

# Towards liberationist engagement with ethnicity: A case study of the politics of ethnicity in a Methodist church

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**Dates:**

Received: 10 May 2016

Accepted: 03 Aug. 2016

Published: 25 Oct. 2016

**How to cite this article:**

Hankela, E., 2016, 'Towards liberationist engagement with ethnicity: A case study of the politics of ethnicity in a Methodist church', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(1), a3475. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3475>

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The article calls for critical theological examination of the politics of ethnicity in the context of mainline churches in South Africa. The category of ethnicity is largely missing in the interrogation of diversity in the delineated context. Including this category of difference in the theological and religious studies diversity discourse would, if brought to bear on praxis, facilitate the building of inclusive worship spaces. On the contrary, neglecting the politics of ethnicity in the context of churches means neglecting a dynamic that impacts negatively on the everyday life of ordinary churchgoers. The argument is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author in a Methodist church in Johannesburg primarily in 2009.

## Introduction

Hope,<sup>1</sup> a congregant at the Central Methodist Mission (henceforth Central) in Johannesburg, spoke of the relationships between ethnic groups at her church, particularly from the perspective of language use, as something 'we need to work on': 'We still need to find that balance where everyone feels that they are accommodated'. Despite the multilingual main service at Central and positive changes in regard to such accommodative practices, Hope perceived things to be 'still dominated by [the isi-] Xhosa [language]'. In this article Central provides the context to examine the politics of exclusion based on ethnicity, which play out in different guises in different contexts around the world. I agree with Hope: it is primarily the members and leaders of faith communities that need to address questions of ethnic difference and power in the faith context. The role of an academic viewpoint, such as the one explicated in this article, is to facilitate such work.

Exclusionary boundaries also feature in different ways in the broader South African society. The transition to democratic governance has not resulted in an era of collective celebration of difference, 'a rainbow nation'. According to Worby, Hassim and Kupe (2008):

[T]his cheery, multicoloured metaphor seems at best shallow and incomplete, at worst hollow and insincere. [...] Now, in the view of many South Africans, it seems that the rainbow has been displaced by the onion: a way of imagining degrees of national belonging, layered around an authentic core. (pp. 7, 16)

From the perspective of ethnicity, the rainbow-turned-onion is not only failing to embrace foreign nationals. Immediately under the outer skin of the national onion, which consists of black foreign nationals, lie given black South African ethnic groups: the Tsonga, Shangaan, Pedi and Venda (Worby *et al.* 2008:16). The hierarchical onion dynamics also cut through the ecclesial landscape. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous note from the 1960s on Sunday morning being the most segregated time of the week in the United States in many ways continues to resonate with the present-day Christian experience in South Africa (see Van der Borgh 2009). In the context of Methodism and race, Simangaliso Kumalo (2009:42) states: 'For generations to come, Methodism will always have to deal with the legacy of apartheid within it'. Thus also within churches, the 'rainbow people of God' continue to experience, (re)construct and challenge exclusionary boundaries along racial and other socially constructed lines of difference.

Within the broader context of exclusionary social boundaries, this article focuses particularly on the politics of ethnicity, a neglected area in academic research on Christianities and, in particular, the so-called mainline churches in South Africa. Based on a case study on the ethnic dynamics at Central, the article argues that there is a need for critical academic and theological interrogation of the politics of ethnicity, particularly in the context of mainline churches. Such an undertaking would facilitate the aim to build inclusive worship spaces, whereas neglecting this category of

1. Interviewees' names have been anonymised.

**Note:** This article builds on Hankela 2014a and, in particular, uses the discussion on pages 279-83 in constructing the argument made in this article. I wish to thank Stephan de Beer, Sipiwe Dube, Carin Runciman, Ignatius Swart and Auli Vähäkangas for comments on previous drafts of this article and the people at the Central Methodist Mission who journeyed with me in different ways in 2009.

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difference means neglecting a dynamic that impacts on the every(Sun)day life of ordinary churchgoers. The article contends that such interrogation should be undertaken in a broader intersectional framework: a myopic gaze on ethnicity, a notion often misrepresented in racialised terms, would easily strengthen white privilege instead of providing tools for creating inclusive spaces, but dismissing ethnicity in the name of fighting racism would not do justice to the congregants' everyday questions of recognition either. Lastly, suggestions are made for a framework for a liberationist theology of ethnicity.

