

**The Manyano¹ movements within the
Methodist Church of Southern Africa:
An expression of freedom of worship (1844–1944)**

Mokhele Madise

Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology,
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Lazarus Lebeloane

Department of Further Education, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South
Africa

Abstract

The arrival of the Methodist/Wesleyan mission and missionaries in Africa heralded a religious stringency that did not afford the indigenous people religious freedom. In response, a number of movements were formed from within the church by indigenous people. Many of these emerged as Manyano movements. The various forms that these movements took were intended to address a range of Christian understandings of what may be termed a rite of passage with regard to age, gender, race and non-affiliation. The history of these churches in Africa, and South Africa in particular, has revealed the schism that later led to the formation of the African Independent Churches. These movements introduced a new trend in these traditionally European churches involving the expression of religious freedom and worship from within rather than imposed from without.

Introduction

When churches from Europe were introduced into Africa through missionaries on an evangelical mission, the intention of these missionaries was to convert the indigenous people. Their primary task, however, was to attend to the spiritual needs of their soldiers and colonial administrators from their various countries in Europe, and it was through their subsequent encounter with the indigenous people and resulting curiosity that the missionaries began

¹ *Manyano* are prayer movements or organisations within the church. These organisations may be incorporative or exclusive.

to be interested in evangelising them. The missionaries did not give the indigenous people an opportunity to demonstrate their religion, but instead concluded that the latter had neither religion nor religious conscience, and thus simply imposed Christianity on them without affording them an opportunity to share their beliefs, and without being prepared to learn and understand which religion the indigenous people were embracing at the time. However, what was at stake was choice or freedom of religion, not only for the indigenous people, but for the missionaries and their counterparts from Europe as well. It emerged only later that not only religion, but also politics, economics and social factors were in fact at issue.

This article will focus on the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, and the schisms that occurred in the Methodist Church leading to the founding of the Manyano movements in that denomination will be briefly highlighted. These movements were formed on the basis of age difference, gender, race and non-affiliation, and include movements such as Unzondelelo,² Bana ba Lebese,³ the Wesley Guild, the Young Women's Manyano, the Women's Manyano and the Young Men's Guild. Some conclusions will be drawn at the end of the article.

Background

The history of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from the date of its break with the Thembu National Church under Nehemiah Tile in 1880 reveals a lack of religious freedom afforded to indigenous people (Balila 1991:54). Nehemiah Tile demonstrated the lack of religious freedom in the Methodist Church through his involvement in Thembu politics in 1883, as a result of which he was taken to task by Rev Chubb, who claimed that Tile had kept him in the dark about his political activity. This was further exacerbated by the donation of an ox at the circumcision of Dalinyebo, heir to the Thembu Chieftaincy. The subsequent schism was brought to a head through Mangena Mokone in 1892, and almost crippled the Methodist Church. The point of contention was racial discrimination and working conditions in the church, and as a result Mokone drew a large following consisting of both lay members and clergy of the Methodist Church. Action by both Nehemiah Tile and Mangena Mokone led to the formation of the present-day African Independent Churches (AICs). These schisms created a new platform for the struggle for religious freedom from within rather than an abandonment of the church. The continuation of the schism seemed not to have shaken the

² *Unzondelelo* is a Zulu word meaning desire, passion and an irresistible impulse to save another person's soul.

³ *Bana ba lebese* is a reference to children's milk teeth.

mainline churches at all with regard to their endeavours for religious freedom. As a result it later gave rise to innovation within the church, as many members of the Methodist Church opted to remain in the church and consider new options for creating an environment that would offer them religious freedom in the 19th and 20th century; there was thus a paradigm shift from schisms in the Methodist Church to Manyano movements. Although this paradigm shift was not restricted to the Methodist Church, it must be remembered that this was where the Manyano movements originated.

Unzondelelo

The history of this movement goes back to 1844, to the time of the Swazi king Mswazi. Mswazi sent a delegation to Rev James Allison, who was stationed in Thaba-Nchu at that time, requesting him to come and talk to the Swazi people about Christianity (Balía 1991:35). At the District Synod, which met at Grahamstown, James Allison and Rev Richard Giddy were released on a mission to Swaziland. They were accompanied by indigenous men from various ethnic backgrounds. However, the mission was unsuccessful, as a misunderstanding between the party and the Swazis resulted in considerable loss of life. They left Swaziland for Natal with their families in 1847, and were warmly received there. A member of Allison's company, Samuel Khumalo, succeeded in bringing together a group of people that included Daniel Msimang, Stephen Xaba, Stephanus Mzolo, Timothy Gule, Ezra Msimang, Williams Mlambo and John Zuma (Balía 1991:35). Daniel Msimang had the idea of beginning a campaign, with a conference to be organised in Edendale (bought by James Allison for the Methodist Church, in order to establish a community where Africans could own land), as it was conveniently situated for their meetings. The group corresponded with other Methodists throughout the country and invited them to the conference, to be held in August 1875. Revival services were organised in 1874 in preparation for the anticipated conference of August 1875.

