

# CHRISTINAH NKU AND ST JOHN'S: A HUNDRED YEARS LATER<sup>i</sup>

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## *Abstract*

In 1906, at Derdepoort (Botswana), a twelve year old Tswana girl, Christinah,<sup>ii</sup> experienced the first of a series of divine visions that eventually led to the founding of a powerful African independent church. This article traces the history of Christinah Mokotuli<sup>iii</sup> Nku (1894-1988), as well as that of the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa,<sup>iv</sup> the church she founded in 1939. The article also briefly examines the history of the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy; the church that ensued from the rift experienced in 1972, and the present attempts at the unification of the St John's churches, which currently constitute 39 splinter groups.

The article is a preliminary history only, owing to the fluidity of the history, which is dependent on oral sources. However, the article is structured around a specific focus, namely healing. The story of Christinah Nku and St John's, then, will be, firstly, the story of Ma Nku's vision of the church as a place of healing, secondly, her healing ministry, which was strongly supported by indigenous knowledge, and thirdly, the proposed healing to be effected through the unification of the church.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Alleluia<sup>v</sup>

We have seen peace by mother Nku.  
She was given to us by the Almighty  
to gather all lost sheep.

Mother Christinah Mokotuli Nku,  
the daughter of Bolibe,  
an amazing person.

She brought salvation to the world.  
She received instructions from above.  
She healed the sick through prayers.

People got life;  
the insane recovered;  
they sing alleluia.<sup>vi</sup>

On Saturday 25 November 2006, the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa celebrated the century that had passed since their founder, Ma Christinah Mokotuli Nku, received her first divine instructions through a vision

in 1906. The festivities at Evaton in Sebokeng,<sup>vii</sup> where Ma Nku's original church was built, lasted throughout the day and night and included music making by three brass bands, choral singing by seven choirs, and speeches by ten prominent political and religious leaders.<sup>viii</sup> Among the guests of honour was Prof Mathole Motshekga, former premier of Gauteng, and Rev Motlalepula Chabaku, Member of Parliament, who also delivered speeches, much to the delight of the congregation, who packed the church to capacity.

Special guest of honour, and leading the procession into the church dressed in the attire of an archbishop, was Lazarus Nku, grandchild of Ma Christinah Nku through her son Joel. Introducing the guests to the congregation was Daniel Mathe, another grandson of Ma Nku, and son of her only surviving child, Dorah Mathe. The prominence of Lazarus Nku and Daniel Mathe was not without significance. Lazarus represented the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy that came into being after the rift in the St John's church in 1972, while Daniel Mathe represented the Evaton branch of the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission Church. At present they are leading the movement towards reuniting St John's.

Finally, before the festive service commenced, Ma Dorah, Ma Christinah Nku's only surviving child, entered. She is now 88 years old, everybody's friend but nobody's fool. She carries the legacy of her mother, the prophet, with dignity. She was the last speaker at the church service. In true prophetic style she reiterated the history of her mother, and exhorted the congregation to take her mother's legacy of prophecy and healing with them into the future.

During the service, the above song in honour of Christinah Nku was sung by St John's choir from Soshanguve. The choir master was Rev Nelakhe S Gabela, who researched and compiled the words of the song from historical sources.<sup>ix</sup> In a unique way the song summarises the life and work of Ma Christinah Nku: she brought peace to the community; she gathered the lost sheep from amongst her people; she brought salvation to the poor and the sick; she gave the instructions she received from above through to the faith community; and she healed the sick through prayer. For this she is honoured and remembered. For this she is loved and cherished. This was her contribution to her community: peace, salvation, and healing.

## **2 AIM, METHOD AND SOURCES**

### **2.1 Aim**

The aim of this article is to give an overview of the history of Ma Christinah Mokotuli Nku (1894-1988) and to emphasise her healing ministry. The article will trace her involvement as prophet, healer and founder of the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, as well as her journey with the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy with which she has been associated since Rev Petros Masango took over the leadership of the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission in 1972.

### **2.2 Research questions**

The research questions initiating this research were:

- 1 What are the centenary highlights of a church that developed from the visions of a twelve-year-old girl in 1906 to one of the largest African independent churches in South Africa in 2006?
- 2 What are the gender issues at stake when tracing the history of Christinah Nku as a female church founder of the early twentieth century?
- 3 What are the faces and effects of the healing ministry of Christinah Nku?
- 4 What are the reasons for a church separating into 39 splinter churches, and what is the possibility of unification in an age of healing?

### 2.3 Sources and method

This article can only be a first attempt at a history of mme Manku and her church(es) because of the orality of the history. The method followed in obtaining the information contained in this article is, therefore, simply the way in which sources were accessed. Interpreting the sources was difficult, if not impossible, since the status of many of the unpublished sources could not be determined. The visions of mme Manku were related in a variety of unpublished sources, for instance. The origins of these sources (e.g. St John 2006; and Nku undated) were impossible to determine, and often contradicted each other. In this article, then, fact and fiction find a respectful voice alongside one another. The following sources were available to the author:

- 1 Firstly, *published sources* on Christinah Nku were searched, scrutinised for information, and as far as I know – exhausted. Published material on mme Manku is scarce, with only a few references scattered in books and essays that deal with greater entities, such as African independent church formation and Zionism in general. Published material referring to mme Manku includes:
  - Martin West's *Bishops and prophets in a black city: African independent churches in Soweto, Johannesburg*, which deals with Ma Nku's handling of the 1972 division in the church (West 1975:65-66).
  - Bengt Sundkler's *Zulu Zion and some Swazi Zionists*, gives a vivid description of mme Manku leading a congregation in celebration and tells her history as a healer in a riveting eye-witness report (Sundkler 1976:79-82).
  - Allan Anderson, who deals with the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission as one of the most important and most numerous African Pentecostal churches in South Africa,<sup>x</sup> describes the history, beliefs and practices of this church and refers to mme Manku's prominent role in the church until 1970 in his book *Bazalwane: African Pentecostals in South Africa* (Anderson 1992:106-109).
  - Simon Moripe adds a gender perspective to the history of mme Manku in his essay on "The calling and service of the African women in the African Independent/Indigenous Churches" (Moripe 1994:72).

