

## CHARLOTTE MAKGOMA MANYE MAXEKE: HER LEGACY LIVES ON

*Joan Millard Jackson*<sup>1</sup>

John Wesley College, Kilnerton, South Africa

### *Abstract*

This article deals more with Charlotte Maxeke's work than with the details of her life history. Maxeke was the first black South African woman to receive a BSc degree – this at a time when few women were graduating from universities and most were training to become teachers or nurses. She told her family in Johannesburg, including her mother's cousin, Mangena Mokone, about the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) in America and so opened the way for the AMEC to commence their work in South Africa, a work that continues to this day. Maxeke was the first South African black woman to be appointed as a probation officer and this opened the way for others to do the same work. She was the founder of the Bantu Women's League, which is now known as the Women's League of the African National Congress. She was also one of the founders and the first President of the National Council of African Women. She worked tirelessly for the good of the African people, particularly black women. The many papers that she read at conferences have left us a record of what she taught and what motivated her life.

### 1 CHARLOTTE MANYE MAXEKE

There are people in every generation who receive little recognition for what they have done, but their legacy lives on. One such person is Charlotte Manye Maxeke. A number of accounts of her life have been written, such as the book entitled *Malihambe: Let the word speak*

---

<sup>1</sup> Research Associate, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

(Millard 1999) and a chapter in the book entitled *Her-story: Hidden stories of women of faith in Africa* (Phiri & Govinder 2002).<sup>1</sup> Walker (1982) mentions her in her book entitled *Women and resistance in South Africa*, as does Skota (1965) in his *The African who's who: An illustrated classified register and national geographic dictionary of Africans in the Transvaal*.<sup>2</sup> In this book, Skota presents new facts to enhance the story that is being told. As the founder of the Bantu Women's League (the forerunner of the African National Congress Women's League), the work she started is frequently in the news today. But how many people know of her contribution to the recognition of women in South Africa? After her death in 1939, Senator Rheinallt Jones, head of the South African Institute of Race Relations, wrote as follows:

Mrs Maxeke was a remarkable woman who had overcome many obstacles to obtain education and to serve her people. What a pleasure it was to hear her speak in the excellent English and the pleasant voice she possessed. She was always "quick on the uptake" and her mind was humble to the last. For Charlotte Maxeke the African people came first in her thoughts, and through a long life she served them, in the Church, in Social Welfare, and wherever she could.<sup>3</sup>

The members of the African National Conference came to know her as the "Mother of African freedom in this country" (Hlatwayo 1987:6), but she referred to herself as "an African girl for the whole of Africa".<sup>4</sup> Her legacy that resulted in these and other accolades will be explored in this article.

### **1.1 Her early life and career**

Charlotte Manye was born in 1874 near Fort Beaufort in the Eastern Cape (Millard 1999:39). Her father, Lange Jan Manye, came from the Sotho chiefdom of Ramogopa. His home was near Soekmekaar in the old Transvaal, an area now known as the Limpopo Province. Her mother came from the Mpo people, a group which later formed the Mfengu people in the Eastern Cape (McCord 1995:8). Charlotte's father travelled from the north to the Eastern Cape where he met her

mother who was a teacher. They were married and Lange Jan went to night school and worked as a foreman for a gang of labourers working on the roads. He also became a lay preacher in the Presbyterian Church (McCord 1995:8). Charlotte was the eldest of six children – Charlotte, Katie, Philip, Henry, John and Mary-Ann. Some of Charlotte's nephews and nieces still live in Soweto.<sup>5</sup>

The family lived in Uitenhage and Charlotte attended the Rev I Wanchope's primary school (Skota 1965:195). When she was old enough, she was sent to the Edwards Memorial School in Port Elizabeth where she was taught by Mr Paul Xiniwe (McCord 1995:13). He was the school choir master and Charlotte, with her beautiful contralto voice, and her sister, who had also joined her at school, became members of the school and church choirs. Her singing opened new avenues of opportunity for her.