The first conference was presided over by Johannes Khumalo, with Stephen Mlawu as the secretary. It was at this conference that the name Unzondelelo was proposed. Unzondelelo was to become a watchword for Black Methodist evangelism. At the conference, a session devoted to evangelism highlighted the need for funding and full-time evangelists to work among black people. Delegates immediately raised a sum of £100, and this contribution was handed to Rev John Cameron, who at that time was the District Chairman of Natal. The handing over of the funds was followed by a formal application to establish the Unzondelelo movement in the Methodist Church. However, Rev Cameron died before presenting the movement's case to the synod, and as a result there was confusion among the white missionaries concerning the aims and objectives of Unzondelelo. The initial

conference was not unconstitutional, as it was attended by a deputation of white ministers appointed by the conference in 1874. However, the white missionaries were more concerned with the training of the native clergy, an issue which the black Methodists were not considering within the realms of Unzondelelo. They responded with these words: “We have a wound in our hearts, but we have nothing to do with the training college. If you put it up, we will send our children, but we cannot build it” (Balía 1991:37).

The members of the Unzondelelo movement decided to appoint a sub-committee whose task it was to put matters into perspective with the white clergy. In communicating with the white clergy, the members of this sub-committee chose their words carefully. They did not dismiss the idea of being under the superintendence of the missionaries, and promised to conform to and respect the laws and discipline of the Methodist Church. However, they made it clear that they intended managing their own affairs, selecting the sites for their revivals and meetings, and electing their own leadership. From this it was clear that black clergy belonging to the movement were concerned about certain issues affecting the Methodist converts (Balía 1991:37), who were at a disadvantage as the result of incompetent and obstinate missionaries, especially in Edendale, and felt that their efforts should not be threatened by the concerns of the white missionaries.

Bana ba Lebese

It is not clear how this movement for the children within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was started, and by whom. All that is known is that a group of women felt it was important to bring the children in the Methodist Church together and teach them Christian values. Wednesdays were selected for bringing children between the ages of one and twelve together for worship, and to learn the scriptures, moral values, and social interaction with others. The intention was to bring these children from different communities together to interact through participation in drama based on a theme selected from scripture. This would also involve singing (usually a hymn). The choice of scripture-based dramas and hymns was another way of teaching these children to be independent while simultaneously encouraging their talents or preparing them for future careers (Madise, undated). Parents were involved, especially in monitoring the progress of their children. It is from such beginnings that a number of ministers began their journey to entering the ministry, or becoming lay preachers and evangelists. Other children have gone on to become professionals in other fields. Bana ba Lebese has therefore afforded many children the freedom to express their religious conviction during their early years.

The Wesley Guild

The Wesley Guild was probably started in 1948 or 1949 in South Africa. However, this movement had existed within the Methodist Church for a long time before reaching South Africa. It began as a youth movement in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa when it was found that most young people were playing no active role in the church. In South Africa, the Wesley Guild was founded by Gabriel Setiloane, who was at that time a young minister of the Methodist Church and a Connexional Youth Co-ordinator. The aim of the Wesley Guild was to bring the youth together to participate meaningfully in the church. As a result, the Wesley Guild established the four Cs, which became the pillars of the organisation, namely comradeship, consecration, Christian citizenship and culture. Many of the young people who belong to this movement uphold all four. Participation in the guild allows these young people to freely express their religious (Christian) freedom in a manner with which they feel comfortable (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa Youth Department, undated).

The Women's Manyano (Kopano)⁴

According to Preston (2007: 42), the word *manyano* signifies “purity of speech, holiness of life, conduct and temperament, and service to the glory of God for the extension of his Kingdom”.

Opinions vary concerning details of the founding of the Women's Manyano in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (Preston 2007:41). Different authors give different recorded dates for the establishment of the movement: Madise (2000:23) states that this women's movement was founded in 1905 by Rev and Mrs Mthembu. Preston (2007:41) states that Mrs Amos Burnett started the Women's Manyano in the Transvaal in 1910. Atwell (in Preston 2007:41) claims that the movement was established in 1926 at a Conference in Bloemfontein. Deborah Gaitskill (in Elphick & Davenport 1997:253) speaks of African women from the Johannesburg Primitive Methodist Church holding a series of revivalist gatherings in 1919 and recruiting other women in the Orange Free State, and claims that this constitutes the beginnings of the Women's Manyano, which was initially led by black male evangelists, although women took turns at leadership as well as to pray and convert their hearers to repentance.

