

# From Cabazi to Bruma: Purity Malinga's Rise to Presiding Bishop of the MCSA

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## Abstract

This article is an appraisal of Presiding Bishop Purity Malinga's journey from her rural upbringing in Cabazi, Ixopo in KwaZulu-Natal to the helm of Methodism in Bruma Lake in Johannesburg, headquarters of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). The path of Purity Malinga to Presiding Bishop of the biggest mainline denomination in Southern Africa is explored from a perspective that her nomination breaks the 212-year-old glass ceiling that limited women's rise into leadership in the MCSA. The aim of the paper is to present facts about the life, qualities and achievements that enabled her ascendance to the leadership of the MCSA. The major conclusions of the study indicate that her rise to the echelons of the church was because of a combination of factors, namely her leadership capabilities, theological acumen, progressive nurture of Methodism and the crisis caused by a leaked conversation between Rev. Vukile Mehana and Raymond Sibanga on December 28, 2018.

**Keywords:** Purity Malinga; Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA); Presiding Bishop

Being human and female, I shall be able to live a life of doxology in the human community, glorifying God for the gifts I receive in others and for the possibility I have of giving myself freely for the wellbeing of the community while remaining responsible and responsive to God. (Oduyoye 1986, 137)

## Introduction

I first met Purity Nomthandazo Nobuhle Malinga early in 1994 at Professor Neville Richardson's house in Pietermaritzburg, where we were having dinner. At the time, I was a student at the then University of Natal, and she was the resident minister at Edendale Circuit. I was one of the first three Methodist students sent by the church to



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do the Extended BTh Programme. The others were Rev. Vuyo Dlamini (Bishop of the Natal-West Synod) and Dr Ruth Jonas (Bible Society). I was fascinated to the point of intimidation by her (Malinga's) dignity, presence, calmness and clarity of thought during our conversations that night. I left the dinner feeling that I had just been in the presence of greatness, but was not sure why I felt that way. Looking back almost 25 years later, now I understand why I felt that way. Indeed, I *had been* in the presence of greatness; a first year theology student having dinner and conversations with the indomitable Professor Neville Richardson, one of the great scholars to be produced by South African Methodism, *and* Nomthandazo Purity Malinga. She was the fourth woman to be ordained by the Methodist Church in its history, who would later become the first woman to become Bishop and Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church in Southern Africa (MCSA). Looking back at that moment today, I feel like one of the disciples on his way to Emmaus, "why didn't our hearts burn within me as they spoke to us."<sup>1</sup>

Purity Malinga (hereafter Malinga) is the fourth woman minister in the MCSA. The first woman to offer for ministry in the Methodist Church was Constance Oosthuizen, who offered in 1975. Nikiwe Mbilini and Libuseng Lebaka-Ketshabile, both of whom offered in 1980, followed her.<sup>2</sup> Malinga offered in 1981 and was ordained in 1988. Although the decision to ordain women in the MCSA promulgated 42 years ago, it is only now (in 2019) that a woman has emerged to lead the Methodist people in the position of Presiding Bishop. This makes it imperative for us to reflect on the life and work of Malinga. Her nomination has broken the 212-year-old stained-glass ceiling for women leadership in the MCSA. Her journey into the leadership structures of the church is a testimony to the fact that women can lead the church and society at all levels. The aim of this essay is to explore Malinga's journey from her upbringing at Cabazi in Ixopo to Bruma Lake, where she will be occupying the position of Presiding Bishop, chief pastor of the Methodist people in southern Africa. The following questions will guide the essay: Who is Malinga? Where does she come from? How and when did she receive her call to the ministry? How did she navigate triple oppression, which all African women had to go through in South Africa? What has been her contribution in the church so far? How was her journey to the helm of the MCSA? How was she elected to the position of Presiding Bishop, and what are the unique gifts she brings to this position?

An adequate exploration of the above facts should enable us to get into the gist of who she is, as well as the leadership qualities and skills that are critical for the role she is going to play as a leader for both the church and nation. The essay will bring into discussion the following factors: her upbringing; education; early experiences of the ministry; her experiences as a theological educator; life as first woman bishop in the

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1 Luke 24:32.

2 However, Mbilini was ordained first (1985) because she had already been in ministry as a deacon, thus making her senior to Rev. Ketshabile who ordained a year later in 1986.

MCSA and service at connexional<sup>3</sup> level. We will critically analyse her life and work and then draw the paper into conclusion.

## Methodology

Two methods of data collection form the methodology employed in this study. These are: 1) archival research; and 2) oral research through formal and informal interviews. Two formal interviews were conducted with Malinga: first, by Rev. Lwamkelo Gwaxaza (a research assistant) on May 12, 2018, at Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary; and second, the author—using email and telephone—conducted follow-up interviews. Informal interviews were conducted with five church leaders (2 clergy and 2 lay) because of their experiences emanating from the fact that they had worked with Malinga in the past. An interview held with a member of her family provided information on her family background. The research validity is ensured through archival sources, because archives from both the church and secular institutions corroborated most of the information collected from Malinga and the interviewees. The bulk of the information received, be it from Malinga or other interviewees, was “compared with and verified with each aspect mentioned in this paper.”<sup>4</sup>

