

Mfaniseni Ndwandwe: Quiet bishop who made a brave stand (1928–2018)

MFANISENI Sigisbert Ndwandwe died in Jouberton, North West Province. Aged 89, he was the Anglican Bishop Suffragan of Johannesburg in the volatile 1980s. He often found himself on the frontlines during the uprisings against apartheid as he tried to work with young activists in his diocese, and as far as possible shield them when they were being shot at, sjambokked, chased and detained by the police. This made him a target too. During the national State of Emergency in 1986, his home in the Klerksdorp township of Jouberton was firebombed and he was detained without trial for 99 days.

His diocese incorporated parts of the homeland of Bophuthatswana, run by Lucas Mangope. When people in Zeerust were being hunted down by Mangope's police in the early 1980s for their resistance to his regime, Ndwandwe visited and instructed one of his priests, the Reverend Oupa Letsholo, to allow his church to be used as a refuge for people who did not feel safe in their own homes. His strong convictions were probably why in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he was part of a panel of four bishops appointed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, head of the Anglican Church in South Africa, to promote peace between Inkatha and the United Democratic Front in war-torn KwaZulu-Natal.

Ndwandwe was born in Nongoma in KwaZulu-Natal on 25 November 1928. He matriculated at Inkamana High School in Vryheid and studied to be a Roman Catholic priest at Inkamana Seminary. He was ordained

in 1955. Three years later he was awarded a scholarship to study at the University of Rome where he earned the degree of Doctor of Canon Law. After his return he taught at Inkamana.

Having long been in love with a woman he met when they were fellow pupils at Inkamana High, he was among those Catholic priests who felt strongly about the celibacy vow for priests. When their representations to the Pope failed, he became an Anglican priest in 1968 and immediately married the woman he'd fallen in love with.

He was sent to Soweto as the priest in charge of The Good Shepherd Church in Tladi. In 1976 he became the Rector of St Cyprian's in Sharpeville, Vereeniging. In 1978 he and the late Bishop Simeon Nkoane were elected as Bishops-Suffragan of Johannesburg. He was based in Jouberton and served the western part of the diocese while Nkoane looked after the eastern part.

In 1985 they joined Tutu (recently installed as Bishop of Johannesburg) and two dozen other priests in an illegal march to police headquarters in Johannesburg in protest against the detention of Father Geoff Moselane of Sharpeville, who was later charged with United Democratic Front (UDF) activists in the Delmas Treason Trial. In the following year, in April Ndwandwe's house in Jouberton was firebombed. Police were suspected of being involved. Instead of investigating the incident, they arrested him on charges of public violence. They released him, only to re-arrest him under the Internal Security Act,



*Mfaniseni Ndwandwe, (left) with Bishops Tutu and Simeon Nkoane leading a march on Johannesburg's police headquarters in 1985
(Image by Robert Tshabalala)*

and detained him without trial for 99 days on a claim that he had conspired to murder policemen. He and other prisoners engaged on a hunger strike because the food was inedible, which they ended after three or four days. They were served scorching hot, mealie meal porridge but without spoons to eat it. Being ravenously hungry, they used their hands which they scalded in the process, much to the amusement of the guards.

Ndwandwe was a gentle, quietly courageous, dignified man. He wasn't strident or an overtly political priest. He believed that as a bishop, he had a sacred duty to look after his flock, be with them when they were in trouble and protect them, even if this meant physically interposing himself between them and the police, which he was known to do. When Tutu heard

Ndwandwe had been arrested, he told the government: 'If anyone has been working towards holding together a community that was exploding, then it was this person. This is not the way to go around defusing this explosive situation.'

Ndwandwe identified equally with the white members of the diocese. Despite a high level of conservatism, and a strong reticence to accept a black bishop, Ndwandwe went out of his way to let them know that he was their bishop too. His quiet dignity and conscientious approach won many over.

On the day he was released from prison, he went to St Peter's Church in Klerksdorp to preside at a confirmation service. 'We thought it [the confirmation service] won't take place,' parishioner Marie van Wyk remembered,

‘But [the] bishop said ‘The work of the Lord must go on’, and it did.’

Ndwanwe retired in 1991. He is survived by Dorcas, his wife of 50 years, two sons and a daughter. Another son died in 2004.

This is an abbreviated version of the obituary published in the *Sunday Times*, 13 May 2018.

CHRIS BARRON