- Linda Thomas politises mme Manku as church founder and healer in her book *Under the canopy: Ritual process and spiritual resilience in South Africa* (Thomas 1999:5, 6, 20, 51, 69, 81, 91, 93, 99, 101, 102), and in an earlier essay, "Christinah Nku: A woman at the center of healing her nation" (Thomas 1997:54-71).
- Finally, Frederick Quinn in his *African saints: Saints, martyrs, and holy people from the continent of Africa* (2002:154) includes an article on Christinah Nku, emphasising her role as healer in a context of poverty and political marginalisation.

2 In the second place, this study is dependent on *interviews* with members of St John's Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa. The research route included visits to the following people:

- The research journey started in Soshanguve<sup>xi</sup> on Tuesday 5 September 2006 with a visit to **Rev SS Mongwe**,<sup>xii</sup> secretary to the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa, to obtain addresses for contacting the relevant churches. The initial aim of the project was to visit St John's churches only in the vicinity of Pretoria/Tshwane. Rev Mongwe required a letter of intent from us<sup>xiii</sup> in order to obtain permission to submit the information asked for. The letter was faxed and 10 contact numbers were obtained from Rev Mongwe.
- Rev Mongwe consequently introduced us to **Rev Paul Mabothe**, whom we met at Mongwe's house the following week on Tuesday 12 September 2006. Mabothe was very helpful in explaining the history of the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission in poetic terms. He furthermore secured an interview for us with Archbishop Ramokoka from the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy in Zuurbekom,<sup>xiv</sup> and gracefully accompanied us there the following week, that is, on Thursday 21 September 2006.
- **Rev Enoch Ramokoka** is the grandson of Ma Christinah Nku through her fourth child, Mary. He is acknowledged by some as archbishop of the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy, the church that came into being in 1972 after Petros Masango became archbishop of St John's Apostolic Faith Mission. He claims to have been legally appointed archbishop after the death of Archbishop Simon Maphlaole Nku, although the Nku family claims Tebogo, the son of Archbishop Simon Nku, as the rightful heir to this title. Ramokoka shared valuable information on his grandmother as a visionary and as a member of the family.
- Rev S S Mongwe also referred us to the Mabopane branch of the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission where he himself worships, and which is one of the largest St John's congregations in Gauteng, if not South Africa, consisting of more than 10 000 members. Here we were received on Wednesday 4 October 2006. Our purpose was to witness the healing performed there on Wednesdays, but we were asked to come back the following Tuesday, that is, 10 October 2006, for an interview with the bishop, Mother **Selina Chauke**. Chauke was a trainee of Mother Christinah Nku, and shared with us the journey she travelled with her.

- Bishop Selina Chauke is 88 years old, and was supported by her daughter Naomi (70) during the interview. After the interview, the latter referred us to Winterveld<sup>xv</sup> for further research on the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy. A long drive to the northwest brought us to the church in Winterveld, where the cell phone number of the President of the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy, Lazarus Nku, was given to us by family members. Back home we made an appointment with **Ntate Lazarus Nku**, and visited him in Winterveld the following week, that is, on Tuesday 17 October 2006. However, in order not to ruin recent attempts at unification between St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy and St John's Apostolic Faith Mission, Lazarus Nku insisted that permission for an interview be obtained from the headquarters of the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission church in Evaton, Sebokeng.
- The next research stop, then, was Evaton. This took place on the next Monday, 23 October 2006. We were very late for this appointment, as the journey to Evaton took two and a half hours instead of the usual 55 minutes because of heavy traffic on the Johannesburg Eastern Bypass. At Evaton we met with a legend, the 87-year old **Ma Dorah Mathe**, second and only surviving child of Ma Christinah Nku, and with her son, the evangelist Daniel Mathe. Ma Dorah is outspoken and down to earth, and the interview with her was too short. Hopefully, she will allow another one shortly.
- A week later, we had an informal interview with **Daniel Mathe** at the National Archives in Pretoria/Tswane. Daniel wanted us to read the original court orders that were issued when the church split in 1972. However, all three of these orders were wrongly indexed in the archives, and remain untraceable. We used the opportunity to interview Daniel, who shared his views on why the split in the church happened and how it can be mended.
- I also held informal interviews with Daniel Mathe and **Rev E T Rampedi** in my office at Unisa on 6 and 12 December 2006, with **Rev S E Mosiye**, the PRO of the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy joining us during the last meeting. They provided important information for and corrections to this article.
- Two further voices on the history of Ma Christinah Nku will feature briefly in this essay. The first is an interview between Nomavenda Mathiane (2006) and **Kenosi Mofokeng** who identified Mother Christinah Nku as her mentor. The second is a brief, informal conversation the author had with **Maureen August**, granddaughter of Christinah Nku through her fifth child, Lydia August, during the festivities on 25 November 2006, in which Maureen, inter alia, pointed to the need to consult the community on the historical importance of Ma Nku.

