

## **Conflict and the Subsequent Split of the Lutheran Church in Botswana, 1978-1997**

*Simon Isaac Bayani\**

### **Abstract**

In 1978 the Botswana branch of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) had internal conflicts that led to its subsequent split in 1979. A separate church called Evangelical Lutheran Church in Botswana (ELCB) was formed out of this split, and it was autonomous from the South African one. After the split, a conflict soon followed concerning ownership of the church property as the two rival entities both claimed it. The High Court ruled in favour of the ELCSA, and advised that the ELCB be registered as a separate entity and acquire its own property and buildings. It took 18 long years for the ELCB to leave the ELCSA property and during the 18 year period, at least on two occasions violent altercations took place between members of the two rival churches. A parliamentary debate was also held in 1979 to discuss this issue, which had taken a political dimension, as the government of Botswana seemed to push a political agenda by supporting the ELCB. This article brings this crisis in the Lutheran Church to light, and details the events that took place from 1978 to 1997 and even after. The piece does not focus on the conceptual state-church relations in Botswana, but rather on the administrative dynamics of the Lutheran Church in the country.

### **Introduction**

The Lutheran Church first came into what would later become Botswana as the Hermannsburg Missionary Society in 1857 at the recommendation of President Andres Pretorius of the Transvaal. The missionaries started work among the Bakwena, then Bangwato and subsequently the Balete of Ramotswa where it remained until it became the ELCSA with its headquarters in Johannesburg South Africa (Mignon 1996).

According to Pastor Nicholas Isaacs of the ELCSA, mainline churches such as the ELCSA are mainly concerned with serving the community (personal communication with Pastor Isaacs 2 October 2013). Therefore, when the Lutheran Church came into Botswana as the Hermannsburg missionaries, it was mainly concerned with preaching the Christian gospel. However, like any other mainline church or missionary entity such as the London Missionary Society (LMS), in addition to preaching, they also looked at the society to see what needed to be done to help local communities. Thus, the Hermansburgs felt that there were two needs which were education and health care. They provided these services to the Balete and some Batswana who came from other areas surrounding Ramotswa (communication with Pastor Isaacs 2 October 2013). Through this approach, the Lutherans were able to win the hearts and souls of those who received their educational and health services, and managed to convert some of them to Christianity. However, it is not yet clear whether the missionaries provided education to all the people or to only those who had converted to Christianity, but the health care was given to all members of the community.

Upon establishing itself in Ramotswa in 1875 the Lutheran Church set up a health post where they gave the local people medical services in a compound where the Bamalete Lutheran Hospital (BLH) stands today. Soon after the completion of the church building in Ramotswa in 1899, classrooms were also constructed because attaining education in order to gain knowledge of the white man had

---

\*Simon Isaac Bayani, Department of History, Trent University. Email: [simon.bayani@yahoo.com](mailto:simon.bayani@yahoo.com)

become very popular and a well sought-after vocation (Mgadla 2003). The classrooms were strategically located three blocks between the church building and the health post. The funds for running these facilities came from Germany. This was because it was typical of any mission body to be funded by its head office in a country of its origin. Later in the colonial period the British government in Botswana made modest financial contribution to help the mission bodies establish hospitals because there was dire need for more hospitals in the territory (Mgadla 2007).

It is important to briefly discuss the administrative structure of the Lutheran Church before the split. The Lutheran Church just like any other big church or organisation with many followers had a hierarchical administrative structure or offices governed by the constitution of the church. In the hierarchy of the church, at the top there was a bishop followed by deputy bishop. Then there was a dean who also had a deputy after which there were reverends who were also referred to as pastors, and the latter were equal in terms of power and authority. These officials were overseen by the presiding bishop and his deputy who were based outside the country in Johannesburg. This was the church's headquarters also called the ELCSA Church Wide Office.

