

Sam Mokoena

Facilitator: This is an interview with Rev. Sam Mokoena, we are in Botshabelo in Bloemfontein, the date is 27 June 2011, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Ntate thanks very much for your time. Can you just give me the background of how you ended up here in Botshabelo?

Respondent: I'm a priest of the Anglican Church under the diocese of Bloemfontein, the Free State, I studied ministry at Fedsan, Federal Seminary for three years, 1972 to 1975. The Bishop made me a deacan/priest in Thabanchu here in 1975 and I served in Thabanchu for three years and I moved down to the Southern Free State, Stillfontein, a very poverty stricken area.

Facilitator: really

Respondent: After three years the Bishop said to me there's a challenge about a new re-settlement area called Omverwag, it is called Botshabelo today, he asked me to move up and start the Anglican church, there were Anglicans here, lots of them but there was no church and there nothing. He asked me to become a pastor and Sheppard the flock that was scattered as it were, in our biblical language. So I came here in 1981.

Facilitator: And your impression when you got to this place, it was a new place and somehow ..?

Respondent: In fact I had never in my life seen a re-settlement area, it was the first time I saw one. When they were talking about this area, I thought there were houses here, something like the four roomed houses

that were built everywhere, but I was surprised, I was shocked when I came here. The only tents provided by the government, actually the army and the government of course, just tin shacks, that's all and water tankers. Sometime, the problem with these water tankers, you don't know on time what the water tankers carried, to me they looked dirty and I wondered whether the water was clean and fresh. That was all, there was no clinic, no shops, there was nothing, people were just dumped here.

Facilitator: which part of the Free State did they come from?

Respondent: that's very interesting. According to the government's policy of separate development, population registration act, if you know Basotho were supposed to go to XwaXwa, Xhosas etc. Now let's talk about this place. Basotho were supposed to go to .., but since XwaXwa is so mountainous, the government decided a long time ago, in 1948 they envisaged about this area

Facilitator: really as far back as that?

Respondent: far back as that, they thought Basotho's all over South Africa from Sebokeng, Veereeniging, the Free State etc., XwaXwa will be too small for them, so let's look at another area, XwaXwa 2, they had a problem about the farmers in this area, they couldn't sell their farms for relocation until at last the government paid a lot of money for those farmers to relocate and make space for surplus Basotho. So they came from Bultfontein, mostly the Free State, Hertzogville, everywhere in the Free State. Some came from Gauteng, very few because in Gauteng there were jobs so you didn't have the business of coming here and then some

were forcefully removed, especially those that came from the farms, with the introduction of modern machinery, when you had 20 labourers now you only needed two or three, others were surplus so you chased them away. So they came over to Thabanchu. There was a place called .., this is where they settled and Mangope harassed them, the Bophuthatswana government. Mopeli got a chance and said those are my people, he negotiated with the South African government for this area, they called it Botshabelo – it was not really Botshabelo, Botshabelo had existed before, and had nothing to do with the homeland leaders like Mopeli.

Facilitator: so the kind of the flock that you found here, in your biblical language. What was the impression of the flock?

Respondent: very lean flock, unemployed, especially women because most of the men were working in the mines, others Bloemfontein, they were commuting, others worked in Durban/Cape Town. The oldish folk had nothing to do here, especially those that were illiterate, the ones that came from the farms, they were struggling because they had nothing to do. Well as a pastor it was my duty to find them, I found them. I told them there's a church, word got around that there's umfundisi around, I asked others, I visited, you know literally looking for lost sheep.

Facilitator: But politically and otherwise where was this place moving to?

