

# Mission & Discipleship Committee Vhembe Consultation (Presbytery of Limpopo)

Vhembe is one of the 5 districts of the Limpopo province. It is the northernmost district of the country and shares its northern border with the Beitbridge district in Matabeleland South, Zimbabwe. Vhembe consists of all territories that were once part of the former Venda Bantustan. However, two districts of the former Tsonga homeland of Gazankulu, in particular, Hlanganani and Malamulele were also incorporated into Vhembe, hence the ethnic diversity of the District. The seat of Vhembe is Thohoyandou (meaning 'head of the elephant'), the former Capital of the former Venda Bantustan. According to the South African 2001 census, 800,000 of Vhembe residents speak Venda as their first language, 400,000 speak Tsonga and 27,000 speak Northern Sotho.



The Consultation was supposed to comprise three members of the Mission & Discipleship Committee namely the Revs. John McKane, Petson Kabala and Nokhalipha Nonjojo, but for various reasons only the Rev. John McKane travelled to Vhembe. The Consultation also coincided with the Presbytery Tour of the Moderator of General Assembly, the Rt. Rev. Rod Botsis who was visiting the same area.

## Monday, 19 May

The Consultation began on the afternoon of Monday, 19 May when I arrived in Makhado (Louis Trichardt) and met up with the Moderator, the Rev. Khonani Maselesele and Dr. Simon Nedohe.



Makhado (Louis Trichardt) is a picturesque town at the foot of the Soutpansberg mountain range. It is the centre of the Makhado Local Municipality, which comprises 16,000 km<sup>2</sup> with a total population of 270,000 according to the South African 2001 census. The town is located in a fertile region where litchis, bananas, mangoes and nuts are produced. The national road N1 runs through the town and is 437 kilometres from Johannesburg and one hour's drive from the Zimbabwean border at Beitbridge.

30 kilometres outside of town lies the Maebani township. In 2013 the Evangelical Confessing Church of South Africa (an independent church under the leadership of Dr. Nedohe who is an ex Lutheran Church Pastor) came into the UPCS and became known as the Confessing Congregation of the UPCS. Dr. Nedohe continues to look after the Transitional congregation as he seeks admission to the Ministry of the UPCS. The Rev. Khonani Maselesele is the Interim Moderator while he is the minister of the Matangari Congregation, which is in Thohoyandou.



The Church building stands on 60 hectares of land that has been given to the church by the traditional chief in the area. The building that can be seen to the left has taken approximately three months to build, but there have been some setbacks. One in particular is that the roof, which was built with inferior materials was completely blown away in recent high winds.

With the Moderator visiting it was agreed to erect a gazebo within the building to offer some protection from the elements. A move, which proved very wise for the evening when we met together for a Bible Study.

The plans for this Congregation going forward include completing the church building and then developing among other things: a clinic, a training centre, some agricultural undertakings etc.



## Tuesday, 20 May

On Tuesday morning we travelled to the Mashamba Congregation, which is an Outstation of the Makwerela Congregation. The Congregation has 86 members who have been in the area for many years. They used to meet in another church building, but due to tribal conflicts they moved into the home of a member of the congregation; meeting first in the Lounge, then the Dining Room and then the Garage before being given land by the local chief. Here they have erected a new, albeit incomplete building.





We travelled to Thohoyandou in the afternoon with the Rev. Seani Mavhina and attended an evening service in the Makwerela church with the Moderator. This was a joint service to which all the stations were invited. Makwerela has a combined membership of around 1,000 people, which is made up of the main station and seven outstations. Makwerela was one of the three congregations that came about as a result of the Gooldville Congregation sub-division. I was given an opportunity to share on the work of the Committee as part of the Moderator's *Communion, Community and Compassion* Address. I answered some questions from the congregation on the work of the Committee and some interest was expressed in the website and Property Grants.

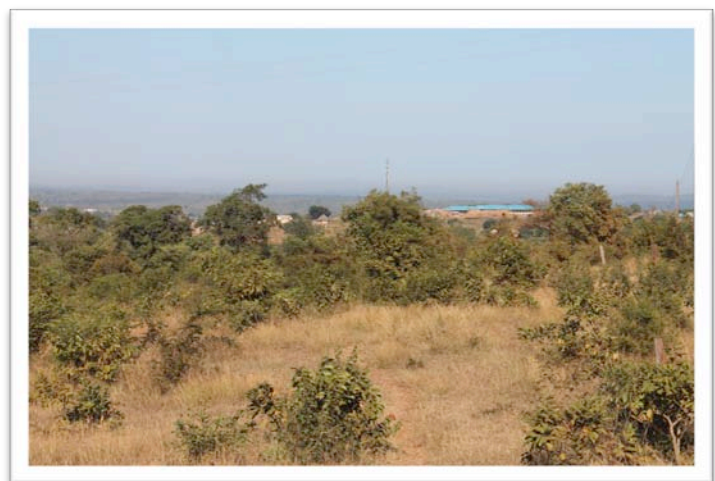
## Wednesday, 21 May



This morning we had a look at a piece of land in Tshikonelo that has been donated to the UPCSA by the local chief. The area has a population of approximately 20,000 people and there are two mainline churches and five independent churches already in the area. A good number of professional people live in the area, but work in and around Thohoyandou and commute in and out of the area on a daily basis using the local municipal bus service.