The church was a congregation, then a parish, which was a combination of congregations. Then there is a circuit made up of a group of parishes. Above the circuit was a diocese constituted by a number of circuits. Lastly, there is the general church as known to the public, and this would be a combination of dioceses. The ELCSA was affiliated to a regional body by the name Lutheran Union Communion in Southern Africa (LUCSA). This body was responsible for the running of all Lutheran Churches that operate in Southern Africa. But this does not mean that every rule that the LUCSA made applied to these countries (communication with Pastor Isaacs 2 October 2013). The ELCSA, for example, has developed its own constitution. This is common in different Lutheran churches in different countries. All the Lutheran churches in Southern Africa subscribe to the LUCSA while in other regions they subscribe to other bodies that oversee those regions. However, all these regional bodies, whether in Africa, Europe or America, subscribe to the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) –the global mother body of the Lutheran churches. This is where the running of the Lutheran Church, as a whole, is done.

### **Causes of the Conflict and Split in the Lutheran Church**

After countless years of labouring amongst the Batswana and gaining a reasonably large sphere of influence in Botswana, the Lutheran Church experienced internal problems that resulted in its split in 1979. The church had branches in places such as Manyana, Mankgodi, Digawana, Pitsane, Ramotswa, Otse, Lobatse, Gabane, Jwaneng, Bokspits and Gaborone just to mention a few (communication with Pastor Isaacs 2 October 2013). An autonomous Lutheran Church was born out of this conflict and came to be known as the ELCB, while the old church retained the name ELCSA. Events preceding this split can be traced to as early as 1976 when there were a series of meetings held in Rustenburg, South Africa, and suggestions made on the formation of a new and autonomous circuit of the church in Botswana (communication with Pastor Isaacs 2 October 2013). There were suggestions that for that to happen local Batswana had to be trained first and become fully qualified pastors capable of running a church (communication with Pastor Othusitse Morekwa 14 October 2013). Again in 1976, a number of pastors in Botswana were said to have caused a lot of trouble by spreading false information to the afore mentioned Lutheran Church branches saying that all their money was being taken to South Africa to make developments there (Rapoo 2005). These were named as Dean P Robinson, Pastor P Steinmeier, Pastor P Grosse, Pastor F Rohland and Pastor L Hermansson of the Lutheran Mission in Sweden (Rapoo 2005). It appears that these church leaders had made up their minds and made it known that there was a need for an autonomous church in Botswana.

In September 1978 there were certain irregularities that demanded disciplinary action on the

part of the then dean, Phillip Robinson. This provided a spark for a split in the church which had been simmering for some time. There were allegations at that time that Robinson had had a child outside of his marriage and therefore had to face disciplinary action. Robinson was demoted from deanship by the Diocesan Council. After this demotion Robinson and a group of those who followed him resigned from the ELCSA on 14 October 1978 (Rapoo 1982). Some of the leading members who followed Robinson were Teacher Segatlhe, Itumeleng Kalanke, Phillip Matsietsa, Ephraim Rasefako, Karel Selebogo and Jacobeth Rangongo. However, the latter returned to the ELCSA and was duly accepted (Rapoo 1982). According to Bishop Rapoo (2005) of the Lutheran Church in Rustenburg (South Africa), who was also a very interested party, the European pastors who had started trouble in the church alongside Robinson had already been recalled back to Europe by the Hermannsburg Missionary Society. He writes that the reason was that they were said to be causing trouble in Botswana. It appears that since Robinson was the dean of the circuit before his demotion, and knowing how much authority he had, he realised that resigning from the ELCSA and forming the ELCB would help him escape the disciplinary action that he was supposed to face. In fact, according to the private Mmegi newspaper, members of the ELCSA stated that Robinson was just running away from disciplinary action meted against him by the church (*Mmegi* 7-23 January 1997).

However, a group called the ELCB Committee for Reconciliation and Unity said that the ELCB broke away simply because it wanted autonomy from the South African diocese (*Mmegi* 17-23 January 1997). This committee was one of the many committees that were formed by the two factions for purposes of reconciliation but ultimately failed.

The split in the church owing to the desire for self-determination from South African domination seems to have gotten a lot of support from the government officials in Botswana. For instance, during a parliament session in August 1979, Member of Parliament (MP) for Kgatleng/Tlokweng, Washington Meswele stated that the Societies Act that had been amended the previous year had to be revised because it was failing to protect Botswana societies, particularly the churches, from outside authorities (*Daily News* 7 August 1979). He said this making reference to the conflict in the Lutheran Church and noted that it was a demand by the Batswana to be given the right to administer their own affairs (*Daily News* 7 August 1979). Meswele was obviously in support of the split and wanted to see an autonomous Lutheran Church in Botswana. He even went further to say that the irony of the matter was that it was not a single man instigating this conflict and wanting to be the leader, but the people of Botswana sought self-determination but one Bishop Rapoo was trying to stop that (*Daily News*, 7 August 1979). The role of the government in this conflict is further explained below.