Respondent: As I said people were dumped here, they had no future, so the government then had introduced something like regional labour councils, if my memory serves me well. Something of the sort, whereby there were regions all over South Africa. Botshabelo, Thabanchu, Bloemfontein were clubbed together as a region whereby there were

white apartheid commissioners who will be responsible for this area in connection with maybe labour because then there was something called .., I forget the name, border industries, as you came along you saw some industries. The Chinese and Israelis and other people had come to establish labour in the plastic industry, and all these other things so that people can find jobs as it were. Very few found jobs, those that found jobs were paid very little, almost nothing, you would earn something like R30 a week which was nothing. So the so called border industries, were sort of .., according to the government serving the labour requirement of the area here. So those who were fortunate could find jobs in Bloemfontein as domestic servants or work in the gardens you know. Those who were fortunate could find lucrative jobs maybe in Johannesburg – mostly were working in the mines, in Welkom and Gauteng, Driefontein etc. The women, some of them got jobs as domestic servants in Bloemfontein, some of course as lady teachers of course around here, others as government workers you know, like in the Dept of Administration and Labour, something like that. Everything was done from Bloemfontein or Thabancu. There were no magistrate courts, only tin shack schools were established here.

Facilitator: the whole thing about the resistance then, the uprisings, which was something that happened in South Africa. How did these things begin here?

Respondent: I think it was the beginning of the 1980s, you remember PW Botha had the idea of Swart gevaar, when the ANC and the PAC movements which were banned and their leaders were in Robben Island or in exile, they intensified the struggle. The government saw that as Swart gevaar or Rooi gevaar, meaning Rooi gevaar would be the Communist

Party, the communists, the guerrillas, MK was functioning intensifying the struggle, bombing electrical installations etc. in specific areas. So the government stepped up its vicious violence, political violence as it were. It happened everywhere in South Africa of course, but in poor areas like Botshabelo, where there was no electricity, there was nothing, so we carried most of the blunt, peoples suffered here. Those water tankers stopped coming, they deliberately stopped bringing us water, just so we can suffer. Many people died, especially children, they died from malnutrition, we had all those diseases that come with poverty. The older folk also died from things like pneumonia. In the first two years since the beginning of the settlement, the first graveyard was full. A lot of people died.

A lot of people don't understand that the duty of a priest is not only for spiritual needs only, how does one administer spiritually under such circumstances. One realises that there's something deeper here. By the way spirituality doesn't necessarily mean that it has to do with God only, it means everything about man, mind, body, soul etc. So the boers, they taught us that to be Christian has to do with the church and with God, "and what do you want in politics?". I remember when I was petrol bombed, a colonel of the special branch came and said to me "he said do you not have a dominee in the church, what do you want from the politics in the township". At the time I was elected with other ministers for a crisis committee. From 1980 there was a crisis in Botshabelo because there were two State of Emergencies, 1982 I think also in 1986, it was a very cold winter. Many people were detained, young, student leaders here in Botshabelo. People were resisting, especially the young folk, the students.

Facilitator: what about this mobilisation. You were saying that young people were detained. What was the build up to that?

Respondent: yes, due to political repression by the state, students who were doing Matric, who were studying history, and those who saw the political repression, those that were mature enough, they became student leaders. Some of them had heard or saw the 1976 Soweto Uprisings, they read about this in the newspapers about students mobilising. The older folk were dragging their feet, everywhere, until 1976. In those days there was very little resistance from the older folk. People had hoped that people like Gatsha Buthelezi and such leaders would do something for them. The students decided to resist – here in Botshabelo they formed Boyco (Botsabelo Youth Congress, Bosco (Botshabelo Students Congress) because COSAS was banned and other formations to say we demand proper schools not the tin shacks, they are cold in winter and very hot in summer, we demand electricity. There was no electricity in Botshabelo, they also said their parents were suffering, they demanded proper education, they demanded qualified teachers. In Botshabelo there were very few qualified teachers. I remember I was embarrassed one day, the Bishop had come here for confirmations. I asked one teacher to interpret as the Bishop was speaking. I'm sorry to say it, I also don't speak English very well because its not my mother tongue, but that guy couldn't just interpret words in vernacular, like resurrection, ascension, etc. the very same person was teaching English to Matriculants. So very few teachers were qualified here.

Now with the final State of Emergency in 1986, this is just where students were detained, boys like Matutle, Boys, Lobby, Stona, and many others, people like Mbalula, they came from Botshabelo here. They were

detained. One other peculiar thing about Botshabelo there were no community leaders. Church ministers, we had to act as social workers, community leaders, as everything. So many people thought that we were political, we were not necessarily ..., we were not blind to the political factor of course, but we were not as it were, political. We were reacting to the suffering of the people. We were reacting to what we saw with our own eyes, the suffering of our people. The flock of God suffering.