The family later moved to Kimberley where Charlotte trained as a teacher and taught at the Wesleyan School.<sup>6</sup> She and her sister joined the Jubilee choir of the Presbyterian Church. In 1891, the choir trained by Mr J H Balmer, was invited to sing in England. Their singing was widely acclaimed and they even sang for Queen Victoria.<sup>7</sup> During this time, Charlotte learnt to speak the "excellent English" admired by Rheinallt-Jones<sup>8</sup>, which enabled her to become a popular speaker at various conferences during the course of her life.

It was during this time that she met women who were part of the suffragette movement. She met Emily Pankhurst, a woman who fought for women's rights, and a woman from West Africa who was a medical student. She was also impressed with two African-Americans who told her about Wilberforce University, a black university without any white authority. Charlotte's world was expanding and she was being prepared for the role she would later play in South Africa.

After their return home, the sisters were invited to join an American choir known as the Orpheus singers. Katie elected to remain at home, but Charlotte went to America. During a tour with the choir she met Bishop Derrick of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America. He helped her to enrol as a BSc student at Wilberforce

University. Here she came into contact with many influential people, including church leaders.<sup>9</sup> The African Methodist Episcopal Church had been established in Philadelphia in 1816 by an African-American, Richard Allen. He had earlier left the Methodist Episcopal Church in protest against racial segregation (Verryn 1972:68). Since that time, the AMEC had flourished. Wilberforce University, an all-black university had been established and mission work was already taking place in West Africa. Charlotte was the first black South African woman to obtain a BSc degree – at a time when few women received tertiary education. While at the University, she worked for opportunities for other black South Africans and was able to arrange scholarships for a number of men who later became leaders in the growing movement of African nationalism. Among them were James Tantsi, Charles Dube, Henry Msikinya, Edward Tolityi Magaya and Marshall Maxeke. Campbell writes that “Charlotte Manye played an instrumental role in extending the privileges of Wilberforce” (Campbell 1989:269).

## **1.2 Her influence in the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Africa**

One of Charlotte’s mother’s cousins, Mangena Mokone, was an ordained Methodist minister. In November 1892, however, he left the Methodist Church and founded the Ethiopian Church with the following motto based on Psalm 68:31: “Ethiopia (Cush) shall stretch out her hands to God” (Gordon 1952:2). This was the same verse that had motivated the founders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

Charlotte wrote numerous letters to her family while she was at Wilberforce. In 1895, Mokone read Charlotte's letters to her family which told them about the African Methodist Episcopal Church which was wholly black. On 17 March 1896, Mokone and the leaders of the Ethiopian Church resolved at their Conference to invite the American church to amalgamate with them and begin a work in South Africa. The House of Bishops and the Missionary Board of the AMEC in America agreed and this was followed by a visit by Bishop Turner in 1898 (Gordon 1952:2). Among the members of the new church were men for whom Charlotte had arranged scholarships, namely,

JZ Tantsi and Marshall (she married Marshall in 1903) (Skota 1965:196). Charlotte also joined the AMEC when she returned to South Africa in 1901.

The South African branch of AMEC was formally established in 1898 during a visit by Bishop Turner, an American bishop. All the bishops for the new denomination were sent from America and Mokone was only recognised as a founder and elder. This led to a number of defections from the South African AMEC, the most important being that in 1899 of James Dwane who had formed the Order of Ethiopia under the umbrella of the Anglican Church in South Africa. The AMEC did not want to be seen as a divisive influence and in 1904, the Reverend Attaway (an American), who was standing in for Bishop Coppin (also an American), wrote as follows to the General Missionary Conference: "Reverend Sirs, I personally assure your body of entertaining only sentiments of loyalty towards His Majesty's government, highest regards for white Christian missionaries in South Africa, and assure you of intention to discourage proselytising and pray your work is great, accept our humble help".<sup>10</sup> Charlotte, too, worked within the prevailing political structures and tried to change what was wrong without being a rebel.