## Black, Woman, and Economically Disadvantaged, a Lethal Combination

The election of Malinga took place concurrently with the election of two other women, who became bishops in the Methodist Church. These were Rev. Yvette Moses, who was elected as Bishop of the Cape of Good Hope District, and the Rev. Faith Whitby, who was elected as Bishop of the Central District. Rev. Moses is white, and Rev. Whitby is of coloured extraction. Both districts elected women as bishops for the first time in their history, and both women were pioneers in these positions. However, their elections remained in the shadow of Malinga’s election. Why was it that the election of two bishops in synods that had never elected women as bishops was pushed to the back of the minds as if it had not happened? Is it enough to argue that it was because Malinga’s election was to the position of Presiding Bishop, which is more senior? Yes, that is true, but I think it is more than that. I think the fact that Malinga was a black woman also added to the euphoria. Therefore, her success was hailed because it crossed not only gender lines, but also had the combination of gender and colour to cross. Malinga was born and raised, and she studied and worked in a South Africa characterised by three major factors facing black women. First, being born black meant that you were discriminated against racially. Second, it also meant that she suffered economic marginalisation. In the third instance, like all other women in the country, she was subjected to gender discrimination. Therefore, from the beginning, her life was to be a

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3 Connexion is a Methodist-specific term referring to all the Methodist churches under the South African conference.

4 Matsaung, L., and S. M. Selokane, 2007. “The Life and Work of the Reverend Mopala Marcus Maphoto: His Management of the Church, 1961–2001,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (September) XXXIII (2): 29–44.

struggle against these three forms of discrimination: race, gender and poverty. Of significance is that these forms of discrimination were not only prevalent at home and in society, but they were also experienced in the church. Ironically, Malinga was born in 1958, the year that the Methodist Church took a brave and ground-breaking decision to defy the policy of separate development and the separation of people based on race. Malinga's church met at a conference in Pietermaritzburg (her hometown) in the year of her birth and resolved that:

We believe that it is the will of God for the Methodist Church to remain one and undivided trusting to the leading of God to bring this ideal to ultimate fruition. (Minutes of Seventy-fifth Annual Conference 1958, 65)

Had the church lived according to this resolution, Malinga would not have felt this discrimination, but since the church struggled to live according to this commitment, she was to experience discrimination by race—not only in society, but also even in the church. The aim of this conference resolution was to ensure that Methodists did not obey the policies of apartheid. All her life in the ministry Malinga has had to navigate the complicated and sometimes dehumanising path between race, gender, and economic marginalisation, while giving hope and faith in the God who transforms people's life-denying situations into life-giving ones. For the past 38 years, she has been ministering and leading the church at local and district levels. Now she has been nominated to exercise that ministry at a connexional level, which is the highest position any Methodist can get.

## **The Making of a Female Presiding Bishop**

Nomthandazo Nobuhle Purity Malinga was born at Cabazi in Ixopo, KwaZulu-Natal. She is the first-born child of Siziba Jeffrey and Thenjiwe Emily (uMaNxasane) Malinga. She and her brother Mzokhona were the only children. Therefore, she is the elder of two children and a leader in the family as *uMafungwase* (the eldest daughter in the family that in Zulu culture everybody, including the brothers, look up to). The family are the descendants of Mfihlo of kaNcakubane, the father to Mdolomba, the father to Mbana, Albert who is the father to Siziba. They moved to Cabazi near the UMzimkhulu River where their grandfather, Mdolomba, bought a farm for his family to settle in. Malinga grew up in a Christian family. Both her mother and grandmother, uMaZulu, were staunch members of the MCSA and were members of the Women's Manyano. The family worshipped at Webbstown Methodist Society under the Ixopo Circuit in the Natal-West District. She did her early education at the local school and later joined Indaleni Methodist Institution for the rest of her schooling. She completed her teacher training at Indaleni in 1976.

## **Call to the Ministry**

It was while studying at Indaleni Institution that Malinga's faith in God matured and she offered herself for confirmation. Her feeling that she was being called to the

ordained ministry followed this step of faith. Looking back to her feelings when she first received the call to the ministry, she said:

There was hunger in me and it was not clear what it was that I was yearning for so deeply. I was aware that it was a yearning to serve God in the church but I was not clear how. At the time, I did not think it was the ministry, as ministry was a male thing. Every minister I knew was a man. Women were Bible women, Sunday school teachers, class leaders and leaders of the women's organisations.<sup>5</sup>

After completion of her teacher training studies, Malinga moved to kwaDeyi Circuit where she was a teacher at two schools, i.e. Siyakhona and kwaThuthuka Primary schools. KwaDeyi was under the pastoral care of the Rev. Raymond Kumalo, known for his outstanding gifts as a pastor. His friends referred to him as *Inkunzebomvu*. Her meeting with Kumalo was decisive because he too recognised the gifts and confirmed her call. Most importantly, he was prepared to journey with her in exploring her call to the ministry. She remembers:

Rev. Kumalo informed me that the church had opened doors for women to candidate to the ordained Ministry and this was extremely encouraging to me. Here I was, struggling with the deep love for the ministry while at the same time feeling that I have no place in the church as women. Suddenly I had a supportive minister telling me that the doors are open and he was willing to walk with me pastorally throughout this journey. This was a response to my prayers and an affirmation of my call. (Interview with Gwaxaza)

In 1981, at a conference that was held in Grahamstown under the Presidency of Dr Simon Gqubule, Malinga was accepted as a Probationer in the Methodist Church. Two years later the church sent Malinga to Seminary for ministerial training. She went to the Federal Theological Seminary for Southern Africa (FEDSEM) in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. It was while at FEDSEM that she joined the small number of women who had joined the ministry of the Methodist Church.

