

**“The Lives and Times of Rev. Dr. Stanley Mmutlanyane Mogoba”**

**A Celebratory Public Lecture by  
Deputy Chief Justice Dikgang Moseneke  
Black Methodist Consultation 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary [1975 – 2015]  
Annual Convocation on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> July 2015  
University of Johannesburg**

*Salutations*

It is indeed an intriguing privilege to be here. I am here at the behest of the Black Methodist Consultation (BMC) – a formation within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. As early as January 2015, the BMC sent a search party, led by Rev M Molo, to find me and summon me to this annual convocation of BMC, a part of my spiritual home, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. The search party was aided and abetted by many who in the past ministered to me and my family. They include Rev Sidwell Mokgothu, Rev Sethunya Mothlodi, Rev Mbuyiselo Stemela, Rev Mogomotsi Diutlwileng, Rev Vukile Mehana and Rev Vusi Vilakati.

Before I get carried away let me observe a modicum of protocol. May I respectfully greet the Presiding Bishop of our Church, Rev Ziphosihle Siwa, our Executive Secretary, Rev Charmaine Morgan; – Bishop of the Central District Rev Peter Witbooi, other Bishops here present, Chair and Secretariat of BMC, all leaders and members of our church in all its clergy and lay formations- kea le dumedisa!!!.

My presence here is especially privileged because I have been given the space and opportunity to pay a public celebratory tribute to Rev Dr Stanley

Mmutlanyane Mogoba. I hope to show in my tribute that a few, indeed a few, are better suited than me to recite a public eulogy in honour of Dr Mogoba. I am his rightful praise singer. This I do also thrilled by the 40th anniversary of the BMC and the context-sensitive theme of this Convocation; *“Let Thy kingdom Come : Afrika’s Urgent Call”*

### *The umbilical cord*

You may know Rev Mogoba, rightly so, as a visionary leader in the Methodist Church and in the affairs our land. But allow me to tell you who he is to me. In my early teens, in the 1960’s I went to Kilnerton High School, that great Methodist educational institution. I had to study there because it had become a family tradition. My grandfather, later, Rev Samuel Dikgang Moseneke attended Kilnerton just before the beginning of the 1900’s. He was called to ministry there. 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 had become a teacher at his *alma mater* where his family members had also studied. He taught me liberation history alongside the prescribed syllabus history – something which was to get him into deep trouble with the security police of the time.

More significantly, Uncle Stan was my confirmation class teacher. . He taught me the Apostles Creed. *Re dumela go Modimo Rara Mothatiotlhe. Mmopi was legodimo le lefatshe.* Under him and Rev Dugmore I learned to sing the *Te Deum*, *Siyakudumisa Thixo*, *Siyakuvuma nguba ungu Yehova*. He arranged for my confirmation, with other youths, by Rev Dugmore in the Kilnerton chapel on the koppie. Only last year Uncle Stan and I, together with other Methodist Kilnertonians assembled at the chapel to remember our formation years. We are grateful to Bishop of Limpopo District, Rev Thamba Mntambo, for arranging that little pilgrimage.

On the same year and month, Uncle Stan and I were arrested. We were later charged and convicted to prison terms on Robben Island. He had 3 years imprisonment and I, his son, had a little heavier burden of ten years imprisonment. Besides my father, Uncle Stan taught me both at Kilnerton and on Robben Island all I knew about the character of our oppression. He tutored me that there was only one race, the human race. He stressed me that inequality and discrimination were inhuman. We all have an inherent God-given dignity and equal worth. We had a right and duty to rule ourselves; to self determination. We deserved peace and freedom in our lifetimes. We had to be kind to others especially the weak and vulnerable. We deserved good rulers. Apartheid rulers were not. Leaders in the public space, like us, had to live a life of goodness and public honesty. They had to be servant leaders. Their task was to serve the people and not themselves. Uncle Stan taught and displayed a remarkable concern for the fate of the African continent and its people. He often repeated what Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe taught that we are a vanquished and dispossessed people. We were a landless people. 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 a continental and not merely domestic in scope. Africa was for Africans in their full non-racial amalgam. Being African had little to do with one's skin colour but rather ones loyalty and consciousness. Africans were for humanity and humanity was for God. In short, Dr Mogoba pleaded that the Lord's kingdom to come to Afrika.