Another reason for the split was explained by the ELCB on economic grounds. They argued that as far as the development of the church in Botswana was concerned, there was not much being done especially in terms of church buildings. Most of the physical infrastructural developments took place in South Africa, and this was used to convince the people that there was a need for autonomy from South African control (communication with Pastor Isaacs 2 October 2013). The situation was also worsened by the fact that Robinson and his fellow European brothers were said to have spread information to the effect that Batswana's money was being sent to South Africa to be used there. Another reason that Robinson gave for the split was that there was a seminary in Rustenburg where pastors were to be trained including Batswana yet the latter did not benefit from the facility. He claimed that Bishop Rapoo was taking only South Africans for that training. It was said that this made Batswana feel betrayed, hence some joined the ELCB (communication with Pastor Morekwa 14 October 2013). Nevertheless, according to Pastor Morekwa there were some Batswana who did go to Rustenburg for training. Therefore, such falsehoods were perpetrated by those who wanted to see the Church split.

It was for these reasons that large numbers of the ELCSA members joined the newly formed

ELCB. To this day the ELCB has more members than ELCSA (communication with Pastor Isaacs, 2 October 201). For instance, according to Pastor Morekwa in 2007 the official ELCB records showed that it had 18,000 confirmed members. The majority of the members who quit the ELCSA for the ELCB were young people and this somehow gave the impression that the ELCB appealed to the younger generation. The older members of the church mostly remained in the ELCSA and according to Pastor Isaacs of the ELCSA this was possibly due to the older generation's tendency to be conservative. However, according to Pastor Morekwa of the ELCB, older people are the ones who left the ELCSA and therefore their children followed them to the ELCB in large numbers. The ELCB's large numbers are also due the fact that after the split, Robinson went to the Cape Orange Diocese congregations in Kgalagadi which covers places such as Tsabong, Werda and Bokspits, and told them that he had formed a new Lutheran Church owing to the 'misdeeds' of the Western Diocese in Rustenburg (communication with Pastor Morekwa, 14 October 2013). Some of them joined Robinson who was now bishop of the ELCB, and soon in 1982 he went to Namibia and requested to be given the congregations from Hukuntsi and Sehithwa all the way to Francistown which were under the Lutheran Church in Namibia and he succeeded (communication with Pastor Morekwa 14 October 2013).

### **The Course of the Conflict and Split in the Lutheran Church**

After Robinson and his group had seceded from the ELCSA, the registrar of societies accepted this as dissolution of the ELCSA in Botswana and transferred the ELCSA's exemption from certain requirements of registration to the ELCB, and at the same time declared the ELCSA an illegal body in Botswana (ELCSA nd). Furthermore, according to the latter source all meetings including worship and services held in the church buildings by the ELCSA were considered illegal and subject to a fine. When the ELCSA leaders asked the department of home affairs to rescind the decision, they were turned down and told that the decision was made in good faith. They were advised by the department to go to the high court and seek redress if they felt wronged. On 28 March 1979 the high court issued an order on the basis of an agreement between the three parties –the ELCSA, the ELCB and the department of home affairs. The terms of the ruling were that, firstly the ELCSA was to be re-instated to its long-established status as a recognised society exempted under the Societies Act. Secondly, as noted in Bishop Rapoo's affidavit, the ELCB was to be granted registration from that date as a separate church (Rapoo 1982).

Events that followed the 28 March 1979 court ruling concerned the ownership and usage of church property. There seemed to be confusion and controversy as to who would remain as the sole owner of the property between the two church groups after the split. As Bishop Rapoo stated in his affidavit, the ELCB had the same rights as any other newly established society, namely to start from scratch and even acquire its own property (Rapoo 1982). Nevertheless, the ELCB made no effort to vacate the church buildings as they ignored notices to vacate the facilities. The ELCSA once again had to turn to government for help and have the court order put to effect (ELCSA nd). It had proof that all the property belonged to them and even provided letters from various land boards as evidence. They argued that they had rightfully been allocated land in Gaborone, Mankodi, Ramotswa, Manyana and Pitsane. Bishop Rapoo further explained that people like Robinson and other ELCB officials had resigned from the ELCSA, and had not re-applied for membership. Hence, they had no right to occupy the ELCSA property (Rapoo 1982).

