

The centenary of Amadodana¹ in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa: development and influence of this movement

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Abstract

The establishment of the mining industry in South Africa gave birth to a new movement in the Methodist Church, a movement that was mainly made up of men. This movement emerged as a result of men in the mining compounds who found themselves with nothing to do during the weekends. Some felt the need to be creative and to ensure that their spiritual needs were met. They thought of a solution: a new way of worshipping and praising God in a unique form. A group of young men came together and discussed how they could go about mobilising men in the mines to be part of this initiative.

This article investigates the history of Amadodana in the Methodist Church: their struggle to be recognised and accepted, the first meetings which led to the establishment of the regular conventions, and further developments which kept the movement growing far beyond initial expectations. The adoption of their uniform was a significant event for the Band (later the Young Men's Guild, also abbreviated as YMG), known popularly as 'Amadodana', as was the development of the constitution. At the end of this article, I come to certain conclusions based on my discussion in the main body of the article.

Introduction

My intention of this article is to investigate the history of Amadodana in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and how they came to transform its rigid form of worship into an African form of worship. Amadodana, as the movement is known in this Church, was founded in different areas of South Africa. However, the two most well known and recorded histories seem to be in the mining compounds of Kimberley in the Northern Cape and Benoni, near Springs (Young Men's Guild: Minutes of the meeting: 1912 Benoni). The difference between two cities being their locations as well as the way the early Methodism in the late 18th century and early 19th century respectively was presented in South Africa. The Northern part (the Transvaal) was known as the Methodist Church while, in the South (the Free State and the Eastern Cape), it was known as the Wesley Church. At that time the Methodist Church in the Transvaal was still under the conference of the Methodist Church in England, while the Wesleyan Church in the Districts of the Free State and the Cape Colony was independent, and held its conferences in South Africa (Madise and Taunyane: 2012). The focus of this article will fall on a single area: Benoni (previously known as the East Rand and today known as Ekurhuleni in the province of Gauteng). Further discussions will include a description of the struggles encountered by these men and how they overcame them. A conclusion will be drawn from the discussion.

The history

The structure of the Methodist Church's geography from its beginning has always been discussed as if this structure was purely part of a secular environment. In other words, the language used in this denomination has invariably been secular and not sacred. In short, what other Christian denominations may know as dioceses and congregations, for example, are in the context of the Methodist Church termed "Districts", "Societies" and "Connexions". The men's organisation which, today, is known as Amadodana was founded in different Districts. However, there is little evidence, in many of these Districts, of how this movement started; the only Districts which do possess some evidence about the origins of the movement are the District previously called the Transvaal District (which was made up of the western Transvaal and northern Transvaal) (the Transvaal District is currently known as the Central District.), and Swaziland (today known as the Highveld District). Before this movement was formed, there was no idea in anybody's mind of establishing something exclusively for men. In fact, the idea emerged because the founders of Amadodana were so impressed by their mothers' establishment of the Women's Manyano (in 1905) in the Methodist Church, the aim of which was to fellowship

¹ This is an IsiXhosa and IsiZulu word meaning young men. In the Methodist Church there is a men's organisation or order by this name, which in English would be the Young Men's Guild.

together (Madise 2000:25). At the same time, the word “Manyano” also became significant to these men as it had with the women; according to Preston’s translation, this word means “purity” (Preston, quoted in Madise 2008:121). Seven years (1912) later, a group consisting of a few young men (there is no evidence of any influential individual behind the mobilisation of these men in the mines) in the East Rand in Benoni strongly felt that they wanted to serve their Lord and Master in a more active way (Madise 2000:25).

According to the Districts’ records, the year this group was founded differs, but is recorded in the Transvaal and Swaziland District records as being 1912 (Young Men’s Guild: Minutes of the meeting. 1912 Benoni). These young men were encouraged by their mothers to “carry the torch”, group themselves together, and establish what at the time was called the “Band”. These young men managed to gather all others like them – that is, from among those who worked in the mines and lived in the mine compounds – to worship and start this movement. These young men agreed on a number of issues, which they recorded as follows:

Set aside one day in the week as our own, for prayers and devotions (Saturday was chosen as the most suitable day.)