The encounter with the latter two women, convinced the author of two shortcomings of the interviews held concerning mme Manku, which should be corrected in the ongoing research on this remarkable woman:

- The community, and not just church leaders, should be interviewed on their experiences of healing and comfort issuing from Ma Christinah Nku and St John's.
  - People who shared personal experiences with mme Manku should be interviewed to complement the testimonies of those who are at present concentrating on the legal and polity issues surrounding the future of the church.
- 3 The third type of source used for this short history of Ma Christinah Nku is the material that was made available at the festivities held to celebrate the centenary of her ministry on 25 November 2006 at Evaton. These include:
- A booklet prepared by the St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of South Africa (2006) entitled *Kgutsufatsoya bophelo ba moporofeta Mme C Manku/Synopsis of the life of prophetess Mrs C Nku*.
  - "My mother told me", a speech delivered by Ma Dorah Mathe (2006) on her mother's history.
  - A song (re-)composed by Rev Nelakhe S Gabela (2006), entitled "Halleluya, rorisang", which was sung in praise of Ma Christinah Nku. Two further songs were sung and mentioned as mme Manku's special favourites during the festivities. They are no 32, "The love of Jesus", and no 105, "I am your child" from the song book *Lifela tsa Sione*.
- 4 We were, furthermore, provided with newspaper clips from the archives of the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission at Evaton. These include:
- Articles from the newspaper *The World* (1970) on the election of Petros Masango as archbishop, the reaction of Ma Christinah Nku to this event, and the ensuing split in the church. These articles range over three weeks from Monday 24 August 1970 to Thursday 15 October 1970.
  - An article, "Mma Nku's church rift is looming", from the *City Press* (2001).
  - Articles from the newspapers *Sunday Times Metro* (2003) and *City Press* (2004) on the unhappiness in the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission over the reportedly lavish lifestyle of its archbishop Jacob Maragu, who succeeded Petros Masango in 1997 and died in March 2005.
- 5 Official documentation in terms of official histories of mme Manku compiled by the church, court orders and agreements of unification were provided by St John's at Evaton. These include:
- A letter signed by Christinah Nku (1970) dated 14 October 1970, which informed the Secretary of Bantu Administration and Development that she had expelled Archbishop Petros Masango from the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa.
  - An undated lists of "Visions" as told by mme Manku to her family.

- A letter signed by Rev BB Thobane (1972) as General Secretary of the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission of SA and dated 19 June 1972 to inform the same Secretary of Bantu Administration and Development that, in accordance with the court order of 10 November 1971, Dr P J Masango had been re-elected Archbishop of the said church.
- The will of Christina(h) Ada Nku, dated 21 May 1980.
- Several documents of the court dating between 1970 and 1984 in which the affairs of the church were regulated by court order.
- A two-page history, "I had a vision 1906", prepared when mme Manku's 100th birthday was celebrated by the Organisation of African Independent Churches in 1984.
- A document entitled, "Agreed Common Ground" (2005), that is, an agreement on unification between five representatives of St John churches, that is, Evaton (Daniel Mathe), Rustenburg (Enoch Ramokoka), Potchefstroom (Radebe), Vogelstruisdraai (Lazarus Nku), and Katlehong (Paul Mabothe). This document was signed on Thursday 13 October 2005.

What, then, did this process of source collection achieve? I now proceed to the main part of the article to give an overview of the life and influence of Ma Christinah Nku as prophet and healer, according to the sources mentioned above.

### **3 1906 TO 1936: VISIONS OF A HEALING CHURCH**

#### **3.1 A history of 1906**

In his speech at the 2006 festivities in honour of Christinah Nku at Evaton, her grandson Lazarus Nku (2006) referred to the significant role played by the year '06 in the history of mme Manku:

In 1906 she experienced her first divine vision; in 1936 she moved to Evaton and the first church board of St John's was elected; in 1956 the first church conference was held; in 1966 she prophesied that there would be war in Israel, and that Dr Verwoerd would be assassinated; and in 1976 she provided shelter to children involved in the Soweto uproar's rebellion.<sup>xvi</sup>

Lazarus Nku thereby aptly introduced 2006 as the year for celebrating a hundred years of Christinah Nku, and a brief history of her life now follows.

#### **3.2 The first vision (1906): Mme Manku accepts her calling as prophetess**

In 1906 God started speaking to mme Manku (St John 2006:1),<sup>xvii</sup> the daughter of Enoch and Magdeline Bodibe (Dorah Mathe 2006). This happened in Derdepoort, Botswana. Having received the indigenous name Mokotuli when she was born on 21 April 1894, she was baptised in the Dutch Reformed Church, and given the Christian name of Christinah. Till the age of

10 she attended a Methodist missionary school where she learnt to read and write (Thomas 1997:58).

Then, in 1906, when she was 12½ years old, God started speaking to the fragile Tswana girl,<sup>xviii</sup> who at the time was looking after her sister's children. Her sister's husband was not always happy with mme Manku, and whipped her for constantly reading the Bible, saying that she was too young to do this. Mme Manku used to go to the mountains where she could hide from her sister's husband and read the Bible.

What then, did God say to mme Manku in 1906? In a dream<sup>xix</sup> mme Manku saw both the devil and an angel. The devil offered her money, lots of it, and the angel a hymn book, asking her to sing hymn 307 (Nku undated). Mme Manku accepted the hymn book, and thereby also accepted her calling as prophetess.

Other things, too, happened to show that mme Manku was special. In 1907, for instance, mme Manku attended the wedding of her cousin with her mother and father. While the people were singing, she was reminded of the angel in her vision in 1906 who gave her a hymn book and asked her to sing, and she fainted. When she regained consciousness, she was suffering from a splitting headache. Her mother carried her home on her back, but on the way they met a man who insisted on taking them to his house. Here a traditional healer made small cuts in the skin on her temples, and put *muthi* into them. However, she was not healed. Here, also, the women's prayer group prayed for her, but the headache persisted. They also read to her from two scriptures, that is, from the Gospel of John and the Letter to the Ephesians. Then the traditional healer told her father that nobody would be able to heal her. She would only be healed by a healer from the east (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:2), a possible reference to the prophet Elia Nkitseng who baptised her.<sup>xx</sup>

Stories of these visions are told, then, to establish mme Manku as a prophetess who is divinely appointed, and not self-appointed for financial gain.