One interesting thing about Botshabelo as ministers, we were so united, of course under South African Council of Churches (there was noise in the background). SACC from Johannesburg had done a lot of spade work here, especially Sheena Duncan, Black Sash, you remember? Sheena Duncan used to come here and met us as ministers of religion and students, so say how can we represent people here, so that those that lost their jobs can get their monies. The people who worked in the mines and did not get their monies. Whites were deadly they were exploiting our people, the poor people in Botshabelo until an advice office was formed, right in the Anglican Church in Section B. An advice office was opened for any advise that people needed, even health, as I say, as a mfundisi, you were acting as everything, a doctor, a nurse, a social worker, everything, a politician. There were no community leaders.

The recording stopped.

Continuation

Facilitator: Okay you can continue.

Respondent: Another aspect of the life here in Botshabelo, not all church ministers were active politically or socially rather. It was only the Anglican Church, the Roman Catholic Church, in actual fact and the Lutheran Church, Father Muthe, myself and Krun Tsebe and somebody. Now, other ministers felt that we have neglected the spiritual work of God, the church, we are too involved in politics, that kind of thing. They felt that politics and religion don't mix, that kind of nonsense. Of course 80% of so called Christians belonging to religious Sacts, ZCC, whatever and you know those churches, and their ministers of course they are not politically conscious. They are looking at whatever, praying and healing. I am not undermining them, they have done a lot of good work spiritually, a lot, more than the established churches, by laying on of hands, praying, healing ministry, social contact. With us as Anglicans I can only say mass there in the alter standing, I don't have real contact ministry. They would come and heal people, and give them holy water – the Anglican and the Catholic church, we don't do that. But now when it came to politics they were not conscious, so they exposed us as it were, to say you see they are Roman Catholic priests we are not, they exposed us to the system. The priests, us, those who were conscious, so we affiliated under the SACC, South African Eastern Ministers, affiliated under SACC and its divisions especially Justice and Reconciliation Division headed by Dr. Kirzner. The Minsiter under ..(unclear) education and social, they were active, but their social development and division, it was vibrant because it composed of people like Desmond Tutu, all that cream, Frank Chikane, they created their own division of justice. We became interested in that division of course neglecting other divisions like social, women and children's groups etc. We felt that these can come secondary really. It was very interesting, again it was very risky. The police were really harassing us.

The interesting thing is, I'm sure the government realised that if we lock up the ministers, especially those three, people are going to revolt, unlike in Johannesburg where they can lock up somebody and others wouldn't know, it is too big. But here because there were no community leaders, we were only three who were active, now if you lock up those three, what was going to happen?

Facilitator: a revolution

Respondent: exactly, precisely, but now whereas on the other hand they were looking at means, how to destabilise us. They were doing all sorts of things to destabilise us. As I said until we were petrol bombed. It sounds .., one might not be perturbed. When it happened in actual fact, it was somebody had pointed a firearm at you, like this, or a tsotsi hijacking your car, when you see death with your eyes. It's scary, I was sleeping with my wife and it was just the two of us, all of a sudden at midnight, it was on 18 August 1983. All of a sudden I just heard an explosion, the whole house, in a mission, can you imagine, the church. So afterwards, that guy from the special branch, Motsamai from Bloemfontein and somebody – at the TRC, that judge asked him “how can you bomb a church, were you aware that there might be some dignitaries of the church, maybe a Bishop or somebody, or even kids?”. To date I still maintain that if you hate somebody at work and you petrol bomb his house, where do you expect his kids and children to sleep. If you are fighting with me as a man, fight me man to man. So I was petrol bombed. Father Mothe was threatened, Knotze was also threatened, he's a white man. So you know Catholic minister do not stay for a long time, he didn't stay around a lot, he was always out and Knotze was staying in Thabanchu, he had a flock here, and his congregation would

come. So I was a resident, I was residing in Botshabelo, I got the heaviest punishment – the advice office was also here and everybody who had problems would come to me as it were. I would go to church on Sundays, otherwise during the week I was doing all sorts of things, God gave me strength, somehow I found people, there were students and other people who were very helpful. Benny Kotswane also worked at the advice office.