## South African theological scholarship on diversity and social divisions

Ethnicity has not been a key category in the critical theological conversation on diversity and power in South Africa. Tinyiko Maluleke (1993) writes of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa as a 'Tsonga church'. He argues that the homogeneity of the Tsonga ethnic group was a product of Swiss Presbyterian missionary activity and further that this product was an efficient tool used by the apartheid system. Kumalo (2009) makes references to ethnicity in the context of a Methodist church in Durban, as do I (Hankela 2014a) in the context of Central in a broader research project on which this article builds. Moreover, scholarship on the Nazareth church engages with Zulu nationalism and African Independent Churches (AICs) as political actors among other themes (Cabrita 2009). Ethnicity, if understood as cultural identity (see below), is also implied in the inculturation discourse and the study of the AICs. However, apart from Maluleke's article, there is little theological engagement with ethnicity in the ecclesial context from a critical diversity perspective and little is written particularly on ethnicity in the context of the mainline churches.

The notion of ethnicity, and its construction and politicisation, is of course closely linked to the history of race. Unlike ethnicity, race and racism have been an important locus in the South African theological scholarship. Historically, two opposite discourses marked this engagement: on the one hand, the theological justification of apartheid articulated from a particular Reformed perspective and, on the other hand, liberation theological judgment of the same system, which drew insight specifically from the black experience but also from liberation theologies elsewhere (see De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1983).

In the theological landscape of the officially post-apartheid South Africa, the discourse on race has changed shape due to the dismantling of apartheid, and other categories have gained more visibility than before on the side of race. Among recent critical contributions by scholars working on theology and religion are studies on the critical social and political role of churches in South Africa, or lack thereof (e.g. Kuperus 2011; Maluleke 2007); Black theology in post-1994 South Africa (e.g. Tshaka 2015; Vellem 2012); questions around

patriarchy, gender and masculinity (e.g. Dube 2015; Phiri & Nadar 2009); white privilege (e.g. Van Wyngaard 2014); and theological praxis in the context of urban inequalities (e.g. De Beer 2014; Nel 2014). Yet, to date there has been little empirical work done in the context of local congregations on diversity and social divisions; even from the perspective of race only a few studies have been undertaken in such contexts (Ganiel 2008; Parker & Hendriks 2003; Venter 1994, 1995; also see Bowers du Toit & Nkomo 2014; Frahm-Arp 2010; Hankela 2014a).

In other words, this article adds to the limited pool of empirical interrogation of diversity in local congregations in South Africa and, moreover, adds the category of ethnicity to the discussion that has been for valid reasons occupied by race – *ethnicity* here is not used as a synonym for *race* as in some previous studies. Based on the micro-level dynamics in one church, approached through a qualitative lens, one cannot make generalised claims of South African mainline churches at large. Yet, due to seemingly similar histories of missionary activity in mainline churches, namely the influence of a particular church in a particular geographic area and thus among a particular group of people (see Grassow 2008; Maluleke 1993), there are also likely to be similarities across these churches in regard to the politics of ethnicity. Therefore, the case of Central points at a likely broader phenomenon that calls for interrogation: the article points at a clear need to pay more attention to the matter specifically in the mentioned context, if assisting in the creation of inclusive spaces is an aim of theological writing on diversity.

My reading of other social scientific studies on ethnicity in the context of postcolonial Africa further suggests a need for a theological unpacking of (the politics of) ethnicity; the importance of the matter for theologians is especially evident when one acknowledges the close connection, both through cooperation and resistance, between missionary activity and the broader colonial project. A prime example of understanding ethnicity in a colonial horizon is Mahmood Mamdani's (1996:16–25) argument of the bifurcated colonial–apartheid state in which civil society was racialised and the rural areas tribalised to serve the state's interests. When the post-independence state then overlooked or failed the detribalisation process, 'the more civil society was deracialised, the more it took a tribalised form' (p. 21). This concurrent construction of race and ethnicity draws attention to the need for examining both these categories. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2011:22–25) argues in line with Mamdani that in the context of Zimbabwe, then Rhodesia, colonial actors impacted on the reinvention of existing ethnic identities – which, he argues, were fluid and served social rather than political aims – into rigid and politicised categories (on the colonial and missionary creation of Tswana ethnicity, see Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:287–288). Even if speaking of ethnicity merely as a political category – in its origin or meaning – would be reductionist, this history exposes the many ways in which ethnicity, as people now experience it, has been created as part of political processes.

