

**THE LIFE AND WORK OF THE
REVEREND MAPALA MARCUS MAPHOTO:
HIS MANAGEMENT OF THE CHURCH, 1965-2001**

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Abstract

This article is an appraisal of the life and work of the Reverend Maphoto, who served the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) for a period of thirty-six (36) years. It has been observed that many servants of different churches left no recorded footprints in history. In the URCSA many priests (or Dominees, as they are called) went the same route, either by ill-health, death or retirement. They were praised at their funerals, at their retirement ceremonies, but rarely when they were still alive and strong. At the time of writing this document, the Reverend Maphoto is still alive and an emeritus of the URCSA. He was interviewed at his home at ga-Matlala, where he built his family home. The paper is written from the perspective that religious leaders have tremendous influence in shaping the direction of the church. Their contribution to communities is immense and they manage the church, each in his or her own way. This article therefore sets out to present the facts about the life and work of the Reverend Maphoto and particularly about his management of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. The researchers went to his home at ga-Matlala to interview him. The major findings of the study indicated that his achievements in managing the church outweighed

his failures and that he deserves to be rated among the effective church managers.

1 INTRODUCTION

The life and work of the Reverend Mapala Marcus Maphoto has its roots in the missionary enterprise of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in the then Northern Transvaal (Maree 1962:35). The point made is that the Reverend Maphoto served the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), which had its origin in the 16th century with the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape in 1652. The transplantation of “Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde of Hervormde Kerk” from the Netherlands to South Africa resulted, centuries later, in the birth of the family of “NG Kerke” – the NG Kerk (for Whites), the NG Sending Kerk (for Coloureds), the Reformed Church of Africa (for Indians) and the NG Kerk in Afrika (for Africans) (Pretorius 1949:24; Matsaung 1981:18). At the Umgababa Synod, the NG Kerk resolved that “... separate church affiliations for the various population groups are the policy of the Dutch Reformed Church” (Umgababa Synod Agenda & Acts 1979:34; Matsaung 1983:11). Out of this family was born, in 1994, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa from the combination of the NG Sending Kerk and the NG Kerk in Afrika. The Reverend Maphoto served both the old NGKA and the new URCSA. For the purpose of this study, the name that will be used is the URCSA. The following research questions guided the study: Who is the Reverend Maphoto? Where did he come from? What is interesting about him? What were the major events of his lifetime? Who were the major figures in the church during his period? How did he manage the church? What were his main achievements?

An adequate perusal of such facts should facilitate a proper appraisal of the contribution he made to the URCSA, both as a minister in the congregation and as a moderator at Synod level. This will enable us to reflect on his role during the period of transition from Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika (NGKA) to Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) at both the Regional and the General Synod level. In reality, the process of transformation in South Africa was strongly influenced by religious leaders and it remains, in many

ways, a story of hope (Hofmeyr 2004:22). The paper will therefore consider the context in which he lived, his schooling and early life, his ministry in the Ohrigstad congregation, his contribution to communities, his role at Synod level, his emeritus life and a critique of his life and work, culminating in a conclusion.

2 VALIDITY OF THE INTERVIEW

Although church documents have been scrutinised, it was nonetheless necessary to interview him in order to arrive at greater clarity with regard to issues that are not clearly articulated in the documents. The validity of this research is enhanced by the fact that information obtained from him during the interview was found to be in line with what is documented in some of the church organs in the archives (Umgababa Synod Agenda & Acts 1979:45). The information supplied by the Reverend Maphoto has been compared with and verified by means of other information concerning each aspect mentioned in this article.

3 THE CONTEXT IN WHICH HE LIVED

The Reverend Maphoto lived at a critical period of South African history when major issues were unfolding for the church and the nation. The political set-up of the time was characterised by Apartheid ideology, which attempted to ensure that the policy of separate development should succeed. The Reverend Maphoto therefore found himself at Kgautswane, a section of the then Lebowa homeland and could not live in Ohrigstad town, which had been declared a White area (although his congregation was named after this town and its boundaries stretched across the area). It was the period when the former South African government used the Bible to justify the Apartheid heresy (Boesak 1977:55).

During this period a group of theologians came together in order to reflect on and understand the significance of that moment in South African history. For them this was a very serious moment. It was the “Kairos” moment, the moment of grace and opportunity, the favourable time in which God issued a challenge to decisive action (The Kairos Theologians 1985:1).

In his own church, the Reverend Maphoto and a group of theologians met at Bloemfontein in 1974 to launch the Confessing Movement of the Dutch Reformed Churches (*Belydende Kring van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke*) referred to as "BK". The main objective of BK was to challenge Apartheid theology which, as already indicated, had divided the Dutch Reformed Churches along ethnic lines (Matsaung 1981:13). BK saw the unification of the Dutch Reformed churches as its God-given task. Its ecumenical ties with similar movements worldwide were very strong. Among its founding leaders it counted Beyers Naude, Sam Buti, Mashai Tema, Lucas Mabusela, Allan Boesak, Shun Govender, Zacharia Mokgoebo, Lesiba Matsaung, Sepapa Seloana and many others.

The Reverend Maphoto led the church as a moderator while he was also a member of BK. He had to attend meetings of both the church and BK without causing any friction that would disadvantage the church struggle in South Africa. He successfully led the church to a full understanding of the mission and vision of BK. In 1986 the members of BK in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) formulated the Belhar Confession, which was embraced by the DRCA in 1994. The two daughter churches then united to form the present URCSA (Matsaung 2006a:234). Today the Belhar Confession forms part of the doctrinal documents of the URCSA (Matsaung 2006b:132).

4 SCHOOLING AND EARLY LIFE

The Reverend Mapala Marcus Maphoto was born on 18 April 1935 at Moletji, Ga-Ramongwana village. He is the son of William Kgwadi Maphoto and Sylvia Thatane.

His parents came to Kransplaas at Aurora in 1939. At this farm, Kransplaas, he started his schooling. In 1940 he completed Sub A and in 1941 Sub B at the school founded by his sister, Neria Mahladi (née Maphoto). There were, in fact, no school buildings: lessons were conducted under the big *mohlopi* tree. From there he returned to Moletji, Ga-Ramongwane, to further his education at Legodi Primary School.

In 1947 he came home to Kransplaas and completed his Junior Certificate (JC, Form III) in 1954. In 1955 he began his secondary education at Bethesda Normal College under the Reverend C L Brink. He completed his Matric (Form V) in 1957. From there he enrolled for a Primary Teacher Course (PTC) at Bethesda Normal College in 1958 and completed it in 1959.

In 1960 he was appointed by the Reverend D S van der Merwe to head Maputlela Primary School in Tzaneen. This primary school catered for children whose parents were working at the Merensky School. In 1961 he resigned from Maputlela Primary School and went to Westfalia Estate in Tzaneen as a clerk. He worked as a clerk for only three months before being promoted to the position of a “paymaster” of the compound. Towards the end of 1961 he felt called by God to become a minister of religion (Maree 1966:33). Against the wishes of the compound manager, Mr J B Roots, he resigned his position and prepared to start his theological training the following year.

In 1962 he went into training as a minister of religion at Stofberg Teologiese Skool van die NG Kerk (Stofberg Theological School), which is situated in Mankweng-Turfloop adjacent to the University of Limpopo (formerly known as the University of the North). In 1963, while still in training, he married Melita Masenya Koko. The marriage was solemnised by the Reverend J D Heroldt at Bethesda. It was blessed with four boys and two girls. He completed his theological training in 1964.

5 THE REVEREND MAPHOTO AT OHRIGSTAD – 1965-2001

The Reverend Maphoto was ordained in 1965 as a minister of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Africa (NGKA) in the Ohrigstad congregation. This was the only congregation he served during the entire 36 years of his ministry. It was in and from this congregation that God used him as an instrument of His mission and where his achievements were realised. The following are among his more prominent achievements:

5.1 Church buildings

On his arrival at Ohrigstad he soon discovered that most congregants were attending Sunday church services under the trees or in structures that were not properly built. His first priority was therefore to build proper church structures in the outlying areas (posts) of this congregation. The Dutch Reformed Church supported him in his endeavours.

He erected twelve church buildings in various outposts: at Kgautšwane, Phiring, Leboweng, Mphatlo, Tlhavekisa, Matibidi, Rowenkrans, Mdlolo, Mapareng, Kgotlopong, Kaspersnek and Makgwareng. His managerial skills helped him to attract many converts to the church.

5.2 Contribution to the life of Ohrigstad congregation

The Reverend Maphoto started his work by doing house visitation from one outpost to another, organising prayer meetings, encouraging dispirited and fallen members of the congregation, evangelising, visiting and praying for the sick and for prisoners. He organised church choirs in each outpost and intensified the youth movement (MBB) currently known as the Christian Youth Movement (CYM). He also paid special attention to the aged and to children. Sunday school and catechism classes were another priority. The Women's Movement – then the Christelike Vrouevereniging (CVV) – currently known as Christian Women Ministry (CWM) was revived in all the outposts. The congregation flourished and its spiritual life was commendable.

When the Reverend Maphoto started working in this congregation in 1965, the membership was 237; when he retired in 2001, it was 3 000. Of these, 240 were members of the Christian Women Ministry (CWM), 161 were members of the Christian Youth Movement (CYM) and there were 37 church council members. He did not, at the interview, mention the Christian Men's Ministry (CMM). He did say that the Sunday school was well organised in every ward of the congregation. All in all, he administered 23 wards. In his own words: "I was successful because I was supported by my wife and strong

men and women of great faith in the church council.” The implication was that his management style was very effective.

5.3 Contribution to the community and education

As a professional teacher, the Reverend Maphoto paid special attention to the education of congregants and the community as a whole. He erected not only church buildings but also three farm schools: Rozenkrans, Heuningskrans and Mohlatsingwane.

He became the manager of these farm schools, employing and dismissing teachers, emulating his former mentors at his alma mater, Bethesda Normal College (Matsaung & Seloana 2005:221-236). In the school community he became chairperson of both Legoleng Primary School and Mahlahle Primary School. He was also the founder and chairperson of Matšhaile High School. While shepherding his congregation, he taught Biology and Afrikaans at Maokeng High School as a professional teacher in 1979 and 1980. From 1978 to 1997 he was the Chaplain of the Transvaal United African Teachers Association (TUATA) in the Far East Region.

5.4 Projects

5.1.1 Agricultural project

Realising the needs of the rural Ohristad congregation, the Reverend Maphoto found it necessary to establish an agricultural project. Through this project the rural community and congregants would be provided with fresh fruit and especially with fresh vegetables. In consultation with the local Department of Agriculture, he successfully managed the agricultural project.

In 1978 the project produced 60 000 bags of potatoes, sold at R5-00 per pocket to generate funds. Some were given to the workers and some were sold, a part of the money being donated to the church.

5.4.2 Poultry project

He also established a poultry project in the Ohrigstad congregation. With assistance from the local Department of Agriculture, he built proper poultry structures. Because of logistical problems it was not as successful as the agricultural project, and eventually it collapsed.

5.4.3 Cookery project

The Reverend Maphoto established a cookery project which was successfully used by the community. It started with 12 women: when he retired, there were 36 women involved. Recipes from Lehlasedi (Ligstraal) were used to guide the women in cooking various foods. This was a community and church-based project and its products were consumed by both the community and the church.

6 FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

When the Reverend Maphoto arrived in this congregation, it was totally dependent financially on the White NGK. The Plaaslike Sending Kommissie (PSK) was responsible for financing the congregation.

After many financial workshops and teaching and preaching about stewardship, and after numerous workshops about organising bazaars and other fund-raising events, the congregation became financially independent from the PSK. Ultimately the congregation opened its own account and never had to rely on the PSK again.

7 CONTRIBUTION AT PRESBYTERY (*RING*) LEVEL

In 1965 the Reverend Maphoto became a member of the Presbytery of Lydenburg. From 1967 to 1969 he was the Secretary, and from 1969 to 2001 the chairperson, of the Lydenburg Presbytery.

At this level, as the chairperson, he conscientised many congregations about financial independence from the PSK. In his own words: "I set myself as an example, because I had already emancipated my congregation from PSK dependency." He also organised church

music competitions, since he himself was a champion musician (Seloana 1997:172) and conducted many choirs. He is, indeed, a man of music. As he puts it, "When there are many people singing, my voice makes the difference."

8 CONTRIBUTION AT SYNOD LEVEL

In 1972 the Reverend Maphoto was elected Assistant Secretary of the Northern Transvaal Regional Synod. From 1979 until 1983 he also served in the South African Labour Research Unit as a representative of the URCSA Synod.

8.1 As moderator for 15 years

In 1984 he was elected as the first Black Moderator of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika (NGKA) of the Northern Transvaal Regional Synod. In 1988 he was re-elected as Moderator of the same Synod. When the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa came into being in 1994, the Reverend Maphoto became the first Moderator of the same Northern Transvaal Regional Synod until 1999.

8.2 As Director of Diaconal Services for 10 years

At the General Synod of 1991, the Reverend Maphoto was appointed Director of Diaconal Services for the whole church in South Africa. After the unification in 1994 he continued to serve as Director.

He conducted workshops on community development in all seven regional Synods of this church. His main message throughout was capacity building at all regional levels.

8.3 As Chairperson of Church Aid in Need (CAN) (KAN) for 18 years

Ever since the establishment of CAN, the Reverend Maphoto acted as chairperson. He is not only a leader but a man who actively makes things happen. Many communities and scholars were helped through CAN under his leadership.

8.4 In the General Moderamen for 11 years

In the General Moderamen of the Synod he served as follows:

- 1987-1994: as Assessor of the General Synod of the NGKA (in the NGKA, the position of the assessor is that of Vice-Moderator).
- 1997-2001: as Assessor of the General Synod of the URCSA (the position of the assessor is also that of Vice-Moderator).

All in all he served four (4) terms as Moderator, each term being four (4) years, making a total of 16 years as Moderator.

8.5 As chairperson of the Curatorium

In 1996 the Reverend Maphoto was elected chairperson of the Curatorium. The Curatorium consisted of delegates from the Regional Synods of the South and North. It is the body that controls and oversees theological training and admission to the ministry of the URCSA. Stipulation 22 of the Church Order 2003 clearly states that

The Examination Commission licenses (admits) a candidate to the ministry of the Word, in accordance with the Regulations for Theological Training, after:

23.1 Examining

23.1.1 theological students who are referred to them by the Curatorium after having completed the curriculum prescribed by the curatorium.

In addition, 23.2 requires the Curatorium to conduct Colloquium Doctum (examination of doctrine) for persons of different categories who want to be admitted into the ministry of the URCSA. The Curatorium had to deal with complex matters of the church regarding Stipulations 22, 23, 24, & 25.

The Reverend Maphoto was charged with this duty. Where there were conflicts he remained cool, and when peace returned he moved forward.

9 INTERNATIONAL FORUMS

He became an international figure and travelled through Africa, North America, Europe, India and Korea in search of diaconal opportunities for his church. He told us how he shared platforms with great African leaders when he conducted the funerals of the late Kgoshi Thorometjane Dinkwanyane and the late Dr C N Phatudi, invited by their families. He has been a regular preacher at Radio Thobela and appeared in various electronic and written media where he made theological statements. He was once also a member of the South African Labour Development Research Unit (SALDRU), which was a parastatal dealing with poverty and labour relations.

10 ACHIEVEMENTS

Comparatively speaking, the Reverend Maphoto's contribution to the community surpasses the inputs made by most current indigenous clergy, especially in the URCSA. Among his achievements he counted the following:

- He fought for the unity of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. "When I took over the leadership of the church," he recalls, "the Synod was divided on political lines: those who were for Apartheid and those who were against it. I found the divided church, but I am happy because I left it united when I retired."
- He fought for democracy in the church.
- He worked for a relationship with the White DRC. "When I retired we had managed to achieve 70% of understanding between URCSA and the DRC," he said.
- He refused to divide the church into Synods along ethnic lines.
- He fought for the re-introduction of the Christian Men Ministry (CMM), which is now flourishing.
- He encouraged the establishment of the Christian Youth Movement (CYM) at a regional level.

- He led the Synod to accept the ABC approach in the fight against HIV/AIDS.
- He feels that he was the most accessible and available moderator in the church. He recounts intervening in congregational conflicts, as at Tshildzini, Koedoeskop, Tlhabane and Mothutlong (Britz).

Among his failures he counts the following:

- The Curatorium failed to keep the Turfloop Theological Seminary at Mankweng (it has relocated to Pretoria).
- At the time of his retirement there were still unresolved conflicts in congregations.
- He left the church with a deep rift between the NGKA and the URCSA.

He leaves the following recommendations to his successors:

- He longs for the church to go back to the Bible.
- The church must adopt transitional ministry, he says, and ministers must be available at all times, especially at deathbeds.
- A tent-making ministry is a permanent necessity and must be made part of theological training for ministers of the church.
- Congregation members must pay dues as they can. They must love their church and work for Christ in His church.

11 HIS RETIREMENT SINCE DECEMBER 2001

After retiring as a minister from the Kgautswane congregation in December 2001, the Reverend Maphoto came back to his community at Kransplaas, ga-Matlala. He lives in a home he built for his family. His wife, Mamoruti Maphoto, said: "Because Moruti had retired and was leaving Kgautswane, I also had to retire; I would not let him go alone. Here we are together at home and our children are happy."

However, the Reverend feels that because of his long absence from his own community, he has lost contact with many people. Some

community members are working in faraway places. The community is rural and lives by subsistence ploughing.

The only opportunity that has come their way, he says, is that a company has approached the community about platinum mining prospects. The Reverend Maphoto is now the chairperson of the Mosehleng Mining Committee (MMC). He also assists his home congregation by preaching and teaching the catechism, and he conducts Holy Communion when the Consulent asks him to do so. He visits lapsed members and encourages them to come to church. He and his wife contribute R50-00 each, every Sunday, to the church coffers. This discipline they started while in Kgautswane congregation and they encourage others to do the same.

When he gets up in the morning, he looks after his cattle, sheep and pigs; he also has chickens, rabbits and a big orchard. His wife cleans the house and does the cooking. They walk together through the village, getting a bit of exercise, or drive to the nearest relative or friend or sometimes to town. "This is how we now serve the Lord," they said.

12 A CRITIQUE OF THE REVEREND MAPHOTO'S LIFE AND WORK

The Reverend Maphoto is huge and tall of physique, with a soft voice. During Synod sessions he would crack jokes which made delegates laugh heartily. He was a man of humour who has confidence in himself. Sometimes his jokes mixed culture and religion, which riveted the attention of his audience. He always tried to be consistent and to strike a balance in his leadership of racial groups among the members who attended Synod sessions. Among his strengths may count the fact that he was an initiator of projects and could chair international forums when invited to do so.

He could also seize opportunities. This he did when he used Synod facilities to uplift his congregation at Kgautswane. Whichever forum he attended, he would use it to benefit the Synod and the church at large.

Among the weaknesses he showed was the way his intellectual skills were handicapped by the defective Bantu education he had received as a Black South African. The financial constraints in the running of the church also weakened his management.

The collapse of some of the community projects he managed showed oversights and miscalculations on the part of the community, the congregation and himself with regard to business plans for their funding.

But he will be remembered for the fact that - like Nelson Mandela – when retirement age came, he willingly accepted it and gave way to others. All in all, he has shown that he was a man of God, a spiritual leader who, when it was time to retire, rendered to his Creator what he had accomplished.

13 THE VALUE OF HIS LIFE STORY

As we have indicated, the Reverend Maphoto was not a mystical figure, nor a highly exceptional church personality, but he did make an exceptional contribution in uplifting the poor and many others in the community where he served as a pastor. Besides preaching the Word of God from the pulpit to exhort people to repentance, he also paid special attention to their socio-economic welfare. Self-denial, commitment, dedication to practical and current situations of the community were the goals on which he focused. Undoubtedly his contribution as a clergyman in the URCSA remains outstanding to this day.

14 CONCLUSION

During his term of service in the congregation and the Synod, Reverend Maphoto showed himself to be a spiritual leader, an initiator of projects and a manager who could assess situations and turn problems into triumphs. In the pursuit of his career and the performance of his duties, he always had the support of his family. For his unwavering contribution to the church of Jesus Christ he deserves to be counted among the effective church managers.

Further research into his life and work in the church is highly recommended.

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Interviews

Six other people were interviewed about the life and work of the Reverend Maphoto, but they did not give permission for their names to be included in the "Works consulted" section.