Seminary life was also not easy, since patriarchy showed itself everywhere you went, in classes, in community life and chapel. First, my own colleagues in the Methodist Church were still struggling with the church's decision to accept women. This was exacerbated by the fact that the Anglican Church had not accepted the ordination of women yet. So one had to deal with patriarchy from all fronts. (Interview with Gwaxaza)

However, Malinga looks back with gratitude to some of the teachers like Dr Khoza Mgojo and others who were supportive of women seminarians. She completed her three years of training at Seminary. Through the support of Dr Mgojo and Dr Gqubule, she got a scholarship to study for her Master of Divinity degree at Harvard University in the United States of America for a period of three years.

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5 Malinga, Interviewed by Lwamkelo Gwaxaza on May 12, 2018 at SMMS.

## **Malinga's Contributions to the MCSA**

### **Contributions at Congregational Level**

In 1982 and 1983 Malinga was stationed at KaBhokweni in the then Nelspruit East Circuit as probation or minister in training. She served under a male superintendent who had never worked with a female minister, so he simply did not know how to mentor and support a woman minister in training. Malinga faced challenging patriarchy in this ministry with a superintendent who would even refer to her as a girl given to him by the church to work with. She remembers that difficult time by saying: "That was my toughest year in the ministry due to the fact that my superintendent had no idea what to do with me. He used to complain: 'I asked for a probation minister and the church has sent me a girl'" (Interview with Gwaxaza). In 1987, after Seminary, she was stationed at Ohlelo-Nkandla, a section of the then UMhlathuze Circuit, where she worked with the Rev. Drummond Geveza as her superintendent. She had a good experience here because Rev. Geveza treated her with respect as a minister and gave her space in the church to exercise her leadership skills. She was ordained and accepted into Full Connexion in 1988.

### **Contributions at District Level**

It was while building her academic career that a nomination for the position of Bishop of the Natal Coastal District interrupted her. Although she had not thought about something like this, she received it as a call from God and responded to it affirmatively. Of significance is that she was going to be the first female bishop in the history of the MCSA, and even amongst other mainline denominations. Malinga was inducted into the position of Bishop of the Natal Coastal District in 1999. She completed a total of nine years. This position gave exposure to the workings of the connexion. Malinga's election and induction as bishop became a special moment, particularly for women, not only in the church but also in the wider society. Women gained confidence and started realising that they are capable of leadership and that they can serve in church leadership positions. In her as a leader, they saw themselves as leaders. She became a symbol of hope and inspiration to countless women. She also learnt that, as a woman, she has to work harder in order to dispel the myth that women are not capable. She said: "I've had to work extra hard to dispel any doubts about my capabilities" (Interview with Gwaxaza). While things were not easy for Malinga as a district bishop, she led for nine years with wisdom and integrity. Her pastoral, humble, but firm character enabled her to navigate the patriarchal attitudes and tendencies that sought to undermine her as a leader. Her comment on her experience was:

At first, most ministers in the district responded to my leadership because the system required them to be accountable. There were fear and uncertainty in the air. To the few who resisted, I had to be firm and make it clear that they had no choice—I was the bishop, they were ministers working under my pastoral oversight and therefore had to account. The fact that I was a woman did not mean anything when it comes to the work. As time went on, however, we built relationships of love, care and respect for one

another—which made us lead together and develop a healthy district. I embraced and listened to those I led and in turn, they embraced me as a person and their leader. While the church systems protected me from being undermined by some who would have wanted to, it was the openness and willingness to build relationships that contributed to my success. Of course, being a bishop is not an easy task; it is a thankless job, and it is easy to be blamed for everything. I did have some challenging times, but overall my time of leading the Natal Coastal District was filled with great moments of joy which I will forever cherish. (Interview with Gwaxaza)

She will be remembered for pioneering work, which broke the gender stereotypes in the church and opened doors for women to lead. From now on, it became normal to think of a woman as a bishop; that is why two more women were elected as bishops of their synods in 2019, which is a milestone on its own.

### **Contributions at Connexional Level**

On her return to South Africa from Harvard University in 1992, Malinga was appointed as a lecturer in New Testament at FEDSEM. Unfortunately, the seminary closed down the same year. She then moved to teach at the Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC) in Johannesburg, while also heading the Christian Education Department of the MCSA. She also taught at Kilnerton Methodist College in Pretoria. Skilled, and with her commitment to the MCSA, sound theological education and teaching experience, she began to learn the polity, processes and ecclesiology of the church. Unknown to her, these opportunities were preparing her for leadership at the highest levels of the denomination.

### **Factors that Mitigated Malinga’s Nomination**

Malinga’s nomination did not come as a surprise or without concerted effort. A number of factors have emerged over the years that culminated to her ascent to leadership. Some of these factors are examined in the following section.

### **KwaZulu-Natal as the Incubator of Women Leaders**

Contrary to popular belief, Methodism in KwaZulu-Natal has historically pioneered woman leadership more than other provinces in the country. It is significant to note the important role played by the Natal-West Districts in providing the MCSA with women leaders.

For instance, it was in this province that a woman princess, by the name of Mkabayi kaJama (1750–1853), led the Zulu nation as a regent, turning it from a small insignificant nation into a mighty one, and she mothered King Shaka, who is known all over the world for his prowess. Had it not been for uMkabayi, the army general, regent and a counsellor, there is no evidence that the Zulu Kingdom would have grown to what it is today.