A report in the *Rand Daily Mail* described her life as follows:

Even in those early days she envisaged a practical programme for the religious advancement of her people and later put it into effect. Her inspiration resulted in the start of African Methodism in South Africa. She was an organiser for the Women's Mite Missionary Society, later the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society of which she was president until her death. (1939).<sup>11</sup>

### 1.3 Charlotte as a member of the AMEC

On her return from Wilberforce, she spoke at the AMEC Conference. She explained how grateful she felt to have been afforded the "rare honour" to have been invited to address the Conference. This is how the occasion was described in the Conference minutes:<sup>12</sup>

The Bishop (American) called forward Miss Charlotte Manye who proceeded to tell the conference how it was expedient that our programme be changed, but we could not overlook our great work of mission! Christ wants the world, whether it will take a hundred years or more. America has her mission fields, but the difference between that country and Africa is that the one has had the Gospel preached in every part and the other is as yet unexplored, therefore our missionary anniversary will take place this afternoon and Miss Manye from Wilberforce University will deliver the address.

When she got up to speak, she articulated what was to become her motivation for the rest of her life. She had the following to say after reading from Mark 26:

Cape Town outcasts must be brought to Christ. They do not come to church but we must go to them and bring them in. I am sorry that we have not many women here because they are a great factor in the church and in the nation. They were the last at the cross and the first at the grave. The lesson we have read brings forth woman in her duty. These women knew well there was that large stone at the mouth of the sepulchre, but because their purpose was great they pressed forward and the stone was rolled away.

We have a thousand stones in the course of our duty to our Maker and these must be removed. The stone of self must go so that we may be vessels for His use. The stone of ignorance must go ... I am glad that the initial steps have been taken in the purchase of the Bethel Institute.

I wish you could see the American women in their societies for the purpose of missions, hear their prayers and collect their tears. You would love Africa better. They taught me away from her shore to love her more. I left a Basuto girl and returned an African girl for the whole of Africa.<sup>13</sup>

In her talk, we see her emphasis on education, her sympathy for and eagerness to help the poor, and her deep faith. In America, she met a number of women who helped to form her thinking. In 1884, the AMEC Conference delegates decided to license women as local preachers. The men acknowledged that “female evangelists were becoming very numerous” (Dodson 1981:285), so they decided that they could become recognised preachers. Some of these were Lena Doolin-Mason, who converted 1 617 “souls”, Mary Palmer, Emma Johnson and Melinda Cotton – all recognised preachers in the American AMEC. Yet when she married Marshall, he attended to the religious part of their work and served as an ordained minister of the AMEC, while Charlotte concentrated on education. Nevertheless, the role played by these women showed Charlotte that potentially there was nothing that women could not do.

At first the Maxeke’s worked for the AMEC at Ramogopa in what is today known as the Limpopo Province, he as the founder of the AMEC in that area and she as a teacher. This was her father’s home. They were later invited to start a school at Idutywa in the Eastern Cape (Campbell 1987:26). Marshall became the headmaster of the Lota High School and an AMEC minister, while Charlotte taught at the school. Their experience in education served them well when they opened the Wilberforce High School in Evaton, Transvaal, in 1908 (Gordon 1952:2). Their legacy remains to this day; the impact of their work and influence is seen in both the Wilberforce High School and in the R R Wright Theological Seminary which trains ministers for the AMEC ministry.

Education was not her only legacy. Charlotte never forgot the needs of her fellow African women and was involved in welfare work from the time the family moved close to Johannesburg. In 1912, her husband became a founder member of the African National party. Charlotte noted that only men belonged to the new organisation. In 1913, she became the founder and first President of the Bantu Women’s League. Now she had a platform from which to speak. In the following years, she was invited to speak at numerous conferences and meetings. As President of the League, she was active in pressing for the relaxation of the Free State Pass Laws and in 1918, led a deputation of women to speak to the Prime Minister,

Louis Botha. She developed contacts with the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Clements Kadalie, but her interests were always rather with the church and its social welfare than with African political aspirations (Walker 1982:37).