Soon the attorney general of Botswana made an application to the high court for intervention. This application together with the original application by the ELCSA yielded results because the high court ruled in favour of the ELCSA through the court order of 8 June 1979. The court order explicitly stipulated five terms that the ELCB was supposed to adhere to. Firstly, the ELCB members and employees were banned from entering or conducting services in the applicant's (the ELCSA)

churches without the authority of the applicant. Interfering with the applicant's conduct of services in the applicant's churches in Gaborone, Lobatse, Ramotswa, Pitsane, Manyana, Mankgodhi, Digawana, Gabane and Mogobane was also prohibited (Republic of Botswana 1982).

The second condition dictated by the court order was that, the deputy sheriff shall evict from such parsonages (church houses) officials of the ELCB who were at the time unlawfully occupying the applicant's facilities at the places mentioned above (Republic of Botswana 1982). These were all properties of the ELCSA and therefore the ELCB had no right to occupy them. Thirdly, the ELCB and its officials were to forthwith deliver to the ELCSA's attorneys, Kirby Helfer and Khama the keys to the ELCSA's churches in Gaborone, Lobatse, Ramotswa, Mogobane, Pitsane and Digawana. The fourth condition was that the Botswana Police was authorised to assist with enforcing the order in the event of non-compliance by the accused (Republic of Botswana 1982). The fifth and final condition stipulated that any of the parties shall be entitled to approach the court on the question of costs within seven days failing which the costs would be borne by the first respondent, second respondent and the attorney general in equal shares.

The ELCB chose not to obey all these conditions and this worsened matters. Before the ELCB could go back to court, efforts by various members of the Lutheran fraternity were made to try and solve the whole issue. On 12 July 1979 Reverend James Knutson of the Lutheran Church in Minneapolis (United States of America), who was also secretary for Africa and a convenor for the ELCSA partners, wrote a letter to Reverend Leonard Auala of the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambokavango Church in Namibia asking him to be a mediator in the crisis in Botswana. Reverend Auala of Namibia responded to this letter on 8 August 1979 declining the request (Leonard Auala to James Knutson 1979). In declining the mediatory role Reverend Auala stated that Reverend Knutson would be best suited for the assignment since he had a good relationship with the two warring parties in Botswana. He also indicated that both sides had agreed to have a mediatory procedure which would probably make Reverend Knutson's job easier. These efforts did not yield the desired results, and the ELCSA was not happy with the way things were going.

The ELCB was not cooperating with the ELCSA particularly in conducting joint services in the church buildings. Services such as funerals and other special services like baptism could not be conducted properly because of the awkward joint usage of the church buildings, something which the high court had barred (communication with pastor Isaacs 2 October 2013).

The ELCSA responded by going to the court of appeal. On 30 November 1979 they gave a notice and stated that they intended to appear for an order that would firstly commit the first respondent (Phillip Robinson) to imprisonment for contempt of court, meaning willfully disobeying the court order of 8 June 1979 (Botswana Law Reports 1982). Secondly, they wished to impose a suitable punishment upon the second respondent (ELCB) for the same church as above (Botswana Law Reports 1982). However, the ELCSA took the initiative of informing the ELCB that they were intending to take them back to court for contempt of court. On 7 November 1979 the ELCSA attorneys (Kirby, Helfer and Khama) wrote a letter to Robinson informing him that they and their clients were disturbed to note that he had chosen to ignore the court order of 8 June 1979. On the same day, another communication was sent by the ELCSA's attorneys to the attorney general. They told the attorney general that the ELCB had refused to go to Rustenburg in September for mediation talks. Furthermore, the ELCB's disregard for the court order had worsened to the extent that the ELCSA was excluded from virtually all its church buildings. So for these reasons, the attorneys of the ELCSA informed the attorney general that they were about to institute contempt of court proceedings against Robinson and his ELCB.

