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Buthelezi, Manas

1935-2016

Lutheran

South Africa

Manas Buthelezi was born at Mahlabathini KwaCeza in February 1935, the son of evangelist Abosalom Buthelezi in the Swedish Mission. He was a descendent of *Mkhandumba kaMnyamana*, *kaNgqengelele*, *ka Mvulana Buthelezi*. He grew up at Mahlabathini where he went to school. Afterwards he continued his education at St.

Francis, Mariannahill, a Roman Catholic institution, where he matriculated and completed his teacher's training program.

He started working at age twenty as a teacher for a few years before deciding to go into the ministry. In 1958, he did his theological training both at Eshiyane (Oscarsberg) and Umphumulo Theological College (formerly a teachers' training college). He concluded his studies with a diploma in theology and a B.A. in theology, two programs he was doing simultaneously through University of South Africa (UNISA). Buthelezi was a bright and gifted student who wrote in exceptionally good English. Some of his contemporaries at the seminary are now retired bishops, including Bishop S. P. Zulu (of the house of Nkabana ka Sthayi Zulu of eGazini collateral royal house), Bishop A. J. Fortuin, and Rev. Shabangu.

Early ministry

After finishing his program at Umphumulo Theological College, Buthelezi left for the U.S.A. in 1961 to do a masters in theology at Yale University and a doctorate at Drew University. He returned in 1968-1969. He taught biblical hermeneutics and other subjects at Umphumulo Theological Seminary. He was the first theologian to introduce Black Theology in South Africa in the 1970s.

Later he left Umphumulo Theological Seminary for the parish ministry, serving as a pastor at Sobantu and Lamontville. In 1972 he was a visiting professor at the University of Heidelberg (Germany) where he delivered a series of lectures in Black Theology. His supportive colleagues were professor Heinz Toedt and Ulrich Duchrow.

Upon his return to South Africa he continued to serve as a pastor. He was also the Natal regional director of the Christian Institute, an ecumenical magazine critical of government policies which exposed the unchristian doings of the white minority regime. At the request of Beyers Naudé of the Dutch Reformed Church, Buthelezi published various articles on the subject of Black Theology in *Pro Veritate*. Along with many others, Buthelezi was an advocate for thousands of voiceless South Africans. He was one of those hot-blooded theologians saying: "Missionary, go home and leave the black man; he is mature enough to manage his own affairs."

In 1972, a symposium was organized by the South African Council of Churches (SACC) in which a series of papers were delivered which were later published in a book entitled *Black Theology in South Africa*. Dr. Manas Buthelezi was one of the cardinal contributors in that book together with Barney Pityana and Mpumulwana. In 1974 and 1975, Buthelezi was the general secretary of the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Southern Africa (FELCSA). In 1976, the year after the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) was formed, he was elected ELCSA general secretary.

Social and political involvement

His transfer from Natal to the Gauteng area put Buthelezi at the centre of a whirlwind

of political events. This young and gifted theologian did his best to harness the Black Consciousness Movement. He made tremendous contributions to the South African Students' Organization (SASO) and the Black Consciousness Movement. While Steve Biko, his contemporary, adopted a politico-philosophical approach to the issues, Buthelezi translated them into theological language, known as Black Theology of Liberation. Directly or indirectly, the June 16, 1976 uprisings were the product of this philosophy.

Buthelezi was constantly harassed by the security police. With the help of others in 1976 and 1977, he established the Black Parents Association, an association with the objective of establishing the whereabouts of students who had disappeared during the upheavals of 1976.

Buthelezi made major contributions to the SACC, the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and the All Africa Conference of Churches. A leading exponent of Black Theology, Buthelezi served several times on the SACC executive. He was a close friend of Doctor Phillip Porter (a Jamaican, general secretary of the WCC) and of Dr. Wolfram Kistner, a Lutheran in South Africa and former director of justice and reconciliation in the SACC.

Buthelezi's election as first bishop of ELCSA-Central Diocese in 1977 at the age of forty-two was a milestone in the history of the Lutheran church in Gauteng. His service as a bishop stretched over twenty years. During his term of office many black political organizations, labour unions, and other various organizations not only found refuge in his diocesan centre but also used it as a platform to run workshops in which they formulated and articulated their political programs, visions, and ideologies. This continued until 1994 when Buthelezi and other theologians felt that they had done their job in filling the political vacuum as spiritual leaders in the political arena.