## On methodology

The data set used in this article was gathered for a project that concentrated on the relationship between the congregation at Central and foreign nationals who lived in the church building (Hankela 2014a). I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at the church for approximately a year in 2009, complete with visits prior to and after the actual fieldwork year. I conducted over 60 semistructured interviews with congregants, people living in the church and ministers, and recorded over 40 speeches and sermons by the then-superintendent minister and district bishop Paul Verryin. In this article I cite selected interviews, whereas the overall fieldwork impacts on my reading of these interviews. My coding of the data, using the Atlas.ti program, was influenced by a grounded theory approach, and so the coding process was guided more by the data than by tentative research questions. Indeed, although the interviews were not centred on understanding the negotiation of ethnicity within the congregation, ethnicity and especially the status of the Xhosa ethnic group emerged as an important theme.

In writing this article I am profoundly aware of my own positionality as a white European academic. I spent ample time at Central, for instance worshipping at the church both during and after my fieldwork, and in many ways was, to an extent, part of the communities there. However, this did not make me an insider in any sense of the word to the ethnic dynamic that I engage with in this article. I write about a dynamic that, I believe, influenced me in a very different way than it did other people who worshipped at Central because of my being a white foreigner. On the topic of ethnicity in this particular context I am a listening observer. My insight emerges at the point where my horizon of understanding merges with the interlocutors' horizon(s) that I learned about through our conversations. While this positionality does not a priori make the insight futile, I believe that further conversation on the topic would benefit from insider insight. This is not to say, of course, that racial and ethnic dynamics in South Africa would be exceptional compared to the rest of the world. On the contrary, while context always matters, comparative approaches to ethnic dynamics in South Africa and in other parts of the world, including my native Finland, could facilitate the attempt to understand exclusionary processes.

## Working definition of the politics of ethnicity

As a sociological notion, *ethnicity* is ambiguous and is used to describe various phenomena (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009:38). Primordial explanations are no more part of the academic conversation in their own right, but some still combine them with social constructionist views. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (p. 40) criticise this attempt to merge two 'inimical ontologies of being, inimical determinations of collective consciousness', but acknowledge that in the neoliberal age of capital:

[i]n its *lived* manifestations, cultural identity [ethnicity] appears ever more as two antithetical things at once: on the one hand, as a precipitate of inalienable natural essence, of genetics and biology, and, on the other, as function of voluntary self-fashioning, often through serial acts of consumption. It is, in other words, *both* ascriptive and instrumental. [...] *Both* blood and choice. (p. 40, emphasis original)

They equate ethnicity with 'cultural + identity' (p. 22) and assert:

that 'it' is best understood as a loose, labile repertoire of signs by means of which relations are constructed and communicated; through which a collective consciousness of cultural likeness is rendered sensible; with reference to which shared sentiment is made substantial. Its visible content is *always* the product of specific historical conditions ... (p. 38, emphasis original)

I follow the Comaroffs in understanding ethnicity as a category related to a shared sense of cultural likeness that is constructed and communicated through a range of signs. In this article the interest is not on examining the definition of *ethnicity* as such but the politics of it: the negotiation, construction and management of ethnic difference. Moreover, the Xhosa ethnic group identity plays a key role in people's narration on ethnic power relations at Central, and these views are to be read in the specific historical context of Central. The interlocutors' views are naturally not cited as an essentialist truth of being amaXhosa,<sup>2</sup> and many of the critical views examined in the article were provided by isiXhosa speakers themselves.

In the context of Central, spoken language is central to understanding the reproduction of exclusionary ethnic boundaries. While one needs to acknowledge that a particular language is not necessarily confined within one culture, in the South African context language is one indicator of difference and, therefore, here a helpful tool in understanding the politics of ethnicity (see Venter 1995:318–319). Thus, the examination of the relationship between language, culture and power informs my reading of the politics of ethnicity: 'To speak ... means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of civilisation' (Fanon 2008 [1967]:8). This relationship between language and power provides a lens for examining the function of language at Central.

