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by: Harry Dugmore

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"KNOWING ALL THE NAMES": THE EBENEZER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH AND THE CREATION OF COMMUNITY AMONG THE COLOURED POPULATION OF JOHANNESBURG 1894 - 1939

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AFRICAN STUDIES INSTITUTE SEMINAR PAPER

"KNOWING ALL THE NAMES": THE EBENEZER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH AND THE CREATION OF COMMUNITY AMONG THE COLOURED POPULATION OF JOHANNESBURG(1), 1894-1939

This paper examines the establishment, growth and influence of the Ebenezer Congregational Church in Johannesburg, over a period of almost fifty years. Although not the largest Coloured(2) congregation in Johannesburg, Ebenezer played a particular and significant role in lives of the Reef's early Coloured population. A later denominational history recalled proudly that Ebenezer became "the largest [single] Church in the Union, and probably the largest single organisation of its kind in South Africa, and, maybe, in the world".(3) From an initial membership of 26 in 1894, the church grew, by the 1930s, to 5000 confirmed members, and many more "adherents" and Sunday school scholars. Lacking the resources of the large European denominations, Ebenezer nonetheless came to be regarded, in the words of a latter-day devotee: "the church of the Coloured people". "Everybody knows", the member continued, "that what the Ebenezer church did for Coloured people on the Reef no other church has ever done."(4) An analysis of the Ebenezer Congregational Church reveals a good deal about how "community" came to be constituted among Johannesburg's Coloured population before the Second World War.(5) This in turn helps to contextualise the particular political responses of the Coloured community on the Reef in this period, which is a major concern of the broader study of which this paper is a part.(6)

"A LITTLE FIRE": THE ORIGINS OF THE EBENEZER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN JOHANNESBURG(7)

When Coloured settlers arrived in Johannesburg in the 1880s and 1890s, they found very few opportunities for religious worship, or for any form of social recreation.(8) Mixed church gatherings were expressly prohibited by the ZAR government. Subsequent church histories all stress the generally oppressive context in which Ebenezer was established. Mr JW. Ontong, a prosperous Coloured man from Kimberly, who arrived in Johannesburg in 1887, recalled:

> "there was no branch of the Dutch Reform Church for Coloured people on the Rand. As we were adherents of this Church in the Cape we were naturally anxious to follow the same form of worship here. We were however stopped at the door and in a peremptory manner told that as the law provided that there should be no equality in either Church or state, we could not be admitted.(9)

In 1890 a number of Coloured members of the Congregational church, mostly from the eastern Cape, tried to attend a service at a white Congregational Church which had just opened in Johannesburg. Although the Congregational Union was expressly non-racial as a coordinating structure, it soon became clear that this Congregational church situated itself firmly in the context of prevailing white sensibilities. An informant recalled having been told by his father, who settled in Johannesburg in 1887, that this particular incident

sparked off the creation of the Ebenezer church:

> "When our church started it was because a [Coloured] deacon was not allowed in the white church in End street. A certain Mr Carrolus said 'so far and no further, we are not going to beg these people to have a seat in their Church...', it started as a little fire.(10)

These two recollections - an important part of the received wisdom of later Ebenezer church members - reflect the contrast between the more "liberal" Cape tradition of greater inter-group tolerance, and the harsher racism practised by the ZAR state and many of its citizens. Shortly after these incidents took place, Coloureds in Johannesburg, from a number of different denominations, got together to form their own congregation.(11) The first Congregational Church was thus an amalgamation of Coloured individuals from a number of different denominational backgrounds, drawn together into an informal religious organisation. A later official history of the Church asserts: "Its origin was of the true Congregational order. No minister gathered them, they gathered themselves."(12) This was in keeping with the traditions of "sturdy independence" which had been inculcated into the Coloured adherents of LMS mission stations in the Cape.(13) Since the 1850s, all LMS mission stations were forced to rely entirely on their own resources.(14) It was thus possibly more likely that Coloureds from this particular tradition would have been able to organise themselves into a "gathered" church of this nature.

Early adherents named their church "Ebenezer", and it was later given the title "The Ebenezer Independent Congregational Church".(15) A DRC minister was invited to preach, and one if fact did so for a few meetings, but this was soon discontinued, "owing to the fact that the Boers objected to the practise of preaching to the Coloured people".(16) Thereafter, for a few years, the Ebenezer Congregational Church was without the formal control of an overarching church hierarchy, and without the usual "instrument" of a white church minister.