Endeavour, the Lord being our Helper, to lead such lives and conduct ourselves in such a manner as will make other young men feel constrained to emulate our example.

Strive to win souls for Christ as our mothers do.

In our worship do all there is in our power to extend His Kingdom by preaching salvation by faith through Christ to all (Young Men’s Guild: Minutes of the meeting in Benoni 1912).

This was the inaugural meeting, which was well attended by many young men on the Reef². The purpose of the newly formed Band was to embark on an evangelistic mission amongst men in the East Rand. At that meeting was a vibrant young man named John B Mabona, who was a court interpreter at the Local Native Commissioner’s Office. He possessed sound leadership qualities which, over the years, enabled him to play a pivotal role in the formation of the Band in the District. The Band soon spread to the nearby areas of Boksburg, Germiston and Springs. However, it was in Boksburg that two brothers, Shadrack and Joseph Januarie, were sufficiently inspired to not only join the Band, but to go on and start their own in Boksburg with worship and prayers (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa: The History of the Young Mens Guild (YMG) in the Central District (undated). In Springs, the movement was started and led by the Mdebuka brothers who, between them, brought together many of the young men to the services (Young Men’s Guild: Minutes of the meeting in Benoni, 1912). The whole of the Rand area was soon organised and all Saturdays were set aside for Bible study, revivals and prayer meetings. As a result, the Band became a fully fledged organisation in the Methodist Church and therefore needed office-bearers. The appointed office-bearers were accredited lay preachers, while John Mabona became a probationary lay preacher who was elected chairman. Although there was resentment at his appointment (Young Men’s Guild: Minutes of the meeting in Benoni: 1912), each time there were elections, he was chosen.

It is imperative to take into consideration the social, economic and political landscape of South Africa at the time. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the beginnings of political activities which, later in South Africa, were to give rise to political and religious consciousness. For many Black people in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, it was not an accident that distinctly political overtones became “part and parcel” of Black Methodist evangelicalism. The reading of the Bible and the power of persuasion and the political situation in South Africa produced preachers who were not only evangelically inspired, but also politically oriented (Madise 2000:10). However, there is no evidence indicating that the founding of Amadodana or the Young Mens Guild had as one of its ambitions the purpose of liberating the mine workers; it simply set out to preach the gospel and convert them.

The struggle

Like many other newly formed organisations at the time (e.g. the women’s Manyano), the Band experienced resistance from certain people including, in this case, the Methodist Church’s ordained ministers. Every Saturday of each weekend the Band would hold evangelistic services and enter the mine compounds as well as the nearby farms and townships, with the mission of converting people. The ordained ministers were critical of what they called “a sect that does not sleep but holds revival services all Saturday evening”. Older church members also aligned themselves with this critique; they did not take readily and joyfully to this new Band of ‘unknown young’ (Young Men’s Guild: Minutes of the meeting in Benoni 1912).

When these young men decided on a uniform, there was opposition: a report was compiled by the Band’s critics and this report was sent to the Rev William M. Meara who was Superintendent of the mission (Meara had already been asked to put a stop to the young men’s activities). As it was, the young African men who had

² This refers to what in the past was known as the mines which were located in the East Rand known today as Ekurhuleni.