In the 19th century, the kingdom produced Nokuthela Dube, wife of the late Dr John Langalibalele Dube, who was responsible for Dube's success. She supported him in attaining education; the founding of Ohlange—one of the first Schools to be founded by black people; the founding of Ilanga LaseNatal—the first Zulu newspaper; and they published the first Zulu-songbook (izingoma nemieququmbelo isiZulu) (Kumalo 2012, 61).<sup>6</sup> Nokuthela was also responsible for preserving Enoch Sontonga's song, *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica*. When all Sontonga's 300 hymns got lost, Nokuthela, who taught it to the schoolchildren at Ohlange, saved this song. She was also behind Dr Dube's appointment as the Founding President of the South African Native National Congress, which was later to be known as the African National Congress (ANC), the liberating and ruling party of South Africa (Gabaitse and Kumalo 2014, 107).

The Women's Manyano, which is the Women's organisation of the Methodist Church, started in KwaZulu-Natal around the 1870s during the war (Born 2002, 12).<sup>7</sup> The current red, black and white uniform used by the Women's Manyano was decided in Natal in 1907 at one of their early annual conventions. One notes without reservation that the first woman ever to be ordained as a Methodist minister, the Rev. Constance Oosthuizen, came from Greytown in the Natal-West District. The district went on to elect her as Secretary of Synod, which was a first for a woman in the connexion to occupy this position. Second, the first black woman minister to be ordained, the Rev. Nikiwe Mbilini, was at Harding Circuit in the Natal-West District—simply because no other circuit in the connexion was prepared to accept a black woman as a minister. It is also in the same district that a woman by the name of Rev. Cynthia Xaba served a black circuit (Umtshezi) as superintendent for over 20 years—which came to an end not by any form of disagreement or conflict with her beloved congregation, but which ended with her premature death. It is unprecedented that a black woman can serve a black congregation for such a long time as superintendent without being pushed out. The Natal Coastal District appointed the first woman to be bishop in the MCSA. Today the MCSA has appointed a daughter of the Methodist people from KwaZulu-Natal to be a leader of the connexion.

We can safely gather from the above that Malinga comes from a province with a long history of producing women leaders. The church in this province has defied entrenched patriarchy by producing women leaders from time immemorial. Malinga comes from a province that has nurtured women leadership for the church—not only in South Africa,

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6 For more on Nokuthela Dube, consult Kumalo, R. 2012. *Pastor and Politician: Essays on the Legacy of Dr J. L. Dube, the first President of the African National Congress*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 61. See also Rosinah Gabaitse and Simangaliso Kumalo. 2014. "Singing from beyond the Grave: Nokuthela Linderley Dube Returned to Memory." *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (December) XL (2): 107–118.

7 Born, E. *From Memory to Hope: A narrative History of the Areas of the World Federation of Methodist Women*. Virginia: Ferrum College, 2000, 217.



but also for the entire globe—as she is the first woman Presiding Bishop in the Methodist Church in the world.

### **A Public Theologian**

I understand public theology as that branch of theological reflection which seeks to understand public issues and dynamics from a theological perspective. Christina Landman has defined it as “the dialogical spaces between ‘private’ and ‘public,’ between God-talk as personal religious belief and God-talk as public discourse” (Landman 2010, 50). The main purpose of public theology is to “bring the concerns of the voiceless into the public arena.”<sup>8</sup> Malinga came into the public eye when she was first nominated as Bishop of the Natal Coastal District in 1999. For a church that had not had a woman rising to that level of leadership in almost two centuries, this was big news that propelled Malinga to play a role in the ecumenical movement and society at large, which was far beyond the borders of the Methodist Church. Just by her dignified presence and prophetic preaching, she pronounced the arrival of women into the male-dominated scene of church leadership. Malinga has the ability for engaging in theological analysis, most of which was presented in conferences, seminars and conventions. Her presence and work have meant that women’s quest for equality could not be ignored anymore—neither in the church or society. It was for that reason that she was elected to lead the KwaZulu-Natal Church Leaders Group, which was also a first for a woman to be appointed in that position. Suddenly the issues around gender and the preservation of pervasive patriarchy by the church moved from the private to the public sphere. She began to represent the church in spaces dominated by men—and she would be the only woman.

Through Malinga, women became present in those spaces and through her dignified and righteous stubbornness, their voices were heard. She began to conduct services where she, as a woman, inducted male-leaders into a position of leadership—something that had no precedence. She represented the MCSA and KZNCCC in public meetings with government representatives, the premier, and so forth. From such experiences she learned ways of engaging patriarchy and the representation of woman. Through her, pervasive patriarchy was undermined and positive masculinity began to emerge. One of the key themes of Malinga’s theology is her positive anthropology. This refers to the fact that humanity is beautiful (especially women) because they bear the image of God, just like a man. In some of her sermons, she affirmed women’s gifts and talents. She remained a consistent critique of patriarchy, but doing this inside the church instead of stepping outside. Her theology is diametrically opposed to the dominant, which places man at the centre of theological anthropology. Using the pulpit, she propagated a theology aimed at dismantling the religious discourses that promote gender discrimination, both in the church and in society. Having studied at Harvard Divinity School in the 1980s, Malinga was exposed to feminist theology early in her ministry. For her, theology must be in solidarity with the experiences of the oppressed and

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8 Landman, C. 2010. “Simon Maimela as Public Theologian of the 1980s and 1990s,” 55.

marginalised women. Just a week before she was nominated, I sat next to her at a seminary graduation. Suddenly the choir stood to sing a song that is insensitive to barren women. She was appalled that seminary students demonstrated such naivety by singing a song that denigrates the pain of women. She believes that theology should teach seminarians to be sympathetic and mindful of the pain of women, both in the church and in society.