Her beloved husband, Marshall, died in 1928 and their only child, a son, went to the United States to be educated. Charlotte became more and more involved with welfare work. She was also the first African woman to be appointed to the position of a probation officer. In 1939, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that "she was also a Welfare Officer in connection with the Magistrate's Courts and a probation officer".<sup>14</sup> The post was especially created for her so that she could extend her welfare work to the needy. Walker (1982:39) writes as follows:

Maxeke's work in the Johannesburg courts brought her into daily contact with the reality of the destruction of family life. The devastating effects of the migrant labour system on the family were particularly marked in the Witwatersrand where Maxeke worked. That area had the highest masculinity rate amongst Africans in the country, and some of the worst slums and shanty towns. Crime, prostitution and illegitimacy flourished under such conditions. These conditions reinforced Maxeke's middle-class values of the stable family, in which women played the central role, the source of both its physical and its spiritual well-being.

#### **1.4 Her social work**

During the 1920s, Charlotte got involved with the Joint Councils Movement where she came into contact with Senator and Mrs Rheinallt-Jones. Charlotte was committed not only to the emancipation of black women, but also to a multiracial society. She believed that all women's organisations should be committed to fighting the injustices black people had suffered and continued to suffer under the different white minority governments. This led her in 1921 to address the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union, an asso-

ciation of white women. White women were given the vote in 1933, but it was only in 1994 that black women received the vote.

Charlotte spoke on a number of subjects when addressing various organisations. In all her talks she showed her concern for the plight of African women in South Africa. As President of the Bantu Women's League, she addressed in 1921 the Women's Reform Club, a group of white suffragettes from Pretoria. She brought to their attention the plight of black women, especially those living in the cities. In 1925, she addressed the General Missionary Conference held in Johannesburg and spoke on the subject of "The native Christian mother". She spoke of the challenges facing those African women who embraced Christianity and had to cope with a completely new lifestyle. She also referred to the role of the missionary and was less than complimentary about the missionaries of her day.

The early missionaries in this country knew what they were doing. They studied us; they lived with us; they moved among us. Even the wives of our missionaries were with us ... But today what happens to us? I won't say all - and some of our missionaries will pardon me - how many times when we go to visit one of our missionaries to find, when we knock on the front door, somebody tell us "go round to the kitchen".<sup>15</sup>

In 1928, she represented the AME Church Women's Mite Missionary Society at a general conference held in America (*Rand Daily Mail* 1939:10). While there she also looked at their welfare programmes. In June 1930, she read a paper entitled "Social conditions among women and girls" at a conference at Fort Hare (Karis & Carter 1977:344). She surveyed the progress black women in South Africa had made and showed how in their "primitive state" each girl child had had the potential to attract a good *lobola* (a price paid in cattle) and were thus afforded protection by the family. While women were protected, the morality of the family was upheld. She also saw the European missionary movement as freeing women from the bonds of polygamy (Govinder 2002:315). While most black women still lived in the rural areas at this time, there was a trend towards women moving

to the towns in search of work. Maxeke had a special concern for these women.

In 1932, the Carnegie Commission noted the effects of urban life on these new immigrants. In the larger towns, and especially in the cities, a process of adaptation was taking place among the younger generation of younger immigrants, since life in the city gave them the opportunity to become skilled workers (Walker 1982:41). Although they received the education they needed, many of the young people were easily led into a life of crime – a fact Maxeke was faced with in her work as a probation officer. The 1930s were also the years of the Great Depression and the poor, in particular, experienced great hardship.

## **2 THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF AFRICAN WOMEN**

According to Hlatwayo (1987:5), the years 1935 to 1937 were a turning point in black political aspirations. African voters who were living in the Cape and who had been enjoying voting rights suffered a blow when they were removed from the common voters' roll by the J B M Hertzog government. This led to united protests by both rural and urban Africans. These Africans would later be represented by white native representatives. The 1936 Land Bill also restricted the land available for African use. This led to great dissatisfaction and hardship. A group of women decided to form a new organisation to deal with the social welfare issues in their various communities (Hlatwayo 1987:5). By this time, Charlotte Maxeke was in her sixties and was suffering from ill health. Despite this, however, she was one of the founder members of the National Council of African Women. The others were Miss Mina Soga, who succeeded Maxeke as President, Miss E P Hlahle and Mesdames M Sesedi, A W Kuse, Qupe and Demas. They asked Dan Skota to discuss the formation of the new organisation with the men who agreed that the new National Council of African Women would be a good idea.