The South African Council of Churches

When Rees took over, blacks made up eight-five percent of the membership and ninety percent of the observer churches in the SACC. Yet whites tended to retain the positions of authority in the churches and in the council. Rees was determined to change this imbalance. Radical new policies were instituted: equal salaries were paid to black and white council staff, toilets were desegregated, every white administrator was given a black secretary and every black administrator a white secretary. Blacks moved into senior positions. At the first national conference that Rees attended as general secretary, delegates elected their first black president, August Habelgaarn.

Even more significantly, the proportion of black SACC members grew tremendously.

Things began to change in the late 1960s when a number of new churches which had started as missions handed over their work to local Christians. These churches then began to join the SACC. The first to do so was the Lutheran church. Although numerically strong they had never played an important role in South African church life, partly because they had been under the control of conservative missionaries.

The situation changed when the missions merged their work and the churches

became autonomous bodies under indigenous leadership. At that time eight of them joined the SACC, bringing into the organization powerful new voices such as Rev. Habelgaarn and Dr. Manas Buthelezi.

More individual independent churches joined in the following years (Hope: 1983: 88). Nevertheless relations between the churches in the SACC constituency and the government remained tense. Many felt that the state was acting against the church simply because the propounded views conflicted with those of the government. This feeling was strengthened in December 1973 when Buthelezi, who was at that time the Natal regional director of the Christian Institute, was banned. A few months later, apparently out of the blue, Dr. John Porter, editor of a right wing news magazine called *To the Point*, wrote a slanderous article on Buthelezi.

Buthelezi then did something which no other banned person had done before: he sued *To the Point* for libel. The magazine boldly stated that it would defend the case, and claimed, in the most extravagant terms, that it would produce evidence to support its allegations that Buthelezi had backed violence and bloodshed in South Africa. When the amount of damages was determined, Porter faced a heavy fine and even jail because he refused to comply with a court order to produce the notes on which his article was based. He was saved only by the fact that Buthelezi refused to press charges. Porter nevertheless suffered deep public humiliation, doubly galling in the light of his position as an ordained minister of the Baptist Union, a status he still retains (Thomas: 1979: 19).

Conclusion

Both Lutherans and white apartheid police sometimes misunderstood, misinterpreted, and fought against Buthelezi. After 1994 he shifted from a political liberation theology to a redemptive eschatological theology with an emphasis on the Lutheran teaching of sola scriptura, sola fide, solus Christus, and sola gratia in reference to Rom. 3: 21-26, 1:16-17 and Eph. 2: 5-9, Gal. 3: 23-29, Rom. 4, I Cor. 6: 11, II Cor. 5:17-21.

In February 2000 Buthelezi retired to his birthplace, Mahlabathini eDwadweni, the Buthelezi royal homestead. He died there on April 20, 2016 at the age of 81.

James Kenokeno Mashabela

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This article, received in 2004, updated in 2023 by the editor, was researched and written by James Kenokeno Mashabela, an honors student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, under the supervision of Dr. Philippe Denis, professor of the History of Christianity and DACB liaison coordinator.

Wolfram Kistner

1923-2006

**United Evangelical Lutheran Church
South Africa**

From Childhood to Theology Student

Wolfram Kistner was born on February 19, 1923 in Hermannsburg, South Africa as the second-eldest of five children to the German missionary couple Pastor Johannes Kistner (born in Franken/ Bavaria) and Maria nee Schröder of the Hermannsburg Mission Society. After a short missionary engagement in Ramotswa / now Botswana, father Johannes was interned in Fort Napier/ Pietermaritzburg during the First World War and had to return to Germany in 1919. After his marriage in Germany, he returned to Hermannsburg/ South Africa in 1922 and became the pastor of the Hermannsburg congregation and the school director of the German School at Hermannsburg / Natal. Here their five children were born: Irmgard, Wolfram, Albrecht, Hanna and Johannes, who all grew up in Hermannsburg. (Pape, I 1986, p 97-98).

In 1930, when Wolfram was seven years old, his mother died of malaria and with his siblings he stayed with his father, until the latter married Grete Harms, a sister of director Egmont Harms, in 1934. Wolfram was then eleven years old and was sent to Germany, to Hermannsburg, Bavaria and Erlangen and there experienced negatively the upcoming of Nazi Germany, which would influence his later life. There he got so ill that his father, as one of the first, travelled overseas by plane to fetch his son. In an interview, Wolfram expressed that he felt the loss of his mother and of home and had a life-long search of “a loving home,” (Gisela Albrecht 2008). He later had a heart for those who were in similar situations, whether the children who had to stay in school hostels, or the poor and marginalised.

He grew up and had his schooling in Hermannsburg / Natal, where he matriculated in 1940, being fluent in German, English, Afrikaans-Dutch and able to