Facilitator: You also mentioned that there was a crisis committee that was formed, at some point in time

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: why was it formed?

Respondent: The security police were detaining students all the time, or at any given time and in big numbers. They would take them at night as you know etc., take them to Gauteng to lock them up. Other students just vanished we didn't know where they are. The other reason, the tin shack schools, there were no proper school buildings at the time, and of course there was no water. After the water tankers were installed in Botshabelo, you would find that one of the taps is located at the far end. People had to go and fetch the water at the far end. There was no sewerage, we had the bucket system and water was fetched at certain points. There were no roads, there was actually nothing, no mortuaries, no shops, there were some spaza. So the crisis committee was found specifically to deal with such issues, we as priests had to find ways and means to make the situation bearable for the people. Mostly the crisis committee was formed for students who were detained indefinitely.

Facilitator: Was there a conflict between the labour struggles and the student struggles?

Respondent: Yes, very good Mfazwe was a labour activist, he was working in the factories. I think they formed something called T and G as a union to fight for workers rights because people were getting lousy weekly salaries, R30 – they fought for their rights. The Chinese exploited the situation, they were told that black people know nothing about money, R30 to R40 per week is enough. As it were the Chinese joined the government to oppress the black people, we didn't like it. Most people who worked in the factories the limbs were cut, or fingers were cut off, they were not represented, nothing was done for them. Other people died and nothing was done for their families, there were no labour lawyers in Botshabelo, the SACC lawyers came to represent certain cases through the advice office. This took a long time. Mfazwe was also a member of the crisis committee. He stood up for the rights of the people, he was steady and was detained several times, when they released him he would come back and carry on where he left off. He really struggled. He was also petrol bombed, detained, beaten, tortured.

Facilitator: Did your church play some role maybe in their cases that Mfazwe and others had?

Respondent: Well, you see as I said, you know we saw the role of the church not as spiritual, per se, but at that time in the 1980s as being actively involved in the resistance against apartheid. So that was our spirituality, resistance against apartheid, and with the guerrillas, MK and APLA intensifying the struggle, we thought to ourselves, let's conscientise

our people for a final throw of the old guard towards a new dispensation, this is how we saw our spirituality.

Facilitator: what about stay aways, did the crisis committee play a role in those?

Respondent: exactly, you are right, the buses that were commuting to Bloemfontein would increase the rates whenever there was political turmoil, exorbitantly. So the crisis committee was asked to intervene and negotiate with Jacaranda Bus company, they were adamant and they would say petrol is now more expensive etc. They did this to frustrate us, especially those that had to commute to Bloemfontein. As you know domestic servants earned very little, so because of the transport costs the people were earning almost nothing. We also tried to negotiate with the "madams" the employers of the domestic workers to at least pay transport costs for the employees.

Facilitator: Did you succeed with Jacaranda Bus Company?

Respondent: very minimal. I remember there was a bus boycott which prolonged for about a month, the company was losing and we negotiated a deal, we asked them to reduce the transport costs. We succeeded because he was also suffering when his busses were boycotted. We negotiated that one - with people like Stona, especially the students with the ministers. The Teachers Union also started at that time, only three or four teachers were active at the time. It was people like Mfuyo, Tau who was killed by the system

Facilitator: really, what was wrong with the rest, why were they not ..?

Respondent: I think they were not conscientised enough. Again Mopeli had taken over the Department of Education and their salaries came from XwaXwa, if you were active, if you were resisting you might lose your job, especially if you do not qualify as a teacher, it might be easy for you to lose your job. We sympathised with them that they might lose their jobs.

Facilitator: but in terms of teachers unions, did things change later maybe after 1994?

Respondent: Yes things changed after 1994 and by the way, I will tell you something. SADTU started here in Botshabelo, not in Jo'burg, it was started by Lefuwo and Tau. But now it took its roots in Johannesburg having started here. Botshabelo then became very active politically, the students, the priests, labour organisations and some of the teachers. Some policemen also used to say we are with you, they sympathised with us.

Facilitator: What were the successes of the crisis committee?