## The congregation at Central

In 2009 people worshipped at Central every Sunday in five different services. The main service at 10:00 was the biggest service, with worshippers occupying both the large sanctuary itself and the loft. The numbers of congregants that gathered for the 08:00, 09:30 and 14:00 services were notably smaller, with the first two gathering in the chapel instead of the main sanctuary.

2. Throughout the article, I use the terms *isiXhosa* (for the language), *umXhosa* (for a person) and *amaXhosa* (for more than one person). While it would be grammatically (maybe more) acceptable to rather use the English version of *Xhosa*, my choice is informed by the politics of identity and recognition in the very context of this research, that is Central, but also the politics of race, ethnicity and language in South Africa at large, where English – language but also culture – appears to be the silent beneficiary, for instance, in the context of the debates on language in higher education.

Central comes from a background of being a white church (see Venter 1994), but in 2009 the congregation was predominantly black. While South Africans formed the national majority among the membership, there were also foreign nationals. Besides the superintendent minister, one could count the regular white worshippers on the fingers of one hand. The class differences were reflected in the fact that the congregants came from the inner city, townships and suburbs alike, some driving, others taking taxis. The most visible difference in the main service was between members of church organisations, or *manyanos*, who wore uniforms and members who were not part of these organisations or did not wear the uniform. During the main service, the uniformed members of the Women's Manyano, Amadodana (Young Men's Guild) and Wesley Guild occupied the first rows in the sanctuary.

The languages used in the services varied. The 08:00 service was an English service complete with English Methodist hymns; the 09:30 service was a French service that consisted primarily of a committed group of French-speaking Africans; the main service was conducted in English, but indigenous languages were used extensively in the liturgy and songs; the 14:00 service was an indigenous service; and the 19:00 service, which catered for the refugee community living in the church, was conducted in English and songs were sung mostly in chiShona.

During 2009 ten ministers served the Central Circuit, which consisted of Central and other societies in and close to the inner city. The then-superintendent minister of the Central Circuit and the Bishop of the Central District, Paul Verryin, is a white, English-speaking South African. Other ministers, some ordained and others on probation, were amaXhosa, amaZulu, English South African and Ronga (from Mozambique).

## Not so diverse after all: Perceptions of Xhosa domination

Whereas the profile of the membership of Central as an inner-city church was ethnically diverse, the visible majority were isiXhosa-speaking. Olwethu's comment about this double identity was telling. When I asked the isiZulu-speaking teenager to describe her church, she began: 'There's a lot of ... wait, it doesn't have much diverse culture. There's a lot of Xhosas there'. Olwethu's comment links to a recurring sentiment that the amaXhosa were 'dominating' at Central in various ways.

Exposing the importance of ethnic identity in the church, Khwezi said that if the amaXhosa did not want something to happen, it was unlikely to take place: 'When we're more democratic, it's a matter of who is the majority and who is the majority actually means that the influence of things, in a sense, is from that group'. Cynthia, for her part, said that amaXhosa got leadership positions in the Wesley Guild, the church organisation to which she belonged, 'because we are the ones who elect and we vote and because majority is Xhosas in the church'; some interviewees made references to

the Guild as a particularly Xhosa space. Subsequently, such manifestation of ethnic loyalty further ensured the continuation of the group's influence.

When a shared cultural identity translated to ethnic loyalty in electing leaders, one can say that these leaders were not only Methodist leaders, but also Xhosa leaders. Andile, umXhosa and a lay leader himself, expressed people's tiredness with amaXhosa being in charge. He spoke of relationships between ethnic groups in terms of 'pretending that we are brothers when deep down one can say: I'm tired of this'. Congregants with whom I spoke, too, emphasised togetherness as Methodists alongside talking of Xhosa dominance. The issue of Xhosa leadership was maybe more sensitive an issue because it was not restricted to the Methodist church, let alone Central: 'Come to church there's a Xhosa leader, come to government there's a Xhosa leader, come everywhere there's a Xhosa leader'. In other words, in the context of Central the Xhosa leaders in the church or the organisations resonated with a collective sentiment about the state of the broader Methodist and South African ethnic power (im)balance. Such a dynamic would naturally strengthen 'Xhosa hegemony', and/or resistance against it, in the microcontext of Central (see Ganiel 2008:274 on white power in church and society in the context of a local congregation in Cape Town).