### **3.3 The second series of visions (1914/1916): Mme Manku was to marry and have children**

In 1914 the Nku family (Dorah Mathe 2006) requested mme Manku's hand in marriage. Her family was not anxious to give her in marriage, and had turned away many suitors, because the seizures and visions from which mme Manku suffered, had led them to believe she was mentally ill. This time, however, mme Manku had a vision of her marriage and saw that it had to happen. However, her fiancé went away to serve in the army during the First World War (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:2). While he was gone, mme Manku became seriously ill, and everybody thought she would die. During her illness, however, she received another series of visions, in which she was told that she would not die, but certainly marry Lazarus Nku, and would bear eight children (St John 2006:2), three sons and five daughters.



When her fiancé returned from the war, they married. Mme Manku was 22 years old when she married Lazarus Mosioa Nku in 1916 (Dorah Mathe 2006).<sup>xxi</sup> Because of her visions and the “illnesses” accompanying them, people said that Lazarus Nku had married a demented person. In “Visions” (undated) Manku relates that this was because she was able to tell people what was troubling them, and revealed their secrets in public. The couple subsequently moved to the Free State (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:2).

Within the next 20 years, between 1917 and 1936, Mme Manku bore eight children, just as the visions had told her. Dorah Mathe, who, as mentioned earlier, is now her only surviving child, remembers the birth months of the children as follows, with her son Daniel providing the names of mme Manku’s grandchildren:

- In March 1917, mme Manku’s first child was born. She had a vision which instructed her to call her firstborn, appropriately, Johannes (i.e. after John the Baptist). In her vision she saw that he was going to be powerful in God’s word and was going to build churches. This indeed happened. Eventually Johannes became the first archbishop of the church, and built most of the church buildings of St John’s himself (OAIC 1984). Johannes had five children: Tebogo, Simon (who became archbishop of the St John’s Apostolic Church of Prophecy but is now deceased), Pule (deceased), Aletta and Seretse (deceased). Johannes died before his mother in August 1979 at the age of 62.
- Mme Manku’s second child is Anna Dorah, born in May 1919. She was married to Elias Mathe and is now a widow. In the vision mme Manku saw that Dorah “was going to serve the people who came before the house of God” (OAIC 1984). Dorah’s children are Deborah, Lydia, Daniel, Patricia and Dinah.<sup>xxii</sup> Daniel Mathe currently plays a major role in the unification of the church.
- Obed was born in December 1921. It was revealed to mme Manku in a vision that “Obed will be a great thinker and would serve God” (OAIC 1984). Obed had one child, Brenda. He died in 2003.
- Mary, who later married Darius Ramokoka, was born in March 1924. The vision revealed that “Mary was going to serve God and take care of the sick” (OAIC 1984). Mary was the mother of Enoch, Patrick, Lazarus, Ernes, Ephriam, Christinah and Penrose. Enoch Ramokoka is currently the Archbishop of the St John’s Apostolic Church of Prophecy, although members of the Nku family regard Simon’s son, that is, Johannes’ grandson, as the legitimate heir to the archbishopric.
- (Jael) Lydia later the famous educationist Lydia August was born in December 1925. She had two children, Eric who is deceased, and Maureen, who was interviewed briefly for this article.
- Joel was born in December 1928. His children are Mamoroesi, Lazarus, Johannes, Tefo and Mami. Lazarus Nku is currently the president of the St John’s Apostolic Church of Prophecy.
- Magdeline was born in October 1932.
- Selina was born in May 1936.

Daniel Mathe calls them a “royal family”, and indeed they were. At the 2006 festivities he said “Ma Christinah Nku has made us kings and leaders”. And indeed she did.

Stories of these visions, then, are told in order to restrict the leadership of the church to the family of mme Manku, and protect the church against intruders. These stories are valuable in light of the later history of the dividing archbishopric of Petros Masango, and the present attempt at unification around the figure of Lazarus Nku (jr).

#### **3.4 The third vision (1918): Mme Manku is told how to live a holy life as a prophetess**

Ma Nku was 12 years old when, in 1906, she was called through a vision to become a prophetess. Twelve years later, in 1918, she received a further vision giving her instructions on how to live a holy life. At the time she was working in the field when a burning coal fell from heaven right in front of her. She fainted and experienced a vision in which she was told not to touch alcohol or do any work on Sundays (St John 2006:2, 3).

These visions are obviously told aetiologically to explain the holiness practices of the church.

#### **3.5 A fourth series of vision (1924): Mme Manku accepts her calling as the founder of the church**

Mme Manku’s seizures continued, and it was at about this time that her husband, Lazarus, heard of Rev Elias Nkitseng “in the east”. Nkitseng was from the Apostolic Faith Mission and Lazarus took his wife to be “healed” by this prophet. Nkitseng recognised that mme Manku was not ill, but under divine calling. This was because mme Manku saw a great ball of fire while Nkitseng was praying for her (Nku undated). In 1924, Mme Manku and her husband were both baptised in the Apostolic Faith Mission Church (AFM) by Elias Nkitseng and Elias Ramoipone (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:3).

Later the same year, mme Manku went back to Nkitseng so that he and his brother Ismael could pray for her. She relates (Nku undated) that she went numb after the prayer and had another vision, seeing a church with twelve doors. A voice told her to take bricks and build a church for God. She was shown “a place in the west” to build this church (Evaton is situated to the west of Johannesburg).

The story of this vision plays a powerful role in legitimising mme Manku as a church founder, a woman in a man’s world.

#### **3.6 A fifth series of visions and near death experiences (1927/28; 1931): Mme Manku accepts her calling as a healer**

Sometime between 1927 and 1928 mme Manku had a near death experience. Her soul and spirit was taken away for three days and those around her

thought she had died. This experience happened because in 1924 Rev Nkitseng had told her to slaughter a cow for the ancestors. However, her husband Lazarus's herd was depleted, and she was tempted not to carry out the slaughtering. Consequently she hovered on the border of life and death for three days. When they were about to bury her, Elias Nkitseng told the people that she was not dead, but that her soul was being held captive somewhere (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:3).