There are two primary schools as well as two secondary schools and two crèches in the area. Over the road from the site a Shopping Centre is in the planning phase of being built.

In order to secure the site for the UPCSA a R3,000 tribute will need to be paid to the chief and the area will have to be fenced within six months, or we could lose the deal.





There is water available from the municipality from a reservoir on the hill. Alternatively a borehole could be dug on in site as there is an abundance of underground water. The Shingwedzi River sources on the property and then flows eastwards across the lowveld and enters the Kruger National Park.

The afternoon saw us move into the Matangari Congregation in the company of the Rev. Khonani Maselesele. We met at sunset with the Elders of Matangari where, once again, I was given an opportunity to Address the meeting on the work of the Committee as well as to field some Questions from them.



Thereafter we moved on to the Thengwe outstation for an evening Service, which was lead by the Moderator. Thengwe incidentally is the name of the local King who has been very generous in allocating land to the UPCSA. This is due mainly to the significant work that the church does within the community.

## Thursday, 22 May



The Matangari Congregation was constituted on 04 April 2004 and the stations that brought about the establishment of the Congregation were all outstations of the Goolville mission namely:

Matangari, Tshiumoni,  
Tshipako, Khubvi, Thengwe  
and Vuvha.

Since 2004 two more outstations have been planted (namely Vuvha and Tshilamba), but in 2009 Tshilamba was closed down due to declining membership. In 2010 the leadership of Matangari resolved not to plant any new stations and resolved, rather, to grow the current eight outstations into self-sustaining congregations. It is an ambitious dream given the prevalent church traditions and financial restrictions.

Three notable projects that Matangari are involved in are:



which is a drop-in Centre for the youth of the area who can drop-in after school to receive assistance with their homework etc.

The Congregation is also involved in the Thengwe Thondoni Poultry Co-Operative, which is a chicken, egg, and vegetable farming undertaking, which sells produce to local vendors.

The Thengwe outstation currently has a community crèche at the church site, but is about to move to a new piece of ground that has been donated to the church in order to accommodate the growing number of children.

Some of the challenges that face the Matangari Congregation are not uncommon to the other congregations in the rest of the cluster. One (main) congregation with many outstations relying on the services of only one minister, which inevitably results in overworked Elders (Teaching and Ruling); vast distances to travel within the parish on appalling roads; giving from a low income base and “competition” from mushrooming independent churches to name but a few. But in the midst of these challenges ministry and growth (albeit slow) takes place.

What follows are some more photos taken of some of the outstations of the Congregation. As you can see, some are in different stages of development than others.



In the afternoon I said farewell to the Moderator and was given an opportunity to spend some time in the company of the Rev. Dr. Robert Munthali who is the minister of the Gooldville Congregation, which up until the sub-division of the Congregation a number of years ago was the only Presbyterian Church in Venda.

Gooldville has eleven outstations attached to it namely:

Ha-Luvhimbi, Mukula,  
Vondwe, Ngudza, Mukumbani,  
Ngwenani, Ha-Mustha,  
Tsliozwi, Nancifield (Musina),  
Campbell and Harper.



The Congregation continues to grow and is involved in many new works in the surrounding villages as well as their long-standing ministry, which is a Secondary School with around 670 pupils next door to the church. Dr. Munthali believes that the sustained growth of the congregation over the 17 years that he has been the minister there can be attributed to (1) good pastoral care and love, and (2) the equipping of the Ruling Elders to grown outstations until they are capable of standing on their own as new congregations. This being said Dr. Munthali also believes that there are a fair number of outstations in his congregation as well

as possibly other congregations within the area that could become new congregations in their own right, but who are reluctant to do so.

In a few short hours I was able to visit six of Gooldville's outstations and to see the current and future work that is part of the life of the congregation. There is much happening and much more is planned going forward.



## Friday, 23 May



Before heading back to Johannesburg I was able to visit (albeit very briefly) the Gooldville church and the Donald Fraser Hospital, which was started as a ministry of the Church of Scotland, but really expanded and cemented itself into the community by Dr. Robert Douglas and Mrs. Emily Irene Aitken (former PCSA General Secretary Chris Aitken's Parents).

The Gooldville Congregation continues to have a strong link to the hospital in that the Minister is also the Chaplain and is regularly called upon to render spiritual input.

Gooldville has in the past, continues to do so currently and seems set to continue to cater for the three-fold educational, medical and spiritual

needs of the surrounding community for many, many years to come.

## Conclusion

I submit that the UPCSA is in very good spiritual health in the Vhembe District of the Limpopo Presbytery. Under sometimes very trying and difficult circumstances churches are being built, the Word is being preached in and out of season, the Sacraments are being celebrated, Members and non-Members alike are being cared for in love and God's Kingdom is growing. All to the glory and honour of his name.

I am grateful to the people that I met for their openness. I am grateful to those who hosted me in their homes for their abundantly generous hospitality. I am grateful to the Moderator, the Rt. Rev. Rod Botsis for allowing me to accompany him on his Moderator's Tour. But most of all I am grateful to the Lord for giving me the opportunity to see with my own eyes how He is present and at work in his creation.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*