The position of the amaXhosa within South African Methodism is seemingly linked to the Methodist mission having had a strong impact on the Eastern Cape (see Grassow 2008). Andile explicitly suggested that the status of the amaXhosa at Central was not only due to numbers, but the situation was the same in places where the amaXhosa were not the majority. Rather, 'it could be because the first people who was encountered by Methodism was Xhosas in the Eastern Cape when the [missing word] arrived, 1652. Then it started there. Then it spread'. Methodist and Xhosa have become closely related identities. 'There are many Xhosas who are Methodists – many, many, many ...', Buhle said of her denomination. Peter spoke of Xhosa domination at Central in relation to history: 'Methodists, traditionally it looks like it's a church for Xhosas because that's the people who dominate and they also try to take ownership of the church'.

In 2014 I interviewed a minister in another predominantly black Methodist church in Gauteng in relation to another research project, but we also touched on the ethnicity and language question. The similarities with what I had heard at Central were clear:

... what I keep saying to them, to say: you can't come to the Tswana-speaking area and claim to be dominant. [...] In a city church like this where you have all South Africans, we need to then be giving each other space.

Moreover, Kumalo (2009:177–181) writes about the Central Methodist Church in Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. Here, too, despite the location, the majority of black members were isiXhosa-speaking. He reports on ethnic tension around a time when the church got its first isiXhosa-speaking minister

in 2003; at the time all the lay preachers were also isiXhosa-speaking. The isiZulu-speaking section of the congregation, led by a circuit steward, 'began to feel that they were being dominated in their church by people from the Eastern Cape' (p. 178).

Overall, the interviews painted a picture of one ethnic group having extensive influence on defining Central as a local congregation and governing the church space. At Central, no other ethnic group was spoken about in the same way by interlocutors as the amaXhosa, whose position had mission-historical roots and a majority status behind it. Many interviewees related the group's influential position to the fact that they were the majority ethnic group in the congregation. For many, moreover, the extent of their collective power was problematic. In a context of multiple identities, being Methodist thus did not necessarily surface as the primary identity in structuring the life of the congregation, despite the references interviewees also made to the Methodist identity as a point of being one despite differences (see below). Against this background it is not surprising that the isiXhosa language had a prominent position at the church, and subsequently the language politics reproduced ethnic privilege in a partly covert manner.

## Language and the reproduction of privilege

Spoken language, a recurring theme in the interview accounts, appeared to be a central means of reproducing Xhosa privilege. The isiXhosa language was a tool that could ensure the continuity of the superior status of the Xhosa identity within the church space.

The isiXhosa language, like the position of the ethnic group at large, was portrayed as 'dominant' compared to other indigenous languages. However, one should note that as the language of communication and preaching English had a more prominent role than any indigenous language in the main service. Moreover, the main service was consciously multilingual: the introduction of chiShona songs in 2009 due to Zimbabweans worshipping in this congregation illustrates the inclusionary intention behind the multilingualism at Central. Such concrete accommodative language practice (see Venter 1995:333) makes this church a particularly informative case study in regard to ethnic diversity.

In practice, in the multilingual main service two prayers that are central sections in the Methodist liturgy in black churches, the Lord's Prayer and *Siyakudumisa* (isiXhosa, [we praise/extol you]), were sung in isiXhosa every Sunday, exposing how the Methodist mission history underpins the (black) Methodist culture. The latter resembles a confession of faith and is a key moment in the liturgy, which one could see reflected in the facial and bodily expressions of the singing people. In Buhle's words: '*Siyakudumisa* is a prayer that each and every Methodist would like to sing because it really brings you closer to God'. Olwethu referred to these two songs in relation to isiXhosa 'dominating' at Central. Cynthia said she

knew there were those who had a problem with the fact that *Siyakudumisa* was always sung in isiXhosa. Hope, umXhosa herself, noted that she felt that the prominent position of her language was exclusionary towards other people and shut them out. In the context of Methodism in South Africa, some of the cultural and/or religious signs and this song could be seen as one, pointing at both ethnic and religious identity at the same time. *Siyakudumisa* then not only strengthened a shared Methodist identity but also pointed at the status of the Xhosa identity within (black) Methodism.