This happened again in 1931, but this time with a glorious outcome. An old woman with the name Ma Dlamini invited mme Manku to her house and gave her a cup of coffee. While they were talking, with Ma Dlamini telling her that she had beautiful children and a lovely husband, mme Manku suddenly had a seizure that lasted from that morning till five in the afternoon. Her husband came to fetch her and took her home to the farm.

The following day mme Manku told the people that Satan had taken her to hell for three hours, but that she had been helped by the archangels Michael and Gabriel. When she was brought back from hell, the ancestors had been on her righthand side, and had spread the skins of a cow, a sheep and a goat on the ground and stirred herbs on top of the skins, and that a lovely fragrance had arisen from the herbs. On her lefthand side, the cherubim had been standing, crying out: "Jehovah of the nations is shining!" Then the archangels Gabriel and Michael sent her out on her mission: "Go, Christinah!" But as soon as she was on her way, Satan appeared again and threw her on her back. Michael and Gabriel shouted: "Where is the spear we gave you? Stab him!" So she grabbed the spear and stabbed Satan in his stomach and threw him on his back. Then Gabriel and Michael put a hood on her back, and in her hand they put an iron rod. They took black stuff from her hand and her tongue so that everything she would say in future would be pure and true (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:3, 4).

The story of these visions is important in establishing mme Manku as a healer. To be a healer, mme Manku had to conquer Satan and sin, in order for illness is seen as the consequence of sin. Not only had she conquered Satan, but she had also been dressed and equipped by the archangels Gabriel and Michael with the symbols of a healer. There can be no doubt, then, about the divine appointment of mme Manku as healer. Like Jesus, she descended into hell and spent three days there, as Jesus had after his crucifixion, to conquer Satan.

After that, the story goes (St John 2006:5), Mr Nku, who now possessed two teams of oxen, bought a third team and carried out the sacrifices as instructed by Rev Nkitseng. Mme Manku, then, had not only conquered Satan, but had also pacified the ancestors. The ancestors, too, showed their support for her ministry as healer by fixing herbs on animal skins in her presence.

### **3.7 A sixth series of visions (1932/33) to secure a livelihood**

In 1932 there was a drought, and since the Nku family with their six children had no food, Mr Nku had to go to Johannesburg to look for work. He left his cattle with a white farmer, who eventually used Mr Nku's brother (Sekese) to

cheat Mr Nku out of all his cattle. When Mr Nku came back later for his cattle, he was arrested.

Mme Manku then lived with her children in Prospect, a “township” of Johannesburg. One day, while looking for work, she became very tired and lay down under a tree. Here she had a vision of a tall man with a long nail, almost as long as his finger, with which he pierced mme Manku, promising that money would be provided for her livelihood as well as her ministry. When she woke up, she saw 5c with which she bought bread (1c), milk (1c), sugar (1c) and tea (1c), as she had been told to do in the vision (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:5). After further praying and visions, mme Manku was blessed with two drums, one full of five pound notes and the other filled with five shilling coins, with which she bought clothes and food for her six children (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:6).

These visions and miracles are obviously told to indicate that God was providing for mme Manku, and preparing her for building the church with the twelve doors.

### **3.8 A seventh series of visions (1932-35) to prepare the ground for building a church in Evaton**

Mme Manku (Nku undated) now tells how she had visions while she was still a member of the Apostolic Faith Mission Church:

- (1) In 1932 she was told to wear a blue and white belt.
- (2) In 1933 she was told to hold her own services with designated church members at 09:00, 15:00 and 19:00.
- (3) In 1935 she was told to hold her own church conferences three times a year, that is, in March, August and November (Nku undated).

With these visions the scene was set for mme Manku to start a new church. The uniforms of the church were to be blue and white, and there were to be three services a day and three conferences a year. Mme Manku was to break with the AFM with whom she journeyed since 1918 (see Thomas 1997:60).

## **4 1936-1972: EXPANDING, HEALING, EDUCATING**

### **4.1 Eighth series of visions (1936-39) on building the church**

In 1936 mme Manku went to Evaton and started healing people. She did not want to ask them for payment, but eventually people started paying her a shilling (10c) so that she could feed her children. Many people started joining her in establishing a church. Amongst them were Ma Moseki and Ma Maloko, as well as Father Rasekgao and Father Ratefane, and many others (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:6).

After working from several sites, from which they were driven by traditional healers, mme Manku had a vision in which she was instructed to build a church where there were heavy electrical cables. She found such a plot in

Evaton and started building a church there in 1939 (St John 2006:7). She also received two further important visions in 1939:

- (1) One vision told her to stop animal sacrifice.
- (2) The other vision showed her a Shangaan, an Indian, a white, a Zulu and a person from Damaraland.<sup>xxiii</sup> Thus she was informed that St John's would spread all over the world (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:8).

Mme Manku apparently bought the plot in Evaton in her own name, justifying this by means of Hymn 40, *Fatshe kela morena* ("The land is of God"). The visions are related here to justify this act, which was to cause intense tension in the church during the late 1940s.

Eventually mme Manku, with the help of her first born, Johannes, built another church in Evaton across the road from the church built in the 1940s. This church is known as "the Temple" and was completed in 1952. For many years this was the largest African Independent Church building in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vaal Triangle area (Anderson 1992:107).

#### **4.2 Ninth series of visions (1941) on the tension in the church**

The St John's Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa was formally registered in 1942. Before that both mme Manku and other church members of the church had visions foretelling war in the church. In 1939 mme Manku had a vision that, after the church had spread "all over the world" (i.e. South and southwest Africa), she would be fighting a war that she was not sure she would win. Two elders in the church had similar visions: In 1941 Father Asele said that a dust storm would come, which would rip off part of the church "on the western side". Then Father Moloi said that the roof would fall on people "on the station and De Deur". A snake would appear and chase the people. They would try to climb on top of buildings, but the snake would chase them down. The spirit of the snake would be everywhere (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:8).