Respondent: As I said things changed a little bit, schools were built around Botshabelo, or rather let me put it this way, things started moving at a faster pace because of the crisis committee. We were always negotiating with the relevant authorities. Somehow detention of students stopped, mostly students were detained. If students were detained we would go to the police station and demand the students. Electricity was installed, there were shops like Lucky 7's, development started at a very slow pace, but it was visible. I think the government was going to do that at its own pace, but because there was pressure from us, the Crisis

Committee, they moved at a faster pace. Again, lots of visitors started coming to Botshabelo, the Germans came through the Lutheran Church because of Knotze, and the Anglican Church. Desmond Tutu came here to look at the situation and wrote about it in the papers. You also played a big role by informing people about the poverty in the area.

Facilitator: the bombing at your place, did that destabilise the family, how did your community react to that?

Respondent: We took it as part of the struggle because even going to report to the police was pointless. I did go to the police to report but nothing came of it, I could see that they didn't care, they were sort of saying you deserve it. It was traumatic. I only started having peaceful nights around 1994, I just couldn't sleep, I would have nightmares or stay awake most of the time with this terrible headache. I think I inhaled the fumes of the petrol bomb because afterwards I had a short breath. It destabilises the family because your brothers/family would come and say "stay away from the politics, you were almost killed, why is it worthwhile?" – so we faced such challenges because of our involvement. I am still traumatised to date. If I look at the news and hear about someone who has been necklaced, the bombing comes back to me. They threw four petrol bombs, you want to go outside and see what is going on, but you don't know whether somebody is standing behind the door with a firearm, its dark at night. Visibility is very limited, it felt as if I have been shot already.

Facilitator: so when you look back, was it worth it?

Respondent: Yes very much. I am a strong believer in God since then because I realised that God had brought me to Botshabelo to do this work. I believe that it was a calling for me, anyone else could have done it. I think I answered to the call of God. Naturally I am not a good speaker, but God gave me strength through the holy spirit to do whatever I did. I will never say I did it all by myself. I had some support from above. I was with our people in their suffering. I was with them and am still with them even today. We finally reached our goal as a country. Apartheid and its laws were abolished and we are in a new dispensation with all the challenges we are facing. The Rainbow Nation with all its enormous challenges. It was worthwhile because the church really played its role as an instrument of God in the liberation.

Facilitator: Is there anything that you think is important that you think should have been part of this interview?

Respondent: I think we touched on most of the points.

Facilitator: One other thing that I forgot to ask you. You went to Karim?? Region, and the conditions there?

Respondent: As I said it's a poverty stricken area, very cold, neglected area, the people living there are gardeners, domestic workers and work for the railways. The people who were stationed at Tronsberg, they worked for the railways, they called them extras. All the people from Stilfontein were bended – it is the work that they did so their backs were bend – they were all suffering from backaches, the boers were ruthless. There was no money, I still wonder to date how people lived there, how they managed. I thought to myself then, here I just don't see how I can

help these people. The only thing I can do it to be with them in their misery and share the little that I have with them, that's all. I couldn't see what else to do because I was alone as a minister there. Others used to come from outside on Sundays, I just couldn't do anything for them

Facilitator: so that was Springfontein?

Respondent: yes.

Facilitator: any form of militancy there?

Respondent: no there was nothing, it was 1978/79/80 – even the whole country there was very little militancy because of the political repression. When PW Botha came into office, he brought a lot of hardships.

Facilitator: so there was no hope at all for ..?

Respondent: no there was no hope.

Facilitator: subsequently what happened to that area?

Respondent: ja, like all these smaller dorpias, the ANC and the municipalities they tried to revive the area, now there are schools there and RDP houses and the streets are tarred, but still there's no hope in the area. Most of the people living there work outside.

Facilitator: comparatively speaking the boers how did they live?

Respondent: the boers, most of them were farmers, those that lived in that dorpie were either policemen, or worked at the Post Office, the bank, municipal offices etc., that's all, some worked for the railways.

Facilitator: thank you for your time

Respondent: thank you.

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Collection Number: A3402

Collection Name: Labour Struggles Project, Interviews, 2009-2012

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

Location: Johannesburg

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