At this time the Congregational Union of South Africa (CUSA) was looking enthusiastically at the possibilities presented by the mass of "heathen" who were converging on the Rand. In 1895 the Chairman of CUSA wrote: "Your committee has recently been impressed with the importance of Johannesburg as an encouraging centre for aggressive work. There seems to be room for work among all classes."(17) CUSA were so convinced of the potential for mass conversion on the Reef that they transferred one of their most successful and enterprising young ministers, the Reverend Charles Phillips, away from his thriving Graaff-Reinet congregation, and to the Reef. There he became minister of the fledgling Ebenezer congregation, made up of just 26 members. By the time Phillips died, in the 1937, the church had become a major social and political force in the lives of the Coloured population of the Witwatersrand, and counted over 5000 members and adherents in its ranks.(18)

Four reasons for the success of the Ebenezer Congregational Church are now suggested, in an attempt to locate and explain the influence of this church among the Coloured population of the Witwatersrand in the early part of this century.

CHRISTIAN RELIGION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COLOURED IDENTITY

The three main "constituent groups' of the later Coloured population - descendants of the Khoisan; emancipated slaves and their descendants; and the off-spring of "mixed" relationships in pre-19th century Cape - were all objects, in different ways, of early missionary endeavour.(19) The London Missionary Society (LMS), one of the most energetic of missionary societies, focussed on these groups almost to the exclusion of others. As the preeminent historian of the Coloured people has argued, the LMS had initially aimed to work exclusively among the Xhosa population of the eastern Cape, but their first missionary, van der Kemp, found:

> "the Hottentots much easier to influence than he had found the Xhosas. The latter still had their Chiefs, and their tribal institutions were still intact. The Hottentots had already lost, or were rapidly losing, both. They were, therefore, ready to listen to the exposition of a new way of life and to accept the missionaries as their leaders."(20)

The LMS began its activities in South Africa in 1799 and developed a number of innovative practices on which their appeal to those groupings who would later be classified as Coloureds, would be based. Foremost of these was the practice of starting vast "mission stations", as opposed to merely erecting a church within a "heathen" area. Although the "temporal happiness and prosperity of society" was deemed by the LMS to be significantly less important than the "chief object" of missionary work, which was "to spread the knowledge of Christ among the heathen", these stations attracted tens of thousands of "Coloured" adherents drawn by the prospect of relative "prosperity". By 1848, the LMS had established thirty-three mission stations in South Africa, of which twenty were for the exclusive use of "Coloured" groups.(21) These stations, and the agricultural land they gave access to, provided the most significant opportunity for rural Coloureds to avoid full-scale proletarianisation in the 19th century.(22)

The provision of land on these mission stations had a significant impact in conscientising Coloureds about their "otherness" in relation to different ethnic groups in the Cape. A later assessment by historians of the Congregational church suggests that John Philip's main concern after his arrival in 1819 was to: "protect the Coloured people from exploitation by whites and from the vices of western civilisation."(23) As with much missionary activity among African groups, this "protection" was a doubled-edged sword. This same commentary asserts that "far from wanting a sudden removal of all barriers between the races Philip advocated that the Coloureds be given land of their own, where they would be free to live and develop a separate existence."(24) This "separate existence" was encouraged, and compelled, by a wide variety of other factors not consid-

ered in this paper. But the impact of Christian missions in shaping Coloured self-perception was significant, possibly considerably more so than has previously been acknowledged. (25)

It was, however, not just the LMS which was active in proselytising Coloureds. Other Christian denominations also achieved conspicuous success in gaining the allegiance of large number of converts, and the overall level of conversion is impressive. From fewer than a thousand recorded "Coloured" Christians in 1800, some 85% of Coloureds claimed allegiance to one of 10 major Christian denominations by 1891. Only 37 000 people designated "mixed and others" in the census of that year, out of a total of 247 000 enumerated in this category, claimed to have "no religion". (26) The breakdown of adherence to various Christian denominations among 'Coloured' groups in the Cape in 1891 was as follows:

DENOMINATION	'HOTTENTOTS'	'MIXED' ADHERENTS IN URBAN AREAS	'MIXED' TOTAL
ENUMERATED TOTAL	50 388		247806
DRC	8023	25332	63574
Anglican	1823	28750	46142
Congregational	7797	14205	33666
Methodist	4500		188508086
Rhenish	--		124385657
Moravians	--	1303	11258
Lutherans	--		66902148
Berlin	--		66905657
Presbyterian	2229		45961240
Catholics	103		17681448
Not Religious	22 545	3883	36 998

These figures obscure regional biases and, in particular, a pronounced rural/urban division. Sixty per cent of the Anglican churches' membership came from Cape urban areas, compared to only about forty percent of DRC and Congregational membership. As about 65% of Coloureds still lived in rural areas in this period, the Anglican predominance in urban areas is even more significant. From a variety of sources it is also clear that the DRC was more strongly represented in the urban areas of Cape Town and Kimberly, whereas the Congregational Church dominated the towns and rural centres of the Eastern Cape. (27)

The Ebenezer Congregational Church was thus firmly rooted in previous religious experience of Coloureds in the Cape Province, an experience intimately connected to Coloured struggles to maintain some access to their rural land base. When this base was eroded, and increasing numbers of Coloureds were forced towards urban centres, their needs and expectations of their churches changed. In the next phase of proleterianisation, Coloureds had a greater need for educational facilities, the rudimentary provision of social welfare facilities, and, possibly of greatest importance, the need for a

"sense of place", and of "belonging", in what was to be a particularly harsh new urban environment.

"THE STRENGTH TO BETTER OURSELVES": EBENEZER AND THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION FACILITIES FOR COLOUREDS ON THE REEF

Ebenezer's rapid success in Johannesburg was, like that of the LMS in the Cape, rooted in the provision of material resources which other institutions, including the state, were not prepared to provide. The first and most "material" reason for Ebenezer's popularity lay in its skillful exploitation of the lack of educational facilities for Coloureds in the ZAR. In fact, the Boer government built no schools for Coloureds at all.(28) The Anglican church first attempted to provide some education for Coloureds and Africans on the Rand; by 1890 five Anglican schools which accepted some black candidates had been established in Johannesburg. The 1896 census recorded that Johannesburg had seven "black" private schools which accepted Coloureds, and four "white" private schools which accepted a small number of Coloureds.(29) For the 4000 people designated "mixed and other", or "Malays" in the 1896 census, and for the thousands more Coloureds and "Malays" gathering in small towns on the rapidly developing Reef, these facilities were completely inadequate.(30)

The Reverend Phillips arrived in Johannesburg in 1896, and immediately began to tackle the need for educational facilities among his prospective Coloured flock. Receiving no state subsidies, despite his repeated pleadings, Phillips nonetheless established a school in the first months of his ministry. A history of Coloured education the Rand asserts "it was ... the Congregational Union that devoted its energies almost exclusively during the nineties to the education and evangelisation of the Eurafrican or Coloured people of the Witwatersrand."(31)

After the South African war, Phillips cultivated an innovative arrangement with the Milner administration, and with later governments, through which the Congregational Church would build church structures and then hire them to the government for educational purposes. A Church elder recalled the arrangement:

> "Wherever there was a Coloured group or community, the first thing he [Rev Phillips] did was established a school, so the children at least could have schooling. Once the building was erected, and in use, it become a church. Or rather first the church, and then the school. Most of the men were working on the mines as unskilled workers, and when there was fair gathering of people working on the mines, and a certain number of children, he initiated this idea of building a school. This went on for many years."(32)

When asked about the appeal of the church, Mr Noah, a long-time Ebenezer deacon, recalled similar same information without hesitation:

> "There was one angle of getting people. Through the Congregational church their children could at least have a better

future. That was Phillips ministry. It afforded them [Coloured people] the strength to be able to better themselves... We were thoroughly neglected, everything we got we had to fight for tooth and nail."(33)

Mr Peterson, an Anglican, put it less charitably, but as forcefully:

"I'm loath to say it, they used to run a sort of a racket in these small places, dorps like Barberton, Potchefstroom and Klerksdorp. You name it, their church building was also a school building. All these dorpies had a small Coloured population, and the government of the day didn't bother to build schools... That is one of the reasons why they became popular. Maybe that was the main reason."(34)

