

HISTORY OF THE BMC – Rev Dr Ernest N Baartman

BLOEMFONTEIN – 2009, JULY 34th ANNUAL MEETING

The Black Methodist Consultation was not a brain child of a particular person or a group. It came into existence as a movement responding to accepted racism in South Africa. It was covered by the Holy sounding words, phrases and sentences, couched in fine theological terms in church. Somehow Black men and women were to sober up after being intoxicated by phrases like “*It is the will of God.....*”

It was rude awakening to realise apartheid was not out there but it was alive and strong in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Ministers were the obvious victims of discrimination in the church.

The church had adopted the apartheid classification of the races. On top were the Europeans (as they were labelled) secondly were coloureds and Indians and at the bottom of the file were Africans (The natives, The Bantus).

The stipend as laid down by Conference was determined by the colour of one’s skin. **This was the triggering fact.** The first meeting was called for Black Ministers to look at inequalities within the MCSA.

In 1975 after much thought a meeting of twelve Black Ministers was called to meet in Bloemfontein. With torturous bending of coincidence of history some by a very fertile creative form of reasoning they put the choice of Bloemfontein as based on the ANC s choice of the city of Roses, Bloemfontein.

For those who met in Bloemfontein, the choice was based on the fact that Bloemfontein was central geographically. Among the twelve were, Reverend’s:- F de Waal Mahlasela, S Mahabane, Seane Sikhakhane, DD Dabula, Seeodi; Senkhane, Masombula, Fikeni, Gorah, Gaba, Baartman who was tasked to convene a meeting of all Black Ministers .

Matters to be considered at the 1975 meeting were, **Priority:**

- Whites were in power and making all the decisions.
- Of the eleven Chairpersons of the Districts, nine Were white and only two were Black.
- The Methodist Connexional office was White and the only Blacks were those who made tea and worked as delivery persons.

- Allowance to Blacks e.g. children's funds, funeral expenses etc. were far less than those of whites.

Blacks were drunk with 'First-ism' I am the first black to occupy this position!

- Are all blacks free to hold this position after Mr or Miss first?

Secondly:

- We looked at the level of black participation, very low language could have been a barrier especially church (jargon) language. Embarrassment could have been more.

Thirdly:

- Blacks did not prepare and equip themselves for meaningful engagement in discussions.

Empowering blacks would include helping representatives. To understand, engage and dialogue with the agenda prior to attending meetings.

Fourthly:

- There is question of supportive participation. Just standing and making it known one supported the previous black speaker.

Fifthly:

There was the need to widen black representation in the various structures of the MCSA.

There was the tendency to appoint the same black faces in various committees. This does not refer to those in executive positions.

The first meeting of Black Ministers Consultation took place in Bloemfontein, **in 1976**. Black Ministers issues were high on the agenda. The question of stipends and stationing could have been a compelled factor. The question of real power was not on a front burner Ministers came from every corner of connexion within South Africa.

The attendance exceeded the organisers' expectations. The present Presiding Bishop and Executive Secretary were part of those first meetings (*Rev Ivan Abrahams and Rev Vuyani Gladstone Nyobole*).

The audience was mixed with Elderly Ministers as well as Young Ministers and Probationers. In the discussions that took place it became quite clear that ministers alone were not the Black Church but only a part of the Black Church.

- What was missing, was the laity!

With one accord it was decided that lay people be invited to the next meeting. All Black Laity was invited. Men and Women were to be invited.

The Black Methodists Consultation decided on some major issues:

1. We were and would always remain within the Methodist church of Southern Africa. We had no mention of ever leaving the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

“The Methodist church of Southern Africa had Black people since the nineteenth century “ The MCSA - ililifa loobawo; lefa labatswadi barona”

2. The Black Methodist Consultation was to be a movement within the Church to permeate every area of the M.C.S.A. This made it imperative to have decision-making people from the Church. The B.M.C's influence was to be effected by the young as well as the departments, synods and Conference.

In 1978 the Methodists in the then Transkei (M.C.T) decided to break away from the M.C.SA. They formed the Methodist Church of Transkei. Some of them claimed that this was what the B.M.C. stood for. The B.M.C. did not accept this reason.

The Transkei schism went totally against these principles. From Obedience 81, Journey to New Land, the political angle they under girded the policy of separate development. They gave it theological and ecclesiastical respectability.

Some of the leaders in the M.C.T. were keen on positions. They found themselves in leadership in a pseudo connexion. Our condemnation of this breakaway was tempered by the knowledge there was a brotherhood even after ten years a good portion of the Methodist Church of Transkei were welcomed back in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

Many people within the M.C.S.A came to realise that had it not been for the BMC there could have been a split in the Church. **The BMC helped to bring to the surface very deep discontent in the Black constituency. This helped the church to try and address these areas of potential conflict.**

- **The BMC at its highest goal sought to unite the MCSA. It brought to get Black members to stand on their feet, strengthen their backs and look everybody in the eye without apologising for their being.**

The idea of a single multicultural church in a geographical area was first rooted in the BMC.

Some people hijacked this idea and came up with grossly handicapped and disadvantaged child, the geographic circuits in their present disfigured form.

Many formerly White Circuits have taken members from Black Circuits. Virtually all geographical circuits have cost Black Circuits some of their members.

- **Can you think of a white society taken out of a white circuit and incorporated into a Black circuit?**

I can give you many Black societies moved into white circuits to be a “burden” on our white circuits.

The Contribution of the BMC:

- **The BMC has opened the eyes to the leadership gifts in its Black membership** not only males but females as well.
- The BMC has demonstrated its **belief in the unity of the Church**. Unity has to be nurtured all the time.
- The BMC has demonstrated its **desire for development** by contributing to the training of ministers financially.

I must conclude by saying that **there is great need for the BMC** not only to exist but to try and keep being a positive influence in the effectiveness of the Church in Southern Africa. We need to seek to be a formation in the Methodist Church that seeks to be obedient to the call, bear our cross and to be crucified to the cross that every Black woman, girl, man, and boy gets the Methodist Church to be born in Africa and thereby have Christ born in Africa.

I need to remind people that it is very easy to be Black amongst Blacks, but it is very difficult to be Black amongst Whites. Black women and men, you are on your own. No one is ever going to help us stand and walk, but ourselves.

Thank you!!! Thank you!!! Thank you!!!