Malinga's journey and public theology enable women to forge what feminists refer to as a "blossoming theology." Sarojini Nadar defines this theology by saying that "Blossoming is the metaphor for a women's theology characterised by changes, growth, transformation, and especially for a corporeal theology born out of women's bodies and their suffering" (Nadar, in Phiri and Nadar 2002, 157). Malinga has lived, practised and preached blossoming theology from the moment she was appointed as first woman bishop of the MCSA, some 20 years ago. Val Paquet, the editor of *New Dimension*, who had an exclusive interview with Malinga during her induction service as Bishop of the Natal Coastal District, observed: "while militant feminist does not apply, she is determinately in favour of gender equality" (Paquet 2000, 1).

### **An Ecumenist**

While bishop of the Natal Coastal District, Malinga was elected as chairperson of the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council—a position she held with great success for a full term of three years. She also became chairperson of the Natal Church Leader's Group (NCLG). This meant that she needed to cross her denominational boundaries and bring together members from different denominations and traditions to work together. One of the biggest challenges that confronted her was the decline of commitment to ecumenism by the mainline church, while the Pentecostal movements and the ministries were getting more committed to it. As a leader, she had to create harmony between these traditions. She succeeded in making all those church groups feel welcomed and appreciated in the KZNCC. Soon after relocating to Gauteng, she was elected as second deputy president of the South African Council of Churches—a position she occupied for a period of three full years. When she was nominated to the position of Presiding Bishop of the MCSA, she was serving as Director of the Education for Ministry and Mission Unit in the MCSA—a unit which deals with the training of those who respond to the call to lay and ordained ministry. This includes working with the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa and other denominations who are training their ministers at the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary, which is under her leadership. She spends most of her time discerning with those who share their call to the ministry throughout the entire connexion.

### **The God-moment for Gender Equality**

For over a decade, the Methodist Church has been concerned that women are poorly represented in all levels of its structures. It was for this reason that the conference took a decision that during all meetings of the church the proportionate representation will

be 40 per cent male, 40 per cent female and 20 per cent youth. In Methodist circles, 40:40:20 is the rule of representation. However, year after year it has been a concern that this target has not been met during the election of delegates to synods or the annual conference. It is even more visible when one looks at the bishops of the church who are all male. After 40 years of women's ordination, women form only 17 per cent of ordained ministers, only four per cent of them are superintendents, and there is no woman bishop in the MCSA (Morgan 2016, 21). Then, at the 2017 Conference, it was resolved that the conference would nullify any nomination of males to the position of bishops and replace it with a female. The resolution would take effect after the synods of 2019. Therefore, there have always been formal and informal discussions around the connexion that 2019 was a year when women would get into leadership in a way that has never been seen before—a God-moment for gender equality. Things got complicated when a male General Secretary got into the position at the 2018 Conference, so it was clear that the Presiding Bishop would need to be a woman. The names that were touted around were those of the then Secretary of Conference, the Rev. Charmaine Morgan and the Rev. Purity Malinga, who was Director of Education for Ministry and Mission Unit.

### **The Telephone Conversation about the Status of Women in the MCSA**

On December 28, 2018, a scandal broke out regarding a private telephone conversation between Reverend Vukile Mehana (Director of the Human Resources Unit, Chaplain of the ANC and the facilitator of the revisions around the Book of Discipline of the MCSA) and his friend Raymond Siyaba. The conversation was about the fact that one female minister had been robbing members of the Young Men's Guild, who obviously are male. Siyaba was probing Rev. Mehana to respond to this event, and he responded with very problematic androcentric and patriarchal statements that were offensive to women—not just on the person of the concerned reverend but all of them in society. He was not aware that his friend was recording the conversation. This led to a national outcry and condemnation by women's bodies in the church and society. There were marches to Bruma Lake, demonstrations against Rev. Mehana and pressure exerted on the Methodist Church to take appropriate disciplinary measures against the minister involved. Senior Methodist ministers appeared on television and spoke through radio broadcasts sharing their experience of patriarchy in the church. Rev. Malinga herself and Charmaine Morgan, the General Secretary, appeared on national television, sharing their experiences of patriarchy in the church. This bolstered the campaign for the election of women into the leadership of the Methodist Church.

### **Campaigns towards Synods**

The results of the elections came as a culmination of years of lobbying, protests and resolutions put through one conference to another by concerned groups in the church. Credit goes to the Women in Ministry (WIM), a support group of women in the Methodist Church, who has been putting pressure on the Methodist Church to open up opportunities for women to lead the church. Their struggle reached its climax at the

2016 Conference with Rev. Dibuseng Lebaka-Ketsabile giving a strongly worded challenge to the church. She said:

I challenge the MCSA to be true to its words. We need to see women elected to positions of leadership going forward in this church. The next president of the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary must be a woman. The next group of bishops must include women. How long shall the church renege on its responsibility of affirming women? (Malinga 2016, 5)

Malinga herself had also delivered a paper at the Limpopo District Convention where she made a passionate call to the Methodist people:

Engage in open discussions about how our patriarchal cultures distort our humanity and our discipleship. All of us, women and men, contribute to the devaluation of women in church and in society.<sup>9</sup>

This was followed by a nation-wide campaign by women in ministry and gender-activists both lay and clergy. The call was simple; women need recognition in the MCSA to lead the church at all levels. At the beginning of 2019, campaign messages started appearing on the internet and on WhatsApp. It was here that the name of Purity Malinga began to gain momentum.