designed the Band's uniform were called to appear before Meara but, to the surprise of those opposed the Band, he received them well. Commenting on their bearing and dignity, he told them to remember their aim which, in this case, was the mission to evangelise and convert other young men like themselves. He further ordered that they be provided with food and sleeping accommodation (Young Men's Guild: Minutes of the meeting in Benoni 1912). In short, the Band was not given the order to break up, as some people had thought would be the case. Instead, Rev Meara asked the young men to sing the song they were singing while they were waiting for the outcome of the meeting (the outcome which would decide the fate of their movement). After the song, Rev Meara addressed the young men in Zulu thus: *Hambani bakhonzi kodwa ze nikhumbule ukuba owethu umqamlezo use ntliziyweni. Hambani niye ku Shumayela ivangeli*³ (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa: The History of the Young Mens Guild (YMG) in the Central District.). The following day the Band entered the nearby mining compounds and townships. Within two years, the mission had spread as far as Pretoria and the outlying circuits. Reports of revivals were recorded in many circuits and ministers became convinced of the value of the Band's work and were impressed by its results.

In 1915, during the First World War, a large number of young men lived in the army camps established near Johannesburg. Members of the Band would, from time to time, come from different places to gather with these young black men together for the purpose of holding a prayer meeting with them. These occasional meetings at the army base or camp were later turned into what came to be the first annual conventions. The Band finally became officially accepted as a legitimate organisation within the Methodist Church (YMG & UCAMG 2002:7). From the history of this movement, it seems that the first President or Presidents were the Superintendents of the circuit before there was a comprehensive Connexional Executive. This could be due to the fact that the District and Connexional conventions were established much later.

The first meeting

Sometime after 1915, the Band gradually became accepted by many people in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. And, in 1932, for the first time, both (black) clergy and laity met officially under one roof and under the adopted name "Amadodana" or "Batlhankana". It is the former name that came to be popularly adopted in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. The first meeting, held in Albert Street, was chaired by the Rev John Mabona who, by then, was an ordained minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Mabona chaired this first meeting under the guidance of Rev William Meara who, as we saw above, had endorsed the existence of Amadodana in the face of its critics. Some of the resolutions taken at this first meeting were:

³ Direct translation: Go and evangelize but do not forget that you carry the cross in your hearts. This was a command concerning the mission given to the Band to go and preach the gospel and to remember that their crosses are in their hearts.

- That a District Committee be formed
- That the first official meeting be held in Johannesburg in 1933.
- That the President of the Annual meeting shall be the resident minister of the entertaining circuit.
- The President shall be eligible for re-election (Young Men's Guild minutes of a meeting held in Benoni 1912).

Before 1932, it is not clear how the first committee of the Amadodana came into existence and, furthermore, there is no indication of any controversy around the leadership of Amadodana (as was the case with the women's Manyano [Madise 2000:21]). At the same time there is no evidence of how the ministers came to be members of the Band because, logically, lay people could claim the leadership on the basis that they had founded Amadodana (as was the case of the women's Manyano in other quarters of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa).

In 1933, the first official annual meeting of Amadodana was held in Johannesburg in Albert Street. Again, the chairman of the meeting was the Rev John Mabona. This meeting was followed by the first annual convention, which took place in Springs during 1934 and which was led by the Rev Dumisa Hlabangane, the President. All the annual conventions up to 1941 were held on Good Fridays. Interest from other men had grown and so had the numbers of members and delegates attending the annual conventions. The convention of 1941 resolved that an annual convention be held for a period of three days each year (Madise 2000:21).

The venue of this successful convention (1941 convention) was Klerksdorp. This first annual convention took place exactly ten years after the official meeting of the clergy and laity's inception of the Band, as it was known then. At that time (1941 convention) the Reverend Shadrack Mdebuka (there is no clarity whether he had any relationship to the Mdebuka brothers mentioned earlier in this article) was elected President of the YMG (Madise 2000:21). His term of office was to extend to twelve years because he was continually elected unopposed as President. The Rev Bernard Mabona (no relation to John Mabona) was elected the secretary and he, too, saw his term of office stretching almost to the same length of time as that of the Rev S Mdebuka (his term of office as secretary was ended by his untimely death). This was also the first annual convention (1941) to be held over three days.