The ELCSA's contempt of court application was, however, dismissed on legal technicalities by Judge Corduff on 16 May 1980. The reason was that the ELCSA had not indicated in their affidavits that both they and the ELCB were legal personas capable of instituting legal proceedings on another

organisation and visa-versa (Republic of Botswana 1982). Nonetheless, the court order of 8 June 1979 was still in place. Fortunately, the ELCSA and the ELCB entered into agreements of their own, and this managed to keep peace for a considerable period of time. These agreements were entered into by both parties for purposes of peaceful co-existence. The government of Botswana, particularly the department of home affairs, also wanted the two parties to reconcile before the issue could be taken further (communication with Pastor Isaacs 2 October 2013). The ELCSA and the ELCB were to use the property of the church together. One faction would use the church for conducting services for a given amount of time, and the other commencing immediately after the first had left. According to Pastor Isaacs sometimes the two factions would come together in one service and take turns in the officiating of the service. This arrangement did not mean that the matter had been resolved but just a means of maintaining temporary peace and stability. Interestingly, it lasted for 18 long years only to erupt again in 1997 into a violent crisis when the ELCSA suddenly tried to implement the court order of 1979.

### **Government's Impartial Handling of the Crisis**

The government of Botswana had taken an unfair position from the beginning of the conflict between the rival factions of the Lutheran Church. When approached by the ELCSA and asked to implement the court order of 8 June 1979, government through the department of home affairs, stated that it would implement the court order only when the two factions had made peace. Apparently this department was adopting an age-old Setswana adage which says that *ntwa-kgolo-ke-ya-molomo* ('it is better to jaw-jaw than war-war') despite the court order. This approach can be interpreted as meaning that after the two had made peace, there would be no need to implement the court order. In short it was believed that there would not be any conflict over property (communication with Pastor Isaacs 2 October 2013). Even the police, who were instructed to remove the ELCB members from the ELCSA's churches, did not take action. The ELCSA had approached the police requesting the removal of the ELCB members who were refusing to make way for the ELCSA to carry out ordination that they had long planned and had also informed the ELCB about. The station commander at Gaborone Central Police Station simply said there was nothing they could do unless the ELCB was doing something illegal. The irony is that the ELCB's presence in those premises was an illegal act because it violated the high court order mentioned above. In his book, Bishop Rapoo writes that 'It was a great disappointment to see the government of Botswana ignoring the Court Order and allow the ELCB to stay in buildings that do not belong to them' (Rapoo 2005:130).

The Lutheran Church issue had become political and government's response to it was made part of the country's national interests. National leaders in the form of cabinet ministers and parliamentarians such as Washington Meswele and Peter Mmusi (Minister of Home Affairs) openly took sides in this issue with the view that they were protecting Botswana from domination and exploitation by outsiders (personal communication with Pastor Morekwa 14 October 2013). At the same time government was also concerned with the interests of its people who were on the side of the ELCSA and wanted them to capitulate because in terms of numbers they stood no chance against the ELCB.

On 3 August 1979 Meswele requested to move a motion in parliament which wanted the Societies Act be referred to the Law Reform Committee for amendment. According to Meswele in 1978 the Societies Act had been amended with the primary aim of protecting citizens from the control of foreign-based societies and officials (*Daily News* 7 August 1979). He went on to say that nearly all churches in Botswana were governed by constitutions and rules of parent societies which were not registered in the country. He further stated that these constitutions did not allow for the Botswana branches to have control over their finances, and that many of them had tried to change to constitutions that suited them better but ended up being sued in the high court by their mainly South African mother bodies (Republic of Botswana 1979). Meswele spoke at length about this issue giving much emphasis on the conflict that

was going on in the Lutheran Church. He likened the situation to that of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) which was also experiencing a seminar conflict.

This session of parliament was very long and different MP's spoke at length on their take in the Lutheran Church conflict. Meswele said that both Robinson and Rapoo were South Africans but at least Robinson could see that Botswana was an independent country and deserved its self-determination. Therefore, Meswele described him as a true minister who had come to preach the word of God. He said that Bishop Rapoo, on the other hand, was interested in empire building and did not want to see Botswana freed from foreign control (Republic of Botswana 1979). This sentiment obviously shows that Meswele was siding with the ELCB.

