colleagues, congregants, and ministry associates further demonstrate that the Mhlophes' legacy extends beyond institutional positions and remains visible in the churches, ministers, and community leaders whom they mentored and inspired across generations.

The recovery of these ordinary saints contributes to a broader reconfiguration of church history and ecumenical thought. It affirms that unity is lived and embodied through faithful practice, giving concrete expression to theological convictions and institutional commitments. Such understanding calls for sustained attention to the forms of life through which the church participates in God's reconciling work in the world. At the local level, in pastoral relationships marked by vulnerability and moral conviction, ecumenical faithfulness takes tangible shape: accessible and transformative, even though costly.

The argument advanced here carries implications beyond this case study. The future of ecumenism depends not only on institutional dialogue and doctrinal convergence but also on the capacity of local communities to sustain relationships of cooperation and

shared mission. In contexts marked by inequality, fragmentation, and social change, unity is most readily recognised where churches act together in response to concrete needs. The framework of ecumenical heroism from below therefore provides a resource for rethinking leadership and ecclesial identity in contemporary theology and practice and points towards forms of Christian unity that are grounded in presence, justice, and the everyday faithfulness of ordinary believers.

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