During the run-up to the elections, a few names were in the run for the Presiding Bishop. Most of these were male. They came and disappeared and it was not clear who was behind them. This was made complicated by the fact that the Methodist Church does not allow campaigning for positions in the church, although there is no written rule against it. The processes of discernment are not well regulated in the church. It was in the last quarter towards the elections that Rev. Malinga's name gained momentum and was pushed through Facebook and private conversations by progressive groups. This group consisted of women ministers and younger male ministers with strong representation from those who are pro-LGBTQI. There is shared sympathy between those fighting for gender equality and those fighting for the full recognition of gay rights in the church and its ordained ministry. Campaign statements and messages of mobilisation were posted for people to consider voting for Malinga.

The 2019 synods were seen as the *Kairos* or God-moment for the election of women leadership. This call became so popular that people from the highest echelons of the church were afraid of contradicting it for any reason. For instance, WhatsApp had messages such as:

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9 "Purity Malinga, Forty Years of Ordained Women in the MCSA Ministry." Paper read at the Limpopo District Women's Manyano Convention held at Middleburg, 2016, 5.



Purity is the mother the church needs, she has never tried to be a man about her leadership, she is a strong feminine woman and at such a time as this, our church needs a mother's intervention. Our young girls need a strong woman to look up to for shaping a BETTER tomorrow today! Yes, that shaping requires wisdom and finesse, which Purity possesses. I believe God has a gift for the MCSA, for such a time as this, in the person of the Rev. Purity Malinga!<sup>10</sup>

A biographical profile for Rev. Purity Malinga. On the left, a red octagonal graphic contains the text: 

**Born at Imbo in KZN**  
Student of Harvard University in USA  
- Obtained Master of Divinity Degree  
- Specializing in Hermeneutics  
Student of Duke University  
- Obtained Certificate on Leadership

**2019 YEAR FOR  
NEW DAWN - NEW AGE**

**Ordained in 1988**

Former Bishop of the Natal Coastal Synod 2000 – 2008  
Former Director of Christian Education and Lecturer at John Wesley College – Kilmerton, Pretoria.  
Former Lecturer at Federal Theological Seminary.  
**A True Leader by Birth**

 On the right is a photograph of Rev. Purity Malinga speaking at a podium. Below the photo is a red banner with the text: 

**Rev Purity Malinga**  
Director of  
Education for Ministry & Mission Unit

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10 Rev. Sifiso Khuzwayo. Posted on Facebook, 14 May 2019 at 05:07.



These and many other posts dominated the social media space.

Pictures of bottled of purity (like the one below), a well-known brand of baby food, became a symbol of the campaign, which was on Facebook and other social media platforms with a message challenging people to have Purity during voting day.



Young people, members of the clergy, together with the youth of the church drove a campaign that was unparalleled by any other in the church, calling for the election of a woman as Presiding Bishop, and they were unequivocal on their candidate. Malinga's name was the only woman candidate. It competed with the name of the only other candidate, which is that of Bishop Mthobeli Matyumza.

## **The Nomination**

### **The Moment of Reckoning**

As per the rules of the church, synod meets at the same time throughout the connexion when they will be electing a Presiding Bishop. Indeed, on May 16, 2019, Methodist delegates converged in the 12-synod meeting in all nine provinces of South Africa, including Mozambique. The task was the election of a new Presiding Bishop and Purity Malinga was the most popular name discussed during teas, lunches and dinners. The elections were on May 17, 2019. Malinga received a total number of 1 740 votes, whilst the second contender, the Rev. Matyumza, got 234 votes. Therefore, Malinga took 75 per cent of the votes, whilst Matyumza got the rest. It is also significant to note that Malinga got landslide votes from 11 synods, with the exception of the Queenstown District who voted for their Bishop, Rev. Matyumza. This was an overwhelming victory for Malinga and a clear show of confidence. The results of the elections unequivocally articulated the turning of a tide in the church's history, for it shattered the stained-glass ceiling and it became the first to do this amongst mainline churches. The results came as the fruits of years of hard work by the leadership of the church in encouraging the inclusion of women in leadership structures. The victory does not belong to any particular group as their achievement, but rather to most of the Methodist people—as attested by the votes.

### **Reactions to the Nomination (Internal and External)**

The Methodist people reacted with joy and celebration upon receiving Malinga's election. The MCSA, through the Presiding Bishop, released a formal statement a few hours after the election. It announced the results, congratulated Malinga on her nomination, and thanked the Methodist people for the smooth elections. The statement noted that the Methodist people have expressed "joy and jubilation" to the election of a woman leader after 200 years of oppressive patriarchy (Siwa 2019).

Malinga's response to her election was telling. Humility, grace and submission of herself to the rules and disciplines of the Methodist Church marked it. She wrote:

This is to convey my humble gratitude for the confidence bestowed upon me in nominating me as Presiding Bishop elect. As a Methodist minister, I vowed to go wherever the church sends me. I, therefore, accept this call, I say with Mary the Mother of Jesus, "Here I am Lord Let it be with me according to your word." I dedicate this historic moment to all Methodist people—but particularly women, young and old,

clergy and lay. I stand on the shoulders of many women of faith who have prayed for such a day like this. This is, therefore, our moment all of us together. (Malinga 2019)

The Presiding Bishop of the MCSA, Rev. Ziphozinhle Siwa, responded immediately after the result came out by describing Malinga as:

A tried and tested leader and we rejoice in her election as Presiding Bishop. This decision of the church affirms our belief in the partnership of men and women and affirms our knowledge and belief in black women, in particular as capable leaders in their own right. (Siwa 2019)

There was also a response on Twitter by the President of South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa, who wrote:

Congratulations are in order to Rev. Purity Malinga on her election as the first ever female to hold the position of presiding Bishop in @The-MCSA. Her election affirms the centrality of women as leaders across all structures in society. We wish her well in her new role.<sup>11</sup>

Another significant message came from the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL). It read:

The African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) congratulates Reverend Purity Malinga on her election as the first female Presiding Bishop for the MCSA. We consider this election as progressive and a step in the right direction towards addressing patriarchy and gender equality in faith-based organisations. (ANCWL May 20, 2019)

Facebook was very busy, with messages coming from within the MCSA and from outside commenting on her election. The general message expressed there was an appreciation of the transformation that was going through the church. The messages came from within South Africa and from overseas, and they all celebrated the breaking of the stained-glass ceiling, which had been limiting women's ascent to leadership for over 200 years.