This was at the height of the apartheid system in South Africa and just three years after the Soweto uprising of 16 June 1976. Many Botswana politicians decried the dominance/control that South Africa had on Botswana (in many respects). Therefore, they used any opportune platform to assert Botswana's independence from South Africa. Their defence of the ELCB can also be viewed in this light.

Thus in parliament members of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) expressed support for the revision of the Societies Act and their support for the ELCB. The only exception was David Magang who says he was deliberately kept outside the national assembly when the matter was discussed (Magang 2008:370-1). Others dissenting voices were from members of the opposition parties namely Kenneth Nkhwa and Motsamai Mpho (Republic of Botswana 1979). To further show government's partiality in the Lutheran issue, Peter Mmusi informed Bishop Rapoo and some of his fellow South African priests that they now needed visas to come into Botswana. To stress the point, they were told that they would be arrested if they came into the country without visas (personal communication with Pastor Morekwa 14 October 2013). According to Bishop Rapoo affected ELCSA priests were Pastor H Dehnke, Dean D Mascher, Dean ER Tisane, Dean BP Mokoma, Diocese General Treasurer JE Fischer, Pastor Rabaji, Pastor E Lange, Secretary General LG Khutsoane and Dean D Ramokoka (Rapoo 2005).

### **The Re-emergence of the Lutheran Church Crisis after 18 Years Lull**

Between 1979 and 1997 the ELCSA and the ELCB were operating under the gentleman's arrangement that they had both agreed upon in 1979. The agreement was entered into by the two parties for the sake of peace. As mentioned above the two were to use the property of the ELCSA alternatively. One faction would use the church for conducting services for a given amount of time and the other commencing right after the first had left. Sometimes they would even come together in one service (communication with Pastor Isaacs 2 October 2013). However, this arrangement did not mean that the matter had been resolved but was just a means of maintaining peace. Remarkably, as noted above the matter went on quietly for close to two decades until it erupted violently in 1997 when the ELCSA decided to want to put into practice the 1979 court order.

In early 1997 the private *Mmegi* newspaper, which did not exist in 1979 as were other independent newspapers in Botswana, blamed government for the ongoing tension in the Lutheran Church. *Mmegi* stated that in 1979 a court order was issued which evicted the ELCB from all the ELCSA buildings. However, eighteen years later in 1997 the keys to the church building were still in the hands of the ELCB (*Mmegi* January 31 to 6 February 1997). The newspaper went further to point out that the authorities had done nothing about this, instead they tried every trick to frustrate the ELCSA into submission but in vain. Pastor Nicholas Isaacs of the ELCSA was quoted saying that government was siding with the ELCB, and delayed the implementation of the court order for political reasons. Isaacs also blamed the police for failing to address the situation when asked to intervene (*Mmegi* 7-13 March 1997).

The emergence of private newspapers in the 1980's made it possible for the Lutheran Church

crisis to be probed into by a 'neutral eye' and reveal government's position fearlessly. This approach was very different from that of the state-owned *Daily News* which acted as a government mouthpiece more than anything else. It should also be noted that by 1997 the relations between Botswana and South Africa had also improved remarkably as a result of the end of apartheid, and the emergence of a new democratic dispensation there that started in 1994.

The re-emergence of the Lutheran Church crisis took place in Gaborone at the ELCSA premises at the African Mall in January 1997. The ELCSA allegedly hired security personnel with vicious looking dogs to prevent the members of the ELCB from entering the premises. The ELCSA argued that by so doing they were implementing the 18 year old Court Order that was meant to evict the ELCB members from the church premises. Granted by the High Court in 1979, the Court Order had never been implemented partly due to the ELCB's resistance and later the voluntary truces entered into by the two factions. These truces were agreements between the two Churches to use the church property alternatively. It can be said to have been a violation of the Court Order but the ELCSA entered into the agreement because the ELCB was not showing any intention of leaving the church buildings. On that day when the ELCB members were prevented from entering the church they went back and did not hold the service with their ELCSA counterparts. This was not the last time the ELCSA had such an encounter with them. It can also be argued that the ELCSA was to blame for suddenly changing an arrangement of 18 years without consulting the ELCB.