Another, though more cautious, practical language-related aspect of the implications of the Xhosa majority and status also had to do with songs in the main service. Songs were sung in various South African indigenous languages, English and chiShona (usually one song in a language per Sunday). However, even then, at times amaXhosa were said to sing in their language instead of isiZulu when a given song was supposed to be sung in the latter: the superintendent minister was said to have interrupted a service and told people not to 'cheat' but to sing in the actual language in which the song was printed on the bulletin. In this context, Olwethu wondered why a Sesotho-speaking person would come back to her church when songs in their language were sung reluctantly, with a tired vibe. For the teenager, this suggested that the congregation did not want to 'open up their minds to (that person's) culture'. In the case of songs then, the practice of printing songs in multiple languages for each Sunday did not mean that the languages, and by extension the various ethnic identities, would be equally recognised. The collective sentiment of a connection between Methodist and Xhosa identities rather became embodied in the singing congregation: maybe amaXhosa indeed are more Methodist? Whereas, on the one hand, the differing levels of enthusiasm could be thought of as the most natural reaction (who would not respond to their mother tongue differently?), on the other, in the context of a diverse church this embodied enthusiasm resulted in perceptions of symbolic exclusion.

In a similar manner, Buhle suggested that congregants responded strongly to isiXhosa preaching, unlike preaching in other languages. Specifically:

We've got a lot of Xhosa people and Xhosa people really think that the church belongs to them – which is not the case. Even the language, if you speak something else, not Xhosa, especially if you are a preacher, you've got a problem.

Furthermore, in relation to decision-making, Buhle maintained that if someone made a suggestion in isiXhosa, it was easily approved, but if someone spoke or prayed in other languages, her sense was that the Xhosa majority did not take that person seriously. Indeed, Hope noted that some isiZulu-speaking stewards spoke isiXhosa to the congregation; she did not specify whether she thought this was due to wanting to accommodate a majority or due to opting for a more 'influential' language. Moreover, a few interviewees suggested that in some instances (e.g. preaching) when isiXhosa was used, people seemed to think that translation

was not necessary, but when someone spoke another language it would be translated into isiXhosa.

In this context, a couple of interviewees addressed what they saw as a sense of inferiority on the part of non-isiXhosa speakers. Khwezi, umXhosa himself, referring in particular to the Wesley Guild, said: 'But as far as language is concerned, ne, you will tend to find that Xhosa language is a little bit more attractive to a non-Xhosa-speaking person, in such a way that when we are together, they feel intimidated of speaking their own language'. Thobeka, also umXhosa, told of a discussion the Guild had had on discrimination. Culture had emerged as the only theme Thobeka could recall: 'If you're not Xhosa, you feel inferior because Xhosas they, like, they dominate and maybe they don't respect you because you don't speak their language'. According to Cynthia, the Guild had discussed in 2008 that it would become required for those on trial to become members to have a hymnal in Setswana and Sesotho.

Promoting the isiXhosa language in the above-described manner could be seen as a logical and 'fair' thing to do in a congregation where the majority was amaXhosa. Not everyone was fluent in English and even if that were the case, there are other questions of privilege and identity attached to the English language that make it impossible to see it as an easy answer in this situation. Indeed, it would be partial to portray the status of the isiXhosa language as a conscious attempt by one group to exclude others.

Nevertheless, observing the politics of language shows how ethnic power operates in the church context through practices that seem sensible and practical (e.g. a more prominent use of the language of the clear majority group) but in fact reinforce hierarchical and exclusionary boundaries. Moreover, language allowed the majority ethnic group covert means to govern the social hierarchy: in the multilingual main service, space was made for different languages, but this practice did not deprive the congregation of means to manage the ethnic dynamics through language.

Overall, the language politics is telling about the politics of ethnicity as a much more penetrating question than one of leadership and decision-making and the centrality of ethnicity to the politics of recognition in the Methodist context. Resistance against the 'dominant' Xhosa status perhaps indicates both a sense of unequal recognition of different cultures and a stand against assimilation, something that black South African Christians in mainline churches are historically far too familiar with.

## Understanding ethnicity intersectionally

The discussion above, if in a vacuum, gives a wrong idea of the extent of the Xhosa influence in South African Methodism. The perceived Xhosa domination appears in a different light when the racial power imbalance is acknowledged. The Methodist Church in Southern Africa (MCSA), which in 1958 adopted an aim to be 'one and undivided', continues to struggle with

racial inequalities (see Kumalo 2006, 2009). The complex ways in which race operates in this context were illustrated in the 2009 synod of the Central District of the MCSA: the synod in a district where the majority of ministers were black elected a largely white top table.