The first meeting, held on 16 December 1937, consisted of forty delegates. They were addressed by Mrs Edith Rheinallt-Jones who told them that they "were writing a page in the history of South Africa. The importance of your determination shall be rewarded manifold in

the future” (Hlatwayo1987:6). Charlotte Makgoma Maxeke was elected the first President in absentia. She attended the conference in 1938 where she presented her Presidential address:

I want to thank you very much and congratulate you on your deliberations. This work is not for yourselves – kill that spirit of self. Do not live above your people, but live with them. If you can, bring someone with you. Do away with that fearful animal jealousy – kill that spirit and love one another as brothers and sisters. The animal that will tear us to pieces is tribalism. I saw the shadow of it and it should cease to be. Stand by your motto - the golden rule (Hlatwayo 1987:8).

This was her only presidential speech as she died the following year. Mina Soga became President.

The message Charlotte brought in her first (in 1901) and last public speeches was virtually the same – selfless commitment to the upliftment of African people. It was a motivation that had guided her throughout her life. Rheinallt-Jones in his statement at the time of her death wrote: “As President of the National Council of African Women she hoped to see her sisters go forward in all that is worthy. Alas, this new organisation came when her bodily strength had greatly diminished. Had she been twenty years younger what leadership she would have given it.”<sup>16</sup>

Charlotte Maxeke died on 16 October 1939 at Kliptown. She was buried in the Pimville cemetery and there is a tombstone in memory of her. In the early 1940s, the AMEC published a memorial pamphlet with the pictures of Charlotte Maxeke – “our link”, Mangena Mokone – “our founder” and Delia Mokone – “our mother”.<sup>17</sup>

Her death was reported in the Johannesburg newspaper, *The Star*, on the Friday after her death. The report read as follows:

Mrs Charlotte Manye Maxeke, BSc, the founder and president of the Bantu Women’s League, who has died in Johannesburg at the age of 65, gave the better part of her

life to the advancement of the native people ... While in America Mrs Maxeke saw an opportunity of gaining higher education and with the help of Bishop Derrick she took her degree at the Wilberforce Institute Ohio.

She returned to South Africa and married the Rev M M Maxeke (who died some years ago) also a graduate of Wilberforce. They did valuable work in the Pietersburg district and founded the Wilberforce Institute, a school for native children from all centres in the Union and the native reserves, which was afterwards transferred to Evaton.

Mrs Maxeke was appointed as Bantu welfare officer and gave evidence before a number of government commissions. In 1928 she went to the United States to study social work and to give an account of her stewardship in South Africa at the invitation of the Women's Mite Society ... which is an off-shoot of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Mrs Maxeke was buried at Pimville yesterday (Thursday, 19 October), the funeral being largely attended.<sup>18</sup>

Charlotte Maxeke's legacy can be seen not only in the social work of the African Methodist Church, but also in the caring service of the African National Congress Women's League, founded by her and which continues the vision she began, namely, the advancement and upliftment of African women in South Africa.

#### **WORKS CONSULTED**

Campbell, J 1987. Conceiving of the Ethiopian Movement. Unpublished paper read at the African Studies Seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, 7 April 1987.

Campbell, J 1989. Our fathers, our children: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa. PhD thesis Stanford University: USA.