This women's organisation was welcomed by missionaries. In the words of Holness (in Preston 1997:23):

⁴ The word *kopano* in Sesotho, Setswana and Sepedi refers to a gathering for the purpose of worship and prayer.

Interestingly, the missionaries welcomed these women's or mother's groups because of their perceived role in fostering 'devout domesticity' among the women. In time the Women's Manyano was to assume the somewhat modified characteristics of being a contextualized channel of mutual support, both for women who had moved to urban areas and rural women whose husbands had moved to the cities for work, in the face of social, economic, political and emotional disruptions.

It would appear that from 1905, when the Women's Manyano was formed by Rev and Mrs Mthembu, it was not recognised by the church, and the organisation therefore functioned without the Methodist Church acknowledging its existence. Hinfelaar (2007:42) observes that the formalisation of the Women's Manyano was long overdue, as it had existed unacknowledged for many years. This may confirm the statement made by Mrs Mokae (in her interview with Madise 2000:23) that from the time the organisation was formed, these women prayed and worshipped every morning in a church, and their numbers continued to grow. Unfortunately they were refused permission to use the church for their activities, and had to resort to holding meetings under trees, where they worshipped and prayed. The Women's Manyano continued their devotional activities and insisted on being granted permission to use the church. They were later granted permission by the leaders' meeting to use the church, and the organisation started to grow from one circuit to another, eventually spreading to the Districts and finally becoming a Connexional movement (Madise 2000:23). Holness (in Preston 1997:23) observes that before the formation of the Women's Manyano, a women's movement was established in the Transvaal and Natal. The women belonging to all these groups met for revival and prayer, and the activities of the groups were characterised by informality in singing, Bible study, prayer recitation and conversation.

Although the Women's Manyano was finally accepted as an official women's movement in the Methodist Church, it did not escape internal tensions and controversies. Controversy emerged in the Northern Transvaal District following the first Triennial Convention, held in Bloemfontein, when it was claimed that the Northern Transvaal District had "interpreted" the laws and discipline "wrongly". At that time it was common practice for ministers' wives to be automatically appointed office bearers of the Women's Manyano. However, the Northern Transvaal took a different approach, which led to the appointment of non-ministers' wives. This district was therefore out of touch with some of the developments taking place in other districts. Constitutionally the Northern Transvaal District was correct in appointing non-ministers' wives, but because this had become common practice, there was controversy and tension within the Manyano (Madise 2000:24). The

movement had been started by non-ministers' wives, but ministers' wives maintained that they could not be led by 'lay women'. This prevented Mrs Khuzwayo from taking a leadership position in 1927, and Mrs E Khumalo encountered a similar restriction in 1932. The tension continued, appearing to have been resolved only in 1995, when the Conference of the Methodist Church stated that office bearers of the Women's Manyano need not be ministers' wives. However, this has been ignored in some quarters, as ministers' wives continue to hold office (Preston 2007: 43).

The Young Women's Manyano

The Young Women's Manyano emerged as a branch of the Women's Manyano, but its date of inception is not known. The membership of this movement consists mainly of young and unmarried women who are full members of the church. To become members they do not necessarily have to be uniformed, but may be in the process of undergoing the required six-month trial period prior to being uniformed (Madise undated). The colours of the Young Women's Manyano uniform differ from that of the Women's Manyano: members of the Women's Manyano wear a red blouse with a white collar or bib, while members of the Young Women's Manyano wear a white blouse with a red collar or bib (Madise undated). As indicated earlier, this movement was not independent, as it emerged from the Women's Manyano, and was governed by the same rules as those governing the Women's Manyano; in addition, the District Convention was held under the presidency of the Women's Manyano. The Young Women's Manyano was allowed only one representative at the district conventions, and the same rule applied at the Connexional level, where the district had only one representative. They could hold no office except that of secretary, and at these conventions they were allowed only half a day to discuss their own matters. It was only in the 1980s that the Young Women's Manyano began to campaign for independence from the Women's Manyano. The various district conventions of the Women's Manyano discussed this issue and decided to take the matter to the Biennial Convention of the Women's Manyano for discussion in 1984. There it was resolved that the Young Women's Manyano be given the independence they had been asking for. Although they were given the freedom to run their affairs separately from the Women's Manyano, no member of the Young Women's Manyano could hold the office of president or treasurer of the organisation, however; the position of the president still resides with the Women's Manyano. The move to give the Young Women's Manyano their independence was finally welcomed by the Women's Manyano at their 2002 Triennial Convention, which was held in Durban (Madise undated). It was later welcomed by the Methodist Connexional Conference, which also gave it its blessing. Its first "official president" was Mrs Gertrude Boyce, who was