On Robben Island he continued his role as father and mentor to me and other young freedom fighters. He urged me to study. I did. He taught me English. He taught me Latin which he had passed at university level. I needed Latin for the LLB degree so that I could be a practising lawyer. He confessed to me that he had wanted to be a lawyer, rather than a teacher, one day. As he said that he spurred me on. I knew that I would have to study hard to become what Uncle

Stan wanted to be. On Robben Island, he advanced rapport between the major liberation movements- the PAC and ANC reminding them of their common history and the similarity of their principal goals.

I had the rare privilege of being in the vicinity of Robben Island when Uncle Stan received his full conversion and calling to ministry. This was not a surprise. He understood the inextricable intersection between spirituality and justice; between spirituality and our Blackness and between Blackness and justice. Our God is a just God. God cannot be love, as every Methodist pulpit proclaims, and be unfair, unjust, uncaring, discriminatory and deceitful. Uncle Stan understood that social justice sits at the heart of contextual theology.

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

### *The Bishop's background*

Yes, we are gathered today to celebrate 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. But who is he? Where are his roots? He is a son of the soil of Limpopo and his foundational homestead is in Sekhukhune. Rev Mogoba was born in 1933. He is now a young man of only 82 years of age. He began primary schooling at an early age, and soon proved to be an exceptionally gifted child, completing standard six by the age of 12. He then went on to attend high school in Kilnerton in the 1940s. Like countless other young men of his generation, including my father, Rev Mogoba experienced a personal and political awakening during his high school years.

Rather than confining himself to any one particular area, he flourished in a wide array of extracurricular activities, including debating, drama and sports. He also joined the ANC Youth League. And yet, even so church attendance was an important part of his life, as it had been throughout his upbringing. Mme Reneilwe, his mother, was a leader of the Women's Manyano, the Methodist Women's Prayer and Service Union. His father, Ntate Reuben Tshomoko Sethulane, was a Methodist lay preacher. His parents set an example of devoted service to the church, and their son followed diligently in their footsteps.

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

Teaching provided Rev Mogoba with an opportunity to fuse two passions: politics and service. He challenged his students to understand political developments in South Africa, and encouraged them to recognise that systematic racial oppression was not inevitable. It was a political choice, and different political choices were possible and morally inevitable in South Africa.

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

### *The arrest and calling to ministry*

In early 1963, Bishop Mogoba was arrested and sentenced to three years of imprisonment for anti-apartheid activism. I saw him soak up inhumane treatment on 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 was meagre and just about enough to keep the body and soul together. As though all this was not enough Stanley Mogoba was sentenced 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. The officials claimed 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 imitating the only prisoner to escape, Nxele, the Left Handed.

I must perhaps pause and recall Albert Einstein: “[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 received his call 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 to each human being fashioned in the image of God, and 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 this truth. This attitude strikes at the heart of what Black theology stands for.

Bishop Mogoba completed his theological studies while in prison. Upon release in 1966, he was restricted to Sekhukhune and banned from working as a teacher, attending church services or participating in meetings. 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 as a probationary minister in 1969. The security police forced him to leave his post, but he was determined to pursue his calling and enrolled in the Federal Theological Seminary at Fort Hare in 1970. He was finally ordained after completing his studies at Fort Hare, and was awarded a scholarship to study African Christianity at Bristol University.

### ***Black Theology***

Black theology is a variant of liberation or contextual theology. It has been defined as “a direct . . . response to a situation where Blacks have experienced alienation at political, economic and cultural levels”.<sup>1</sup> This theology first reared its head in South Africa in the 1960s, and was, in part, inspired by the civil rights movement of the United States of America (including the voices of Martin Luther King and James Cone) and liberation theologies of Latin America.<sup>2</sup> During the Apartheid years, Black theology was a Christian fortress

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<sup>1</sup> Vicentio and de Cruchy (1985:126) as in Molobi's *The past and future of Black Theology in South Africa: in discussion with Maimela*.

<sup>2</sup> Tshaka and Makofane “The continued relevance of Black Liberation Theology for Democratic South Africa Today (2010) *Scriptura* 532 at 533-4.

in which Black people could firmly plant their feet. It was an easily accessible tool to reclaim our cultural origins and our humanity. We used it for the purpose of liberating ourselves from oppression and then for building a new society that was in line with the tenets of the Bible.