An ordination was planned to take place in Gaborone on 23 February 1997 for two of the ELCSA's members who had trained in South Africa. The ELCSA had previously made an announcement in one of their joint services with the ELCB but some ELCB members showed resentment to the intended ordination. A certain Herman Mangope who was a senior member of the ELCB is said to have even made his strong feelings known at the time of the announcement. He is alleged to have boasted that 'No South African will be ordained in this church. Over my dead body' (communication with Pastor Isaacs 2 October 2013). It seems that at the time the ELCSA ignored his declaration and continued with the preparations for ordination. However, it seems the ELCB was determined to spoil the planned event and prepared to cause trouble in the church.

When the day of the ordination finally came the ELCSA members came to church and found the ELCB members already inside having started their service apparently at six o'clock early in the morning (communication with Boitumelo Ditirafalo of the ELCSA 5 February 2014). The ELCSA members then decided to wait outside for the ELCB to finish their service but the service went on and on. Realising that the ELCB was on a warpath, the ELCSA members then walked to the nearby Gaborone Central Police Station to ask for assistance from the police. According to Pastor Isaacs, the station commander sent them back saying that there was nothing the police could do unless the ELCB members were committing a crime. Nevertheless, the court order of 1979 had stated that the conducting of church services by the ELCB on the ELCSA property would be a crime. This condition of the court order can be said to have somehow been rendered redundant by the truces that the two churches entered into for such a long time.

At any rate, the ELCSA members went back to the church and some of them went into the church building in an attempt to talk to the ELCB people but a physical confrontation broke out. On that day the ELCB had organised a bus from Ramotswa full of the ELCB members to try and reinforce their numbers in Gaborone. Another car had gone to the ELCB (Galaletsang) Church in Gaborone West to collect more members with the hope of outnumbering and swamping the ELCSA members, and preventing them from holding their ordination (communication with Pastor Morekwa 14 October 2013). A further indication that the ELCB came prepared for a physical fight was that they came armed! Some are said to have carried knobkerries, sjamboks, tear gas and even battery acid (communication with Ditirafalo 5 February 2014). It is unknown where they may have acquired the tear gas from. It



is said that in the ensuing fight the ELCSA had some casualties because tear gas was used on them, and some of their members suffered bodily irritation from acid that was sprayed on them. Fortunately, there were some Criminal Investigation Department (CID) officers who are said to have brought the situation under control. The CID then asked everyone to leave the premises with only just a few pastors remaining for 'questioning' (communication with Ditirafalo 5 February 2014).

On Tuesday the following week Kinsley Sebele, permanent secretary in the ministry of labour and home affairs, summoned the two rival groups to a meeting to try and find out the cause of the fight! The meeting appears to have been attended by Sebele himself from the government side and representatives from the two churches. It is said that at some point Sebele told the ELCSA members to surrender to the ELCB because their numbers were quite few when compared to those of the ELCB. Interestingly, it is also said that his wife was a member of the ELCB (communication with Ditirafalo 5 February 2014)! However, at that meeting, the ELCB was finally told to stop conducting services in the ELCSA property. That was the first time that the government of Botswana implemented the court order that was 18 years old.

Nevertheless, it is alleged that after being kicked out of the ELCSA churches the ELCB members went on to vandalise some property in Digawana and Manyana (communication with Pastor Oswal Dipheko of the ELCSA 12 February 2014). In Manyana they are said to have removed the roof of one of the offices and broke the windows. In Digawana they removed benches from the church and a bell, it is claimed. The church building in Mogobane is said to have been electrified but the ELCB members chopped the walls and removed the electric cables saying that they were the ones who had electrified it. In Lobatse they are said to have found one old woman at the church and told her to give them the keys for the church. When she refused they left the church only to come back at night and broke the windows (communication with Ditirafalo 5 February 2014).