From this convention the ten shillings levy for membership was paid from the previous conventions in all circuits and sections. The first banking account for the YMG or Amadodana was opened, which enabled the organisation to run its own affairs independently. The theme of this convention was "Ye shall be my witness in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and unto the utmost parts of the earth" (Acts 18: Revised Standard Version). Long before, the conference recognised 'Amadodana' who, at the same time, came to be known as Young Men's Manyano or Sons of Wesley. A membership card was made available to each member, costing only a penny. This membership card is still valid today and is given to new members once they have been officially accepted into the organisation and given the uniform (Madise 2000:27, 28).

Further developments

These developments occurred after May 1942 and were in accordance with decisions taken at the 1941 annual conference. This was the first annual convention to be held in the far west in Klerksdorp. The resolutions taken at the 1941 conference also included changes to the term of office, previously for only one year, to three years (YMG Brochure Southern and Northern Transvaal District Golden Jubilee, 1962). The most significant development was the acceptance, by the Rev Edwin Bottrell, of the 'Rhythmic Dancing' of the YMG. This protected the YMG or Amadodana from the fierce criticism of the Methodist Church's intellectuals. Furthermore, the Rev Bottrell called the Amadodana's music rhythmic singing, and claimed that both the dancing and singing were relics of the old African custom of tribal dancing; this singing and dancing accompanied the Amadodana as they marched on to bring souls to the Kingdom of God (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa: the History of the Young Men's Guild in the Central District, 2007:10).

From the annual convention (which Amadodana were accustomed to) there was a further development: a Quadrennial Conference of Young Men's Manyano was held at the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) hall at Batho Location in Bloemfontein on June 28, 1938. The President of the Young Men's Manyano, who at the time was also Chairman of the District, was the Rev B Lushaba (with Mr WM. Kunene as secretary). At this Bloemfontein convention, significant changes were made. One of the fundamental alterations was that of the name "Young Men's Manyano" to "Young Men's Guild" (YMG), which is still the term used today. Another term which was changed was the term "Native" – this word was changed to "African", and as far as membership was concerned, the words 'active' and 'associated' were deleted in order to avoid duplication. The paragraph on active membership was to read:

Membership after six months probation shall be admitted at a service at which a printed order of service shall be used. The membership card was to be signed and a badge given. No member shall be so received until he is a member of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (Laws and Discipline 1997, 189).

Some of the name changes were for political reasons (e.g. “heathen” to “non-believer”).

Finally, at the quadrennial convention, a motion was passed to hold this convention every three years, not every fourth year. As a result, the first triennial convention was held at East London in June 1941. (This also depended on whether the annual convention accepted the proposal to hold conventions every third year. Eventually, it did.)

The triennial convention of 1944 made a request to the Methodist Church’s annual Connexional conference to have the names of the District Presidents and Secretaries inserted in the Minutes of Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. The structure of the office of the District of the YMG or Amadodana would consist of: President, Vice President, Secretary and Assistant Secretary. Anybody seeking to hold any of these offices would be nominated by the District convention and elected by a majority vote of the District Synod. The President would assume his duties at the next District convention and would be inducted by the retiring or outgoing President.

The structure of the triennial convention was to consist of the following office bearers: President, Vice President, Secretary, Recording Secretary, and the Treasurer. These officials would be elected by and at the triennial conference, subject to confirmation by the Annual Connexional Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

The year 1947 saw changes in the leadership personnel of the Young Men’s Guild. In that same year, the Rev ZR. Mahabane became the first black President of the YMG or Amadodana; the Rev JG. Xaba was his Vice President and the Rev PS Mbete the Secretary. From this year (1947) onwards, there has been a series of triennial conventions and elections of office bearers, both at District and triennial conventions. Up to now the procedure of the District as well as the triennial convention has been the same without any changes made to it. (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa: the History of the Young Men’s Guild in the Central District, 2007:9). Three years later, in 1950, Rev PS. Mbete ascended to the position of the President of YMG, succeeding Rev ZR. Mahabane, with Rev WA. Nxumalo as the secretary (YMG Brochure, Lesedi ka Motlhanka, K&B District: April 1985:6-7).