Moreover, gender and ethnicity intersections should not be dismissed either when aiming at a deeper understanding of the politics of ethnicity. When I asked a minister at Central what she saw as the main challenges in the circuit, she started with ethnicity (the amaXhosa 'want to be dominating') and then spoke of the opposition experienced by female preachers and ministers.

In other words, attention to the politics of ethnicity should not exclude attention to other categories of difference used in the creation of hierarchical social divisions. Race then is a particularly important interlinked category in understanding ethnicity, due to the intertwined history of race and ethnicity and the historical moment in which '[g]ender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, cannot but be experienced as 'raced' under our current available identity positions' (Distiller & Steyn 2004:6). Lastly, ethnicity should then not be approached as a racialised 'black' category, which is often implicitly done even if a shift from 'tribe' to 'ethnicity' has aimed at undoing this: examining the relationships between white ethnicities in South Africa may perhaps provide important insight for deconstructing both the status of the dominant race and that of dominant ethnicities in worship spaces.

## Towards a liberationist theology of ethnicity

How then to address ethnic difference theologically in this context? Some congregants at Central pointed at a given ecclesiological understanding when they referred to the potential of a shared Methodist identity and Methodist rituals performed together, such as singing, in mending social divisions.<sup>3</sup> Mandy suggested:

I think that the language or the ethnicity thing has potential to pull people apart. What actually draws us close or draws us together now is the fact that we are all Methodists and we are under Central Methodist Church.

Andile and Hope, respectively, emphasised the act of worshipping together as a means of creating space for a uniting Methodist or Christian identity:

It is a church where [missing word] there is no political affiliations, whether you are ANC [African National Congress], IFP [Inkatha Freedom Party], but you come to church and you all worship together. It is a church that's got no ethnicity and racism.

'We all sing one song, we all worship in one way, we all praise one God. At the end of the day it unifies the people on some

3. In this article it is a conscious choice to concentrate on the views of congregants rather than those of superintendent minister Paul Verryn or other ministers. Yet, for the sake of context, the reader should know that Verryn preached extensively on questions related to diversity and different social divisions, including exclusion and prejudice based on ethnicity. I have examined Verryn's theological thinking and praxis in Hankela 2014a and 2014c.

level'. Here the Methodist (or Christian) identity was portrayed as a (potential) primary identity under which multiple ethnic identities could be accommodated in a united church community, not unlike in a lot of Christian theological imaginary: church as family built not on blood relations but on shared faith in the redemptive and reconciling power of the blood of Jesus. Because Mandy, Andile and Hope all also addressed ethnic relations as a problematic matter at Central, I understand the image of a diverse church united around worship and a collective identity as an ideal towards which the church reaches.

However, as related above, the Methodist identity is not a historically neutral place for a diverse people to meet; neither is worshipping together only a uniting experience under the current circumstances. From the perspective of ethnicity, the Methodist identity is shaped by a history that perpetuates 'Xhosa domination', while it also features white privilege and patriarchal values. If the Methodist identity is to work as a unifying factor in the context of a local congregation, a theology of ethnicity has to do more than declare unity in diversity.

In the particular Methodist context of Central, such a theology could centre on images found in local denominational and cultural archives. Inclusionary theological frameworks centring on cultural notions have been explored for instance through the notion of ubuntu (see Battle 1997; Hankela 2014a; Meiring 2015; Bongmba 2016). One of the Methodist images that could foster inclusiveness is the teaching on the open communion table. Theologically the open table 'suggests that every person is welcome to participate in the Sacrament of Holy Communion and that there are no limitations or reservations on who may or who may not receive the elements' (Bentley 2011:2). If this image is examined through a social lens, access to the shared table is not dependent either on one's social location or personal traits or actions. Moreover, the table is 'the Lord's Table, not your table or my table or even the church's table' (Bentley 2011:4): God's grace is not to be controlled by an individual or a group of people. In other words, the practice of the open table does not provide the serving minister or an influential group authority to decide on the limits to this access. At Central this was reflected in practice in the superintendent's open-armed invitation to communion addressed to everyone, including the refugee community that stayed in the church and surely also included people who were not baptised.