From thereon, the two factions held their services separately and the ELCB went on to acquire plots within a very short period of time (personal communication with Pastor Morekwa 14 October 2013). The ministry of labour and home affairs was said to have advised the office of the president (OP) that the 18 year old court order had to be implemented after the two scuffles between the two church groups in 1997. Dean Moletsane of the ELCSA, who was also a member of the circuit council, was quoted by Mmegi saying that they were worried by the continued tension between members of the Lutheran Churches in Botswana. He went on to say that violence should not be resorted to but rather love of one another since the love of Christ never ends after all (*Mmegi* 14-29 February 1997). This shows that the two violent outbreaks in that year had raised a lot of concern. The ELCB members were, however, seen one Sunday in May 1997 gathering at an abandoned site of the Lutheran Church in Ramotswa for their Sunday service (*Mmegi* 1-15 May 1997). Interestingly on the other side of the village the ELCSA was celebrating their long-fought freedom at the church.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated how tension that finally resulted in a violent confrontation among the Lutherans in Botswana started and ended after simmering for almost two decades. It seems personal interests as opposed to theological or religious reasons were at the centre of the split in the church. Government's intervention in the matter was also self-serving and only prolonged the crisis. It should be noted that the government of Botswana's position that Batswana were being exploited and abused by external churches with branches in the country may have been understandable but justice had to be done in the case of the ELCB. It is obvious that some senior government officials also had vested interest in the ELCB through church membership.

As late as the first decade of the new millennium, churches of all descriptions headquartered outside the country have multiplied many fold. For instance, branches of the Pentecostal or charismatic

church of mainly West African origin have mushroomed in almost every town and big village in Botswana. Interestingly, some of the occasional and regular worshippers at these establishments are senior government officials and cabinet ministers. Although the government has made efforts to expel some of the predatory foreign pastors from the country and curb the proliferation of churches, the problem persists.

### **Acknowledgements**

This essay is a revised version of my BA research essay entitled 'Crisis and Split of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Botswana, 1978-1997', which was submitted to the Department of History, University of Botswana in May 2014. I would like to thank Professor Christian John Makgala and Dr Boga Manatsha for advising me to revise the paper for publication. Professor Makgala is the one who had suggested this topic to me in the first place and also supervised the resultant BA research essay, for that, I am truly grateful.

### **References**

#### **Primary Sources**

- Affidavit by Bishop Daniel Rapoo 1982, in the case: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa vs. Phillip Jeremiah Robinson and Another.*
- Auala, L to Rev James Knutson, 8 August 1979. (From ELCSA File. Source not catalogued).*
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, A Short Summary of the Division of the Lutheran Church in Botswana (nd) (From ELCSA File. Source not catalogued).*
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa Constitution.*
- Kirby, Helfer and Khama to PJ Robinson, 7 November 1979. (From ELCSA File. Source not catalogued).*
- Kirby, Helfer & Khama to the Attorney General, 7 November 1979. (From ELCSA File. Source not catalogued).*
- Republic of Botswana 1979. Parliamentary Debates of 30 July to 17 August 1979: Hansard Number 65, Gaborone: Government Printer.*
- Republic of Botswana, 1982. "The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa v Phillip Jeremiah Robinson & Another," 1982, Botswana Law Reports, Gaborone: Government Printer.*

#### **Secondary Sources**

- Magang, D 2008. The Magic of Perseverance: The Autobiography of David Magang. Cape Town: Centre for Advance Study of African Society.*
- Mgadla, PT 2007, 'Who Used Whom in the Establishment of Medical Spheres of Influence in the Bechuanaland Protectorate? The Case of the Seventh Day Adventist and Moffat Hospitals in Kanye 1922-1959', in Nkomazana, F and Lanner, L (eds.), Aspects of the History of the Church in Botswana. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2007, pp.115-154.*
- Mgadla, PT 2003. A History of Education in the Bechuanaland Protectorate to 1962. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America.*
- Mignon, A 1996. The Nineteenth Century Lutheran Mission in Botswana. Gaborone: The Botswana Society and Botswana National Archives.*
- Rapoo, PD 2005. Ke Fitlhisitswe Nakong E. Rustenburg: Author.*

#### **Newspapers**

- Botswana Daily News, 'Societies Act to be Revised', 7 August 1979.*
- Mmegi, 'Dogs Used to Block Church Doors: Lutheran Church Crisis', 17-23 January 1997.*

*Mmegi, 'Tension Continues in the Lutheran Church', 7-13 March 1997.*

*Mmegi, 'Church Tension Worries Us', 14-29 February 1997.*

*Mmegi, 'Lutheran Crisis Over', 1-15 May 1997.*