The uniform

In the beginning the YMG possessed neither a uniform nor colours that, between them, would identify the movement as distinctive in the Methodist Church. At this time in 1938 the unofficial uniform was simply a scarlet jersey with a khaki shirt, khaki trousers and black boots (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa: the History of the Young Men's Guild in the Central District, 2007:9), and the movement was still under the leadership of Rev Mearer who was, simultaneously, Superintendent of the mission.

It is also important to bear in mind that the YMG was started by and led by lay people. The YMG triennial convention decided on the uniform and a badge bearing the letters "YMG". An official uniform was adopted in 1938 when, through the District synods, the conference approved the wearing of the waistcoat and the badge that bore the following words: "One Heart, One Way". After adoption of the uniform by the Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, the original uniform for Amadodana was a black jacket, white shirt, black trousers with black shoes and a purple sash. This uniform was later changed to include a red waistcoat (which replaced the purple sash). The colours of the uniform all had a certain meaning:

- Red waistcoat – salvation through the blood of Jesus. There is also a link with the scarlet cord Rahab hung in her window to save her family from the conquering Israelites.
- Five buttons of the waistcoat – represent the five wounds of Jesus on the cross.
- Black tie – symbolises the darkness of the crucifixion and the three hours of darkness at Calvary.
- White shirt – symbolises the light of the resurrection.
- Badge – can symbolise a crown (YMG & UCAMG, 2002:13).

The constitution

The date and year on which the constitution was drafted are not known. However, it seems that the approval of the uniform and the colours of the YMG came after the drawing up and acceptance of a constitution; the constitution was drafted by the Rev Edgar C. Wilkinson, who was stationed at the Witwatersrand Methodist Mission (Garret nd.:109). The constitution was intended to commit the YMG or Amadodana members to the supreme task of evangelising and was inscribed in the small booklet given to all new members.

Some methods of approaching tasks in which members were to engage involved visiting villages, rural areas, townships, cities and labourers' accommodation compounds (hostels). Members conducted a number of mission campaigns and visited hospitals as well as people's homes, all with the aim of converting people to Christianity. By approximately 1965, YMG membership had swelled to 26 029. By then, the YMG had to ensure that it did not become complacent in carrying out its mission, especially given the changing patterns of life in Africa. Consideration had to be given to ways of improving evangelisation and witness so that members kept abreast of the times and were in a better position to deal with the challenges they had to face (Garret nd.:109).

Conclusion

The founding of the YMG within the Methodist Church in 1912 coincided with certain major political events in South Africa. A good example is the establishment of the South African Native National Congress, which later came to be known as the African National Congress. At the same time, the founding of the YMG movement needs to be viewed as a form of Christian empowerment which allowed Africans at the time to freely express their Christian convictions in a way that was in keeping with their culture and traditions. This can further be noted in the way the YMG or Amadodana looked at itself in current years and its involvement in church and society. One of the new developments which the YMG or Amadodana embarked upon was the establishment of the musical group which came to be popularly known as Amadodana Ase Wesley (Sons of Wesley). The purpose of this group was to revive the original rhythmic singing and chanting which Amadodana had been known for. The current centenary celebration of the YMG is regarded as a milestone in the history of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, because it marks a new journey of mission in a new political dispensation in South Africa – after South Africa's long liberation struggle. The interesting thing about this centenary is that it runs concurrently with that of the African National Congress. It is no coincidence that the two were movements born in the same year; both movements were journeys of identify, liberation and self-esteem. The YMG or Amadodana has recently initiated new projects which included community involvement, focussing on issues of poverty, health, children and unemployment (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa: the History of the Young Men's Guild in the Central District, 2007:9).

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