The Methodist people were shocked when, on 21 May, four days after Malinga's election, they received a letter from Rev. Siwa announcing his retirement from the position of Presiding Bishop as early as January 2020, instead of the end of December 2020. In his letter, Bishop Siwa noted that his decision to retire early was to honour the milestone achieved by the church through the elections. He asserted that:

It is a special milestone in the journey of the MCSA and the Ecumenical movement has applauded the Methodists for this election. The journey has been long and the Methodist people are responding well to the calls that the church has been making over time. In the spirit of this milestone, I will apply to the Connexional Executive to become a

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11 Cyril Ramaphosa @cyrilRa...7m.



supernumerary minister with effect from 31 December 2019 ... in order to allow Rev. Purity Malinga to assume duty as from 1st January 2020 instead of waiting for the normal 18 months. (Laws and Discipline 5.7 on page 56, quoted in Siwa 21 May 2019)

The response to Rev. Siwa's letter was received with ambiguousness. For some, this was an act of magnanimity and generosity by the incumbent, for he was allowing Malinga to start leading the Methodist Church even earlier than expected, which was a sign of support. For others, this was a sign of disappointment with the result of the elections and the leader throwing his toys out of the cot. The decision by Bishop Siwa meant that Rev. Malinga needed to hit the ground running.<sup>12</sup>

## **An Appraisal of the Life and Work of the Presiding Bishop-elect**

### **Malinga as a Compassionate Pastor**

One of the attractive features of Malinga is her affectionate humility. Reflecting on her election as Bishop of Natal Coastal District, Val Paquet, then editor of the *New Dimension*, said of her: "The picture she projects is of an assured, quiet, sometimes reserved woman rather than someone who rests on her past laurels" (Paquet 2000, 2). She obviously is a misfit in the world of male competition for power and recognition. Her whole working life in the church has been in a male-dominated institution, and most of the time being a pioneer of women representation she has not bought into the culture of competition. Instead, she has seen her role in those institutions as opening opportunities for other women, especially those who will come after her. Those who have worked with Rev. Malinga describe her leadership style as a compassionate pastor. She is a good listener, gives time to those who come to her with problems and takes time to pray with them. Although she can be stern, she is compassionate and loving. They also note that she is an avid reader and tends to deliver well thought out sermons that appeal to both the heart and the mind. In short, she speaks to the whole person.

### **Malinga the Matriarch**

In spite of the fact that she has never married, she has remained a deeply committed family person. She continues to be the head of her family home, especially with the death of her only brother who left her with a number of children to look after and the affairs of the family to run. She has also had to raise her twin daughters, which she adopted from her brother as her own. In Rev. Malinga the Methodist people have a preacher, an educator, a theologian and a chief pastor. This is significant because the role of a Presiding Bishop is to provide pastoral oversight to the ministers, especially the bishops and the broader Methodist community. She also brings with her the gifts of being a sister, an aunt and a mother. Most people, especially in the Natal Coastal District, refer to her as mamPurity, thanks to her social and pastoral skills. She keeps reminding people of the fact that she comes from Ixopo, so she is a rural girl who still has a lot to learn. In one of the meetings at Central City Mission in Durban, when the

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12 Siwa, Z. "Letter to the Methodist People," 21 June 2019.

discussion was about forming partnerships with international churches, she suddenly said: “Well I come from Ixopo, I don’t know these things but if you guys do and can see that it will help us, let us go ahead, you have my support.”<sup>13</sup> She does not present herself highly to people and is easy to befriend and talk to all people, from lay people, ministers in training, to leaders of the church. Even in meetings, she is slow to talk, always preferring to talk last on a subject after listening attentively to all other views. However, once she is convinced of a point, it is very difficult to persuade her to change her mind or position.

In a patriarchal society, where the respect that a person gets (especially a woman) has a lot to do with her marital status, Malinga has broken the conventional. In Zulu culture, a woman finds respect through her father’s status by being married or by having a boy child. Malinga does not possess all these qualities to enable her to claim status in the church and in society. Her father died a long time ago. He never had an important status in society or the church to enhance the status of his daughter. She has never married and has no boy child. Even the children that she adopted from her brother are both girls. By deciding not to be married, Malinga chose to live “outside patriarchal frameworks” (Russell and Oduyoye 2002, 249). She pushed the boundaries of womanhood and motherhood. Like Mary Oduyoye, the mother of African womanist theology from Ghana, who in the words of Letty Russell lived “in a country where Motherhood is as sacred as it was in Israel she managed to Mother many, but bore no children of her own” (Russell and Oduyoye 2002, 249). She is regarded by many, especially women in ministry, as their mother. Rev. Sifiso Khuzwayo eloquently echoed these sentiments during the run-up to the elections. He said of Malinga:

Purity is the mother the church needs, she has never tried to be a man about her leadership, she is a strong feminine woman and at such a time as this, our church needs a mother’s intervention. Our young girls need a strong woman to look up to for shaping a BETTER tomorrow today! Yes, that shaping requires wisdom and finesse, which Purity possesses.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, these qualities are dismissible by others as a sign of gender bias, expected of her role as a woman minister. For instance, many people may think that as a woman, generally she is expected to be a mother, an aunt, caregiver and nurturer. A positive take to this understanding of her status is that she brings these unique attributes to the ministerial leadership of the denomination, which has never been seen before under male leadership.