elected president of the Young Women's Manyano at the Durban Conference. This initiative was welcomed by the entire Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Mrs Boyce's first triennial convention was held in East London in 2004. Her successor was Mrs Annah Ntlhokoa, who officiated at the July 2007 Triennial Convention, held in Bloemfontein. However, the Young Women's Manyano does not have its own constitution to govern it and its affairs, and it continues to rely on that of the Women's Manyano, as a consequence of which it is governed by the same rules as those governing the Women's Manyano. The Young Women's Manyano is currently working on drafting its own constitution, which will finally govern it and its affairs (Madise undated). It is expected that the process of drafting the constitution will soon be completed to allow the Young Women's Manyano to review it and make any necessary amendments.

The Young Men's Guild

The beginnings of the Young Men's Guild can be traced back to the Transvaal and Swaziland Districts in 1912. A group of young men from the Methodist Church in Benoni felt that they wanted to serve the Lord more actively (Madise 2000:25). Keen to emulate what their mothers had already started in forming the Women's Manyano, these young men formed a band, and undertook to do the following:

- (a) set aside one day a week as their own, for prayers and devotions (Saturday was chosen as the most suitable day)
- (b) endeavour, with the Lord's help, to lead such lives and conduct themselves in such manner as would encourage other young men to emulate their example
- (c) strive to win souls for Christ as their mothers did
- (d) in their worship, do all in their power to extend God's Kingdom by preaching salvation by faith through Christ to all (Young Men's Band 1912).

A large number of people, most of them men, attended the inauguration of this guild. Among them was a young man by the name of John Mabona, an interpreter at the Local Native Commissioner's office. He showed considerable leadership character, which helped him play an important role in the formation of the Young Men's Band. However, this initiative was not limited to Benoni; it spread to other areas such as Boksburg, where two brothers, Shadrack and James Januarie, joined John Mabona in forming and strengthening the Young Men's Band. In no time the band was expanding rapidly on the Witwatersrand, as a result of which office bearers were

required to oversee the affairs of the movement (Young Men's Band 1912). John Mabona, who was not yet an accredited preacher, was appointed chairman of the Young Men's Band. Like any other newly formed movement, the band found that the going was not easy, as they could not function freely as legitimate Christians owing to resentment from both ministers and other accredited preachers (Madise 2000:25). The band was viewed as a sect whose members did not sleep, but instead held revival services all Saturday evening. Established church members did not take readily to this band of "unknown young men". Opposition grew very strong, and they were reported to Rev Meara, superintendent of the mission, in an endeavour to halt their activities. As a result of pressure from all quarters of the church they were called to appear before Rev Meara to account for their "unacceptable deed". To the opposition's surprise, Rev Meara welcomed the young men and, remarking on their bearing and dignity, told them not to lose sight of their aim. The band was not disbanded, as so many had anticipated.

In 1932 both the lay people and the black ministers together with the congregation met under one roof, adopting the name Amadodana.⁵ This time John Mabona was no longer an unaccredited preacher, but an ordained minister of the Methodist Church. He chaired the first official meeting of the group, which was held in the Methodist Church in Albert Street (Young Men's Band 1912).

Conclusion

For many indigenous people, being a Christian came at a price associated with both being a convert and initiating new ways of being religious in the Christian environment. This was evident from the way they were expected to change and behave, while at the same time their initiatives were either questioned or rejected. In some cases they had to seek approval for the exercise of their religious commitment, as was evident in the founding of Unzondelelo and the Young Men's Guild (Amadodana), as in both instances they had to report on their actions and justify them to the church authorities.

In some cases movements such as the Wesley Guild, Bana ba Lebeso and the Young Women's Manyano, youth movements all, met with resistance that in essence resulted from fear of the unknown, and had to deal with the fact that they were under constant scrutiny in case something unexpected should emerge. Irrespective of the challenges faced by these converts, they refused to give up their belief in religious freedom, making a point of worshipping in fellowship while embracing the existence of the social constructs of gender, race and age group.

⁵ This is an isiXhosa and isiZulu name meaning "young men".

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