However, the openness of the communion table could easily be limited to the level of religious talk, verbal proclaiming of unity in diversity or a moment on Sunday morning detached from the rest of the week. As a discourse such talk has the potential to be either liberationist and inclusionary or silencing and supportive of existing power structures. For the openness of the table to be liberationist, the image must be consciously and critically linked to the concrete impact of ethnic, and other, power hierarchies (also) within the very local congregation that gathers around that table.

Therefore, instead of emphasis being on a universal Methodist identity as an answer to division, it would be on the deconstruction of that Methodist identity from the perspective of understanding the roles played by other identities and related structures – ethnic, racial, gender, orientation – in the context of being Methodist. Among other things, a theology of ethnicity would examine the ethnicised manifestations of being Methodist in the rituals that the church performs together, something that this article has done in the context of Central. A further aim would be to reimagine ethnic relations and the structures that strengthen them – in order not to reinforce rigid and exclusionary ethnic identities that fall back on colonial ideologies of race and ethnicity but rather to find nodes in which inclusion takes place, or could be fostered.

In other words, a liberationist theology of ethnicity would be informed by the conviction that 'I believe based on who I am. In other words, what I [...] hold true, right, and ethical has more to do with our social context [...] and identity [...] than any ideology or doctrine we may claim to hold' (De la Torre 2013:eBook chapter 1). The focus of liberationist attention is specifically on the insight from those who are in the margins of power, that is, 'communities that know how to survive within the dominant culture' (De la Torre 2013:eBook chapter 1), in order to reconstruct a new order in the church. However, as I have argued elsewhere, in the context of a local congregation the lines between the margin and the centre are not always self-evident. Nor is the interrogation of power relations meant to exclude those individuals who represent powerful social locations from the conversation: Therefore, in practice the emphasis on the margin needs to be negotiated in a complex social reality that does not lose the preferential option to prioritise the marginalised voice while allowing space for every voice to be heard (see Hankela 2014a:26–27, 2014b:4–6).

When and because every social location matters, the rules of the conversation need to be rewritten: in a place where people are used to listening to a certain voice as authoritative, simply being 'democratic' most plausibly reproduces old ways of seeing and hearing, as Khwezi above implied. Deconstructing the power relations that define the conversation in the church opens the table for new ways of seeing – even if it begins by merely and admitting the impact of these relations in the life of the church and society. This conversation is then supposed to extend from the communion table to the different levels of the often hierarchically organised mainline churches, from theology to finances, from local church committees to synods. In relation to the particular category of ethnicity this means asking questions such as the following: What is the role of language in worship? How does language impact on decision-making? Who makes the decisions on finances? What does ethnicity have to do with humanity and creation? Around an open table, the variety of answers might surprise one. This kind of theological reading of the church from the perspective of power, privilege and historicity is, of course, at the core of all liberationist theological engagement: the

case of Central, draws attention to the need to include the category of ethnicity more prominently in the conversation and praxis.

## Conclusion

For this article, the Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg was approached as a case study to make a case for the need for including ethnicity as a category in the liberationist discourse. The engagement with congregants at Central in 2009 poses a challenge to critical scholars of theology and religion to take the category of ethnicity seriously when examining social divisions in the South African ecclesial context.

The perceptions of Xhosa domination or privilege and the ways in which the isiXhosa language seemingly reproduced that privilege illustrate how ethnicity impacts on power relations in the context of this local congregation and in the lives of the congregants, also beyond the church space. Although these results cannot be generalised without further research, my research engagement with another Methodist church and Kumalo's writing on the Methodist church in Durban suggest that such dynamics are not restricted to Central. Moreover, when the politics of ethnicity at Central are viewed in light of the connections between missionary history and the creation of ethnicity, it seems most plausible that critical research on the politics of ethnicity in the broader mainline church context, and related praxis, should be an aspect of the broader theological cause of creating inclusionary faith communities.

The method of liberationist theology, by definition, chooses those who are on the margins of power as interlocutors. The experience in the margin is supposed to direct the doing of theology. Thus, to do liberationist theology that aims at an inclusionary order and church space in a context such as Central, one cannot ignore the category of ethnicity. Yet, a liberationist theology of ethnicity, as has been argued, would read ethnicity in a framework that is not blind to race, class, gender or orientation either.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

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