One reason Black theology resonated so strongly in 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.”<sup>3</sup> Not only did Black theologians grasp the basic truth that “no reconciliation [was] possible in South Africa without justice”,<sup>4</sup> they encouraged us to actively seek justice – to “stand up for [our] rights and wage a struggle against [our] oppressors”.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Black church during Apartheid*

Black theology was most impactful for a decade: 1976 to 1986. At this time, 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”.<sup>6</sup> In this way, the Black church was bestowed with the duty to provide direction to its congregants, and to act as the loudspeaker through which its people could call out injustices of the Apartheid government and promote social and political change. As a group of anonymous theologians in Soweto pointed out in 1985, the reason Black youth were in revolt was because they believed social and political change was imminent; they were “acting courageously and fearlessly

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard ed “The Kairos Documents” (2010), available at [http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/The\\_Kairos\\_Documents.sflb.ashx](http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/The_Kairos_Documents.sflb.ashx).

<sup>4</sup> Id at 16.

<sup>5</sup> Id at 18

<sup>6</sup> Above n 1.

because they [had] a sure hope that liberation [would] come”.<sup>7</sup> In the context of Black theology, Black communities’ hope for liberation signalled “the coming of God’s kingdom”.<sup>8</sup> 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 the good fight through the ugly years of exclusion and repression. Church buildings converted into fortresses as they hosted protest gatherings and political funerals. It is in this context that we should understand the genesis and path of the Black Methodists Consultation. Black and other progressive theologians took their biblical posts on the side of the marginalised and vulnerable. They highlighted the hypocrisy of those who professed the Christian faith while supporting the Apartheid regime.<sup>9</sup> They garnered hard resources and supported non-violent uprisings and community or grass root programmes. In short pastors embraced the lot of their flock.

But has the Church found a niche in the “new” South Africa? Some might say that with the advent of a participatory democracy the Black church has discharged its historic duty. Has its role been wholly supplanted by the democratic government? Are there residual or perhaps substantive social posers 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. Given its emergence at the height of the liberation struggle, some Christians may have interpreted Black theology only within the context of the anti-

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<sup>7</sup> Above n 3 at 28.

<sup>8</sup> Id.

<sup>9</sup> Above n 2 at 536.

apartheid movement.<sup>10</sup> When that movement concluded with the fall of apartheid, some Christians adopted a passive attitude toward the social and economic transformation that remained to be done in South Africa.<sup>11</sup>

Answers to these difficult questions I don't know. I must remind myself that I am no more than 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 on our incomplete transformation, and rededicate itself to uplifting those South Africans who remain marginalised to this day. The Church must sense the threats to our hard worn gains towards a just society. It must weigh in on the side of social and public righteousness.

I think that the Church has a pivotal present-day role that it should assume. This is because its calling was not confined to fighting racial discrimination. The Church is called upon to do something more than this. 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. It is true that many of our people are still oppressed. In much the same way 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.

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<sup>10</sup> Vellem "A critical black analysis of the church's role in the post-apartheid struggle for socio-economic justice" (2013) *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 1 at 6.

<sup>11</sup> Id.

Although the drawbacks of our country today are not the same as they were then, Black theology 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”.<sup>12</sup> The contentious issues of transformation, restitution and reparation and of land and gender justice fall under this umbrella. There are constant challenges of migration and refugees and the pitfall of xenophobia. There are new forms of slavery related to human trafficking, drugs and prostitution. Threats to the environment are real and promise human extinction over time. Global and domestic inequality is increasing as superior technology is harnessed to create even more wealth for those who are wealthy. The Church cannot simply sit on its hands. True, tangible liberation is yet to be achieved. Black theology could be an effective aid in curbing the prevalence of these social and economic ills.

As I conclude, I think the Church has a vital role on two additional fronts. The first is re-installing 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 mean and cannot be 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 will plant our vegetable gardens, we will buy and plant trees rather than beer. We will replace broken window panes at schools where our children attend. We will not litter. We will use natural resources sparingly and with respect. We would assume much of the duty to alter our lives and those of our neighbours.

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<sup>12</sup> Above n 2 at 533.

The second possible role relates to moral regeneration. Few vehicles are better positioned than places of worship to alter our collective moral compass. The Church can best tutor us on ethical leadership; on servant leadership; on good governance; on accountability.

### ***Conclusion***

I trust that the Church will rediscover the heritage that liberation theology offers, 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 “goodness of creation”.<sup>13</sup> 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 is an epitome of steadfast belief in God, and the power of God to overcome all difficulties. Faithful steward, thoughtful scholar, and committed leader, humble servant: Rev Dr Mogoba is all of these things. I am privileged to sing the praises of his remarkable achievements and contribution. Those of us who have crossed his illustrious path have not been left the same. We are the better for it. . . .

God Bless you and thank you for listening.

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<sup>13</sup> Chimhanda “Black Theology of South Africa and the Liberation Paradigm” (2010) *Scriptura* 434 at 440.