Mme Manku allegedly prophesied a series of calamities that would hit societies broader than St John's. In the 1960s she prophesied that there would be war in Israel and that Tsavendas would assassinate Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, the then prime minister of South Africa and architect of apartheid. She also prophesied that a great illness would overwhelm the world, which was a reference to the AIDS pandemic (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:10).

The year 1949 was indeed not a good year for mme Manku. Her husband, Bishop Lazarus Nku died in a railway accident (Elias Nkitseng had died the previous year) (Anderson 1996:145). In addition, from 1949 many storms rocked the church (according to Dorah Mathe, 2006, "the church started in 1942, and it started to have problems in 1949"):

- In 1949 there was tension in the church over the ownership of the plot in Evaton. And again in 1968 there was unhappiness over mme Manku

keeping the church's money in a safe in her house (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church of SA 2006:10).

- In 1968 Archbishop Johannes Nku took Dr P J Masango to court, accusing him of taking church funds. Masango won the case (Mabotho 2006).

In July 1969 church members voted on the issue of polygamy with Johannes Nku being for and Petros Masango against it. Masango won the vote.

- In the 1970s a split in the church occurred when Dr Rev Petros Masango was elected archbishop and mme Manku's son, Johannes, left the church. In 1972 the St John's Apostolic Church of the Prophecy was established by the Nku family.
- In 2001 a rift was threatening between Enoch Ramokoka and the Nku family, as the latter regarded Ramokoka as self-appointed to the office of archbishop in the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy and preferred Tebogo, son of Simon Nku, as the rightful heir (*City Press* 2001).
- In July 2004 members of the executive of the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission filed an urgent application in the Johannesburg High Court against Archbishop Jacob Maragu, who had been appointed archbishop in 1997 (after the death of Masango that already occurred in January 1984). Members wanted to curb Maragu's powers, especially since he was in a position to dispense church money to him self to finance a lavish lifestyle.

#### **4.3 Appreciation of mme Manku as healer, prophetess, church founder and educator**

This article is not about the division(s) in St John's. It is about mme Manku in appreciation of her contribution to the faith community of St John's, and the South African society at large. This author, then, associates with the following appreciations of mme Manku that refer to her contribution to faith development within the sphere of politics, gender, poverty and education:

- Linda Thomas (1997:63) sees as follows the contribution of mme Manku in her covert resistance to a racist political system that rendered millions poor, many of whom became members of St John's:

As the church grew, Nku's ministry expanded through the establishment of schools for children and programs for youth and adults. People's lives were transformed, and this directly benefited the community. Nku's ministry was subversive in that it functioned as a hidden transcript that was a response to systems that dominated the poor.

- Linda Thomas (1999:5) furthermore honours mme Manku for founding a church that broke away from local missionary Christianity to one based on the healing of a nation through the use of indigenous knowledge and symbols. She especially honours mme Manku for doing this as a woman:

While Nku was a pioneer, one of a few women who initiated independent African churches, she also followed a stream of Africans who grew tired of being dominated by white Protestant Christianity and separated from mission churches to create new religious cosmologies that blended Christian symbols and practices into well-established precolonial religious systems.

- Allan Anderson, whose research in Soshanguve showed that 32 per cent of the population there belonged either to the ZCC or St John's (Anderson 1993:26), also honours mme Manku, not only as a healer who used indigenous symbols, but also as one who healed in her breaking away from the missionary churches (Anderson 1992:106).
- Bengt Sundkler (1979:81) points to mme Manku's legacy as a healer and describes in vivid terms the healing ceremonies he attended that were led by her. He describes her praying over bottles of water that thus acquired healing qualities. He furthermore describes a baptismal service he attended where more than three hundred people were baptised. However, he points out that above all it was "as a healer that she became known", loved and honoured:

Attending one of her yearly August meetings together with some ten thousand faithful, I realized that those people would claim, possibly without exception, that they were there because of having been healed by this woman, or because they were awaiting their opportunity for her healing touch.

- It is Frederick Quinn (2002) who reminds us of mme Manku's nickname amongst her people, which was "mother with a thousand teats". Thus she was honoured not only as a healer of physical illness, but also because she provided for the spiritual and financial needs of the faithful.
- Her children and grandchildren also remember above all her healing qualities. According to daughter Dora Mathe (2006) "people were healed by just looking at her". Maureen August (2006), daughter of mme Manku's fifth child, Lydia August, remembers her grandmother as "powerfully spiritual". She adds an important insight to her grandmother's healing ministry, and that is that her grandmother's healing was based on indigenous knowledge, an important component of township spirituality (see Landman 2006). The community will furthermore testify to the fact, Maureen claims, that they became prosperous after joining the church and coming into contact with its healer. Her grandson through her daughter Mary, Enoch Ramokoka (2006), claims that even Joseph and Edward Lekganyane of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) came to visit mme Manku and gain from her healing powers.
- Selina Chauke, bishop and pastor of St John's Mabopane (Block C), is 88 years old and has known mme Manku since 1956. She too remembers (Chauke 2006) that mme Manku's healing ministry was supported by indigenous knowledge, sound advice, love, guidance and a

feeling for the healing consequences of living in a morally correct fashion.

Mme Manku did her healing through prayer and by dispensing the indigenous wisdom that she received through visions. The only “ancillary” to her healing were the bottles of water she blessed and that thus acquired healing powers. Mme Manku expanded her healing ministry with love towards other people and the advocacy of a healthy moral lifestyle. For this she is honoured no less by her own church, which writes its history (St John 2006) in terms of mme Manku’s prophetic skills and healing ministry.