There is little doubt that the educational endeavours of Charles Phillips was a major part of the church's appeal. But, as importantly, the policy of hiring churches to the government for use as schools provided Ebenezer with funds for expansion that, in other circumstances, only much larger denominations might have had access to. The utility of this arrangement was clear to writers on Coloured educational history, and to the historians of the Congregational Church. Behr asserted that "with the money obtained as rent and with donations from interested Europeans, he [Phillips] had more churches built, which in turn became schools too".(35) A Congregational history recalled: "Where ever a group of Coloured people was found there a church and school were planned. Money was found by the many contributions of the people, and from the rent paid when the building was used for a Government school."(36) By 1903 there were five Ebenezer schools with an attendance of about 500 scholars. By 1906 Phillips had established seven schools which were hired to the government - and he had seen adult church membership rise from 26 to 600. Opening approximately one school per year for the next two decades, Phillips oversaw the establishment of 25 fully-fledged schools for Coloureds across the Reef by the early 1930s. During this period, the number of Coloureds in Johannesburg alone increased by 188%, to stand at approximately 20 000 people by the mid-1930s.(37) Reef-wide adult membership of the Ebenezer Congregational Church grew to over 5000 in the same period and Ebenezer's rate of growth far outstripped that of any other denomination on the Witwatersrand.(38)

The Coloured elite in Cape Town, and in Johannesburg, had no doubts about the importance of education. The very first campaigns of the African Political (initially People's) Organisation (APO) centred around demands for an equal and non-segregated education. Lewis has argued that "for the Coloured elite, equal access to education was an issue of central importance. Not only did education open the door to skilled professional and white-collar occupations, but it brought with it, they believed, the "civilised" status which Cape liberal theory held to be the prerequisite for equal rights with whites".(39) In the early years of this century, the reconstruction government repeatedly assured the Coloured elite in the Transvaal that if they could "impress" the whites of the Transvaal with their

levels of "civilisation", they could win the municipal franchise. Partly because of this, the Coloured elite in Johannesburg fastidiously pursued all options to educate their children.(40) Education was thus a highly desirable commodity offered by no other organisation save Ebenezer. By providing for this deeply-felt need, Ebenezer created a sound basis for its enduring popularity.

"A DEMOCRATIC SORT OF CHURCH": PARTICIPATION, SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE EBENEZER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

The church made no denominational demands on parents - Coloureds from any religious background, including Muslim "Malays", could send their children to Ebenezer organised schools.(41) But the provision of educational facilities was only part of Ebenezer's rapid growth. Of equally great significance, given the oppressive context in which the church was founded, was the participatory emphasis of Congregationalism. This emphasis set the church apart from many European churches, and struck a deeply resonant chord among Coloureds in Johannesburg.

A prominent (white) CUSA theologian explained how those of Congregationalist persuasion saw the differences between their theology and that of other denominations:

> "There remain two great Churches in Christendom - the sacerdotal and the non-sacerdotal; those who believe that a fellow man, concerning a man's sins, may say 'I absolve thee'; and those who shrink in abhorrence from such a notion...". (42)

Congregationalism had its roots in the Reformation and in the radical traditions of Luther and Calvin which stressed the power of the Holy Spirit to speak directly to believers without the intercession of the priests or other ordained intermediaries. But the greater emphasis on individual salvation and on the individual's "direct communion with God" did not, according to the reformers, negate the need to gather worshippers into some kind of organisation. The reform tradition was deeply divided as to the most appropriate form of church structure. The "democratic" and locally autonomous nature of each of the Congregational churches in South Africa reflected a less authoritarian strand of reform theology. The NGK, on the other hand, was much more rigidly organised, with far greater emphasis on centralised structures and the authority of the church. A congregationalist theologian argued: "there are two basic principles in Congregationalism: the independence of the local church... and the interdependence of all local churches which is expressed though their denominational alliance."(43) Because of this rather loose alliance, the Congregational Union of South Africa (CUSA), the co-ordinating structure of Congregationalism in South Africa, did very little to interfere in local church matters.