### **Malinga the Trailblazer**

Malinga has been a trailblazer in many ways. In most of the positions that she has occupied in the church over the years she has either been the first black person or the first woman—from the time she became a lecturer at FEDSEM, to the position of

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13 Circuit Quarterly meeting, Central City meeting February 2007. Durban.

14 Sifiso Khuzwayo Facebook. 14 May 2019 at 05:07.

Secretary of Christian Education, Bishop of the Natal-West District, Superintendent of City Mission in Pretoria, Director of EMMU, and now presiding Bishop-elect. Being a pioneer means that she has had to hit the ground running, navigating new systems, rules and processes and ultimately learning a lot about the church. She has also had to prepare the ground for other black people and women who followed in her footsteps. Taking over from white leaders of the church as a black person has meant that she had to do a lot to prepare the church for black leadership. Her appointment as bishop, to those who could read the signs of the times, was a sign that she was destined for high positions in the church. Despite her great gifts, abilities and theological excellence, she has remained subordinate, though not without defiance to the patriarchy in her church and society.

### **Malinga the Leader**

Malinga, by nature, is a very brave, courageous and resilient human being. This is evident when one, with the benefit of hindsight, looks back on her journey in the ministry. She is not the first and only woman to have offered for the ministry in the MCSA, but she is the only one who has risen through the ranks from one level to another until she has reached the highest office. Malinga's nomination to the highest position in the Methodist Church confirms one missionary's assertion that "if a job is too hard for men, God will send a woman" (in Klaus Fiedler 1994, 306). The Methodist Church has been going through turmoil in recent years, ranging from unresolved issues such as its position on same-sex relations, the failure to elect women in leadership positions and continuous conflict between ministers and their congregations. The controversy caused by the leaked conversation between Rev. Mehana and Raymond Siyaba plunged the church into a much deeper crisis, leading to people losing trust in the current leadership. Therefore, people were looking for a new leadership. Purity is a humble, honest but stern leader. She suffers no fool and does not involve herself in petty politics and cabals. She is a great theologian who seeks to pursue and live out the principles of Jesus through Methodism. Her theological convictions became visible when she condemned the xenophobic attacks when they took place in the country. In an interview with a journalist, she said: "The xenophobic attacks that we witnessed were uncalled for and clearly motivated by naivety and a baseless hatred" (in Dlamini 2008, 1). She has remained the first and only woman bishop in the Methodist Church. It was only in 2019 that the synods elected two other women bishops. In the 200 years of Methodism in Southern Africa, she has now become the first woman Presiding Bishop. Malinga does not present herself as an attractive, charismatic and dynamic leader. Other than her imposing body and presence, you would simply dismiss her. Even when she is speaking, she does not easily appeal as a dynamic leader, but a rather calm, quiet and slow individual. She does not possess lots of energy and does not bang tables when speaking or preaching. However, she appeals to her audience's minds by building sound theological arguments for her sermons, speeches and even contributions. She certainly does not possess any rhetorical skills to enhance her appeal as a leader to her followers. Those who support her are attracted by a combination of her humility, faith, sincerity, dignity, clarity of thought and convincing expressions. As a leader, she is able to bring people together and is able to walk alongside them as they seek to achieve their

commonly desired goals. She does not necessarily lead from the front as a domineering figure, but rather turns to point at the direction and then walks in the midst of the people she is leading.

## Conclusion

This study has aimed at narrating Purity Malinga's journey from her upbringing in Cabazi, KwaZulu-Natal to Bruma Lake in Johannesburg, where she will be occupying the position of Presiding Bishop of the MCSA. Malinga's story depicts the experiences, high and lows, but also the possibilities for many African women who aspire to work for God in the church. It is a story of a continuous struggle for one to be accepted, respected and recognised as having been called by God to serve like any other person. It is a story of resilience, where one draws strength from God and from within to persevere in the midst of opposition, rejection, dehumanisation and even humiliation from the church. She drew inspiration from a number of women (her sisters) in the ministry, like Constance Oosthuizen, Nikiwe Mbilini and Dibuseng Ketshabile, who also persevered in the struggle to remain in the church in spite of the painful experiences they were going through. She also believed that her cause was just and God was on her side, so she shall continue. Her election to the leadership is not just an affirmation of her call to the ministry and ordination but rather a vindication of her theology that God calls women to positions of leadership in the church. It is my conviction that Malinga's story will inspire generations of women to respond to their call in the ministry—to travel the cause in spite of the obstacles. Malinga's story and her ascent to power is a tribute to the hundreds of women in mainline denominations who have fought hard to break the glass ceiling in their denominations and their fight against gender, economic and ethnic/racial discrimination. Now that she has been elected for the position of Presiding Bishop in the Methodist Church, which breaks the 212-year-old ceiling for women, it means that history has been made. She is the first black woman to occupy the highest position in any mainline denomination in southern Africa. This is a credit to the Methodist people for their commitment in recognising the leadership of women. It is also a credit to her for having been resilient and faithful to her call. From now on, we are going to see an upsurge in women religious leadership, not only in the Methodist Church but also in other mainline church in the sub-region all because of this great achievement. Be forewarned.

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