## **5 1972: AN UNHEALTHY DIVISION IN THE CHURCH**

### **5.1 Was the split due to gender?**

Martin West (1975:65) traces the 1972 division in the church back to “the problems that can arise when a woman founds and leads an independent church”. However, Mope (1994:71) claims that “the presence of women as prophets is usually not a threat to the established male hierarchy”. And indeed it is to be doubted whether the split in St John’s in the 1970s can be traced back to the figure of mme Manku as its prophet. In 1942, when she formally registered her church, she was already 48 years old, and in 1972, thirty years later, when the split occurred, she was a woman of 78; hardly a threat as a newly emerging female figure.

What, then, caused the split of St John’s in the 1970s?

This article will only briefly refer to this split since, as was previously stated, the focus here is on the healing ministry of mme Manku. The split therefore is only of importance as a forerunner to the present movement towards unification, in which the history of mme Manku as a healer is again featuring prominently.

### **5.2 The elections of August 1970**

The split occurred formally when Dr Rev Petros Masango, in terms of the constitution, enforced the election of an archbishop, contrary to the practice of mme Manku appointing one. Mme Manku had, indeed, already appointed her oldest son Johannes who was serving in this position. His father Lazarus was the first bishop of the church, and Johannes was appointed to that position after the death of his father in 1949 (Ramokoka 2006).

The election took place in August 1970 and Masango won the elections. Mme Manku tried to take control of the situation by announcing that Masango would only serve four months until she herself had appointed an archbishop. Johannes then resigned from the church and Masango announced that the November festivities would be celebrated in his home town in Swaziland, which was to be the new headquarters of the church. Mme Manku subsequently expelled him from the church, whereupon Masango turned to



the courts which ruled him the legitimately elected archbishop (see West 1975:65-68; *The World* 1970; relevant legal documents).

### **5.3 Was the split due to power hunger?**

The Nku family regarded Masango as an outsider to the leadership of the church which, according to grandson Daniel Mathe (2006), was to remain a family church. Grandson Enoch Ramokoka (2006) attributes the split to power hunger and describes subsequent events leading to the founding of a new church as follows:

The church segregated in 1972, and Johannes formed another church and called it Christinah Nku Faith Mission. Ma Christinah was not pleased with this and did not approve it. They then named the church St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy. The splitting of the church did not fit well with Ma Nku, but there was nothing she could do because of people who were power hungry. Johannes died in 1977. Then after Johannes' death his son Simon Nku became the next bishop.

Enoch Ramokoka himself claims to be heir to the archbishopric of the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy after the death of Simon Nku in 1999, but this is disputed. The Evaton group favours Lazarus Nku, grandson of mme Manku through her son Joel.

### **5.4 Was the split prophesised?**

The Masango group views the history of the split differently. Rev Paul Mabothe (2006) from the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa, that is, the "original church", claims that mme Manku herself had prophesied that Masango would lead the church. She did this as far back as 1937 when she originally started founding the church. Mabothe (2006) states:

During that year (1937) she got a revelation that said to her that there was going to be a man from the east, a Zulu speaking man who is going to be more powerful than her who is going to run the church, and she was only paving the way for him.

He also claims that, as early as in 1922, another prophet, Walter Mateta, prophesied about a man who was coming from the east to lead the church. "And indeed, in 1938 the prophecy was fulfilled as the man came and he was Prophet Archbishop Dr PJ Masango (DD)" (Mabothe 2006). Mabothe attributes the problems in the church to mme Manku's oldest son Johannes who wanted to practise polygamy and who was an autocrat. According to Mabothe, Masango opposed him on these issues, and the people voted against Johannes.

Christinah Mokoduli Nku died in September 1988, seven days after her son Joel Nku, the father of the President of the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy, Lazarus Nku. She was buried on her farm Vogelstruisdraai

(Madikwe) next to Rustenburg. It is now almost 20 years since her death. How have the splits and rows in the St John's churches affected her legacy?

## 6 2006/7: A VISION OF HEALING?

Urged by the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and, according to their own testimony (Lazarus Nku, Daniel Mathe 2006), inspired by the legacy of their founder mme Manku, leaders from the St John's churches met on 20 June 2006 for a "Reconciliation Indaba" at the SACC National Office. This led to a document of intent, entitled "Agreed Common Ground" which was issued on Thursday 13 October 2005. In this document the "big five" agreed:

- on a common mandate to promote unity, peace, common understanding and a good image of the Church
- on future meetings between themselves where they would openly and honestly discuss their differences but also the things that they share in common. Of paramount importance here, of course, is the history they share in mme Manku.

The "big five" who are busy in unification talks and have signed the "Agreed Common Ground" document are

- St John's Apostolic Faith Mission of SA in Evaton, presented by Evangelist Daniel Mathe
- St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy, presented by Rev (Archbishop?) Enoch Ramokoka
- St John's Apostolic Faith Mission of SA in Potchefstroom, presented by Rev BE Radebe
- St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy in Vogelstruisdraai, presented by President Lazarus Nku (and co-signed by the PRO of this church, SE Mosiya)
- St John's Apostolic Faith Mission of SA in Katlehong, presented by Rev Paul Mabothe

In the meantime an initiative has been taken by evangelist Daniel Mathe, Rev SE Mosiya and Rev Elias Rampede to form the African Indigenous Churches Organisation in order to deal with issues such as the reunification of churches from within the independent churches league (Mosiya 2006).

The festivities of 25 November 2006 symbolised their intent to unify, when the "big five" and more, assembled to honour a hundred years of history "written" by their mother, Christinah Nku. It is her healing ministry that is currently the inspiration and historical validation for the St John's churches to find and heal one another.

## 7 CONCLUSION

Lazarus Nku (2006), in a speech he gave at the 25 November 2006 festivities, in his calm and composed way, linked the history of Ma Christinah Nku as prophet to the future of St John's Apostolic Faith Mission with the following words:<sup>xxiv</sup>

We are fixing the things of the church. In heaven the church has already been fixed. The rest remains for our hearts to do. Today, here, coming together, we have defeated the devil. Ma Nku has prophesied the unification of the church. We must now show that she was a real prophet by uniting the church.

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Mongwe, Reverend – 5 September 2006, Soshanguve.

Nku, Lazarus, President – 17 October 2006, Winterveld.

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## ENDNOTES

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- 1 The research for this article was made possible by a small grant from the Research Institute for Theology and Religion, at the University of South Africa.
  - 2 The spelling "Christinah" has been retained throughout the paper because this is the way in which St John's Apostolic Faith Mission refers to her in their centenary celebrations. She herself spelled her name "Christina" in available official documentation.
  - 3 A variety of spellings have been found in the literature, including "Mokothudi", and "Mokutudi". In this article the spelling "Mokotuli" will be used following the spelling of the church at present.
  - 4 In this article reference to this church is made as "St John's Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa", although a variety of designations have been found in the literature, using "St John" in stead of "St John's" and adding "Church" after "Apostolic Faith Mission". Also, some sources use "in South Africa" and other "in Southern Africa".
  - 5 Originally sung in Southern Sotho, the song has been translated by Gabisile Mashigo, assistant to this project funded by the RITR, that is, the project to research the history of Ma Christinah Nku. This is the first verse of the song only.
  - 6 The second verse of this song in honour of Ma Christinah Nku is as follows:
 

St John's of the apostles  
 you helped the nation of this world  
 with the gospel of mother Nku  
 St John.  
 Blue and white is the attire that was given to us.  
 Alleluia, our mother,  
 you finished your calling from above,

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you brought us out of Egypt.  
Today we are able to pray to the God of Mother Nku.  
Always abide by the laws, Apostles!  
And show the nations of the world St John.  
You are holy, St John of mother Nku!  
Let us prophesy for the church to grow.  
St John's, St John's of Mother Nku.

7 Sebokeng is a black "township" situated to the east of Johannesburg, the largest city in South Africa. This is about an hours drive (110 km) from Pretoria (Tshwane), the capital of the province of Gauteng.

8 The speakers were Rev ET Rampedi (St John's, Hammanskraal), Lazarus Nku (President, St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy), Rev Nkosi (St John's, Mamelodi), Archbishop Matjali, Lady Archbishop Tsabalala (St John's, Mamelodi), Prof Mathole Motshekga, King MS Mankuroane II (Taung), Ma Dorah Mathe (daughter of Christinah Nku), Bishop SN Mtini, and Rev Motlalepula Chabaku.

9 The words of the song "Halleluya, rorisang" are as follows:

*First verse:*

Halleluya X2  
Re bone kgotso ka mme-ma-Nku  
Re mo filwe ke Ramasedi  
Go phyta dinku tse latlhegileng  
Mother Christinah Mokotuli Nku  
Morwedi wag a Bolibe  
Motho mohlolo  
Wa hlahisa pholoso lefatsheng le le ntsho  
Aa amogela ditaello tse di tswang kwa legodimo  
A fodisa malwetse a batho ka thapelo  
Batho ba bone bophelo  
Le ba ditlhogo le bone ba fole  
Ba bine da halleluya.

*Second verse:*

St John's wa mapostola  
O thusitse ditshaba tsa lefatshe lena  
Ka yona evangedi ya bo mme-ma-Nku  
St John.  
Blue and white ke seaparo sa rona se re se filweng  
Halleluya mme wa rona  
O weditse thumo ya legodimo  
Re roka bitso la gao  
O re ntsitse Egepeta  
Kajeno re itse go rapela Modimo wa bo mme-ma-Nku  
Tsamayang ka molae hle! Mapostola  
Le supetse ditashaba tsa lefatshe le St John  
O wa galalela St John wa bo mme-ma-Nku  
A re porofeteng, kereke e gole  
St John's, St John's wa bo mme-ma-Nku.

10 The other being the ZCC (Zion Christian Church).

11 Soshanguve is a black "township" situated about 50 km northwest of the Pretoria/Tswane city centre.

12 Rev Mongwe is also acting headmaster of Resithilepele Primary School in Soshanguve.

13 By "us" is meant myself (the author) and Ms Gabisile Mashigo (assistant to the project).

14 Zuurbekom is situated to the northwest of the Johannesburg city centre, halfway between Johannesburg and Potchefstroom/Tlokwe.

15 Winterveld is situated to the northwest of Soshanguve, Hebron and Mabopane.

16 The author wrote down notes of the speech while it was delivered; this was supplemented by Rev SE Mosiya, the PRO of the St John's Apostolic Church of Prophecy.

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- 17 These are the words with which the booklet (St John 2006) prepared for the 2006 festivities start. The booklet throughout refers to her as “mme Manku”, her name being too holy to be pronounced outright.
- 18 Published sources refer to Christinah as a Pedi-speaking girl of Ndebele descent, but Daniel Mathe orally insisted on her being Tshwana.
- 19 The dream is related by Linda Thomas (1997:60, taken from the unpublished family records compiled by Lydia August, “How St John’s Apostolic Faith Mission came into being”.
- 20 According to “Visions”, Christinah Nku (undated) related this incident differently. She said that they went to her cousin’s wedding, where sy became numb for five days. Her mother took her home. When they sat down to rest, she fell asleep. While she was sleeping she had a vision in which she was given two songs, song 32 and 105.
- 21 In his speech at the 25 November festivities, Lazarus Nku said that his grandmother married in 1920 into the Nku family.
- 22 Thomas (1997:60) quotes from Lydia August’ unpublished family records that the second child’s name was “Anna”. In St John (2006) she is referred to as Dorcas.
- 23 In present day Namibia.
- 24 These words were written down by the author while the speech was delivered and may not be verbatimly correct. However, the contents are clear.