- Dodson, J 1981. Nineteenth century preaching women in Thomas, N & Keller, R (eds.) *Women in new worlds: Historical perspectives on the Wesleyan tradition*. Abingdon: Nashville.
- Gordon, E M 1952. *A short historical survey of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Cape Province and its development*. Payne Theological Seminary, Wilberforce University: Ohio.
- Govinder, D B 2002. The mother of African freedom: The contribution of Charlotte Maxeke to the struggle for freedom in South Africa in Phiri, I & Govinder, D B (eds.) *Her story: Hidden stories of women of faith in Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Hlatwayo, T 1987. *Mina Soga's baby: History of the NCAW*. Johannesburg: Seriti ba Sechaba.
- Karis, T & Carter, G 1977. *From protest to challenge: A documentary history of African politics in South Africa 1882-1964*, Volume 4. Political Profiles Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.
- McCord, M 1995. *The calling of Katie Makanya*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Memorial leaflet from AMEC, undated in William Cullen Library, Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg.
- Millard, J 1999. *Malihambe: Let the word speak*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.
- Minutes of the Conference of the African Methodist Church in South Africa held in Johannesburg on 20 December 1901.
- Minutes of the Transvaal and Swaziland District Synod of the Methodist Church for 1892.
- Rand Daily Mail*, 20 October 1939.

Report of the proceedings of the First General Missionary Conference held in Johannesburg from 13 to 20 July 1904, 1905. Johannesburg: Argus Printing.

Report of the sixth General Missionary Conference of South Africa – *The evangelization of South Africa* held in Johannesburg between 30 June and 3 July 1925. Cape Town: Die Nasionale Pers.

Rheinallt-Jones, Senator 1939. *Two notable Africans*. Statement on the deaths of Chief Sentihimile and Mrs Charlotte Maxeke. Typescript in William Cullen Library, Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg.

Skota, T D M 1965. *The African who's who: An illustrated classified register and national geographic dictionary of Africans in the Transvaal* (3rd edition). Johannesburg: Frier & Munro.

*The Star*, Johannesburg, 20 October 1939.

Verryn, T 1972. *The Order of Ethiopia*. Cleveland: The Central Mission Press.

Walker, C 1982. *Women and resistance in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Millard, J 1999 *Malihambe: Let the word speak*. Pretoria: Unisa Press and Govinder in Phiri, I & Govinder, D 2002 *Her story*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- 2 Walker, C 1982 *Women and resistance in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip, 38f and Skota, T D M 1965 *The African who's who: An illustrated classified register and national geographical dictionary of Africans in the Transvaal* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Johannesburg: Frier & Munro.
- 3 Typescript: *Two notable Africans*. Statement on the deaths of Chief Sentihimle and Mrs Charlotte Maxeke by Senator Rheinallt-Jones in the Archives, William Cullen Library, Witwatersrand University.
- 4 Minutes of the Conference of the African Methodist Church in South Africa held on 20 December 1901.
- 5 SABC documentary entitled *Women, resistance and the struggle*, first flighted on 9 August 2000. Producer J Lipman, researcher J Millard. Interview with Mrs G Zwane, Charlotte's niece.
- 6 *Rand Daily Mail* dated 20 October 1939, 10.
- 7 *Rand Daily Mail* dated 20 October 1939, 10, "Sang before Queen Victoria".
- 8 Statement by Rheinallt-Jones on the occasion of the death of Mrs Maxeke.
- 9 *Rand Daily Mail* dated 20 October 1939, 10.
- 10 *Report on the Proceedings of the First General Missionary Conference* held in Johannesburg from 13 to 20 July 1904, 1905. Johannesburg: Argus Printing.
- 11 *Rand Daily Mail* dated 20 October 1939, 10. The report refers to the work of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and not to the mission work that had been carried on by the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in South Africa from 1816.
- 12 Minutes 1901 of AMEC Conference.
- 13 Minutes 1901 AMEC Conference.
- 14 *Rand Daily Mail* dated 20 October 1939, 10.
- 15 *Report on the Sixth General Missionary Conference of South Africa* "The evangelization of South Africa" held in Johannesburg between 30 June and 3 July 1925, 129, 130.
- 16 Rheinallt-Jones, *Statement 1*.
- 17 The pamphlet is in the Archives of the William Cullen Library, Witwatersrand University. The pamphlet is a form of fund raising as it requests contributions of 2/- to help pay for the erection of tombstones for the founders.
- 18 *The Star*, Johannesburg dated 20 October 1939, 9.