In a context where few areas of social life created possibilities for upward mobility, this dual structure was to become a significant part of the appeal of the Congregational Church for Coloureds. Coloureds could advance in the Ebenezer church, and they could aspire to be called to serve in the structures of CUSA.(44) Besides

these opportunities for advancement in the church, Ebenezer itself encouraged members to participate in every aspects of church life.(45) Mr Weimers, an informant with an history of activism in Congregationalist church that stretches back 52 years, argued:

> "Well we are a democratic sort of a church, we are not used to being dictated to. The Congregation always has a last say in any church matter, whereas with the Catholics they [the congregation] are told, you talk down to them. In Congregational Church you had to talk with them. You could give your opinion and if it was the best opinion, it was accepted."(46)

Great faith was placed in the abilities of adherents. From the start of the LMS's work in South Africa, the society had encouraged converts to go out and preach on behalf of the church. In the latter half of the 19th century, Coloureds ran many congregational churches in the Eastern Cape churches with little outside support. Fundamental to the functioning of these churches was "the presence of bands of Deacons, for the most part elderly men of good character, ready to do their part in preaching and to guide the Church Meeting to wise decisions".(47) Ebenezer continued this tradition of self-supporting activities. Ordinary members participated in the church by becoming "lay preachers", or deacons, or senior deacons, or, with some training, formally accredited "evangelists". Mr Noah recalled:

> "We don't stop anybody from wanting to live the spirit, and as he lives the spirit we allow him to become a Deacon, we allow him to preach from the pulpit, we allow him to enforce his will on the choir, and so on. You want to express yourself, you want to come out into the open with what the Lord has granted you...".(48)

Bobby Weimers, a "life-deacon", recalled:

> "Most of these men [in the early church] were semi-literate or illiterate. But they got involved in the church and became lay preachers. You had to prove yourself by serving on a committee of a church for three years, and then you got proposed to be accepted as a Deacon. If you lived a honest life, and people respected you, you became a deacon."(49)

Mrs Wagner, born in 1896, answered a question about how individuals moved through the ranks of the Congregational Church as follows:

> "My father was a deacon. It was [based on] your qualities in knowing your bible, and if they could depend on you to do the work. There was no training. Those that could read, did. They have a church council meeting, and your name goes onto the ballot sheet, and the congregation votes as to who they would want for the church. It is then drawn by ballot."(50)

A significant number of Coloured men did become deacons in the first 30 years of this century. An informant recalled that large outstations could have as many as a dozen deacons, while smaller ones

would have had between three and five deacons.(51) By the mid-1930s the official number of deacons and lay preachers within Ebenezer's ranks was 130.(52) Deacons were not paid: the prestige of their positions, and the spiritual opportunities it gave those committed to evangelism, was held to be reward, and honour, enough. Many of these men were "leaders" in their respective communities, who, having found possibly the most accessible source of social prestige and status available to Coloureds in the oppressive pre-segregationist era, presumably "brought" their constituencies with them. The use of lay preachers and deacons also increased the labour power that the church could draw on, a factor which further compensated for the church's lack of denominational support. As one informant recalled:

> "The Catholics and the Methodists, I don't think they entertained the idea of lay preachers. We had no alternative to encourage lay preaching, for the simple reason that [the Reverent Charles] Phillips and [the Reverent] Rogers [from 1912] were the only two ministers serving at that time, and our church was spread out along the whole Reef. We had 42 outstations. These two ministers couldn't cope, and they had to resort to lay preaching."(53)

The church drew widely on its members in this regard. A lack of formal education or even literacy was no obstacle to men and women playing an important role in the life of the Ebenezer church. An informant recalled:

> "My father-in-law was a big congregationalist. Funny enough he had no schooling. We used to do the reading for him and he would then practise it. He memorised everything. He would take the stand, say the hymn he wanted, and then he started, without a note or anything. You were never pushed back to the corner; they'd never say you're not learned or anything like that. Oh no, you had to take your stand and do the work."(54)

Lay preaching, as with the provision of educational facilities, extended the reach of the church far beyond what would have otherwise been possible. Lay preachers and deacons were also central to fund-raising and to the financing of Ebenezer's operation. Although monies collected in outstation services were used partly for local purposes, a significant proportion of the collections went to the central church's coffers. From this central pool, the two white ministers were paid, and church expansion was funded. Being a "democratic sort of church" was thus an integral part of the church's appeal, and of its gathering of resources from the community it served, which in turn provided a basis for its rapid expansion in the first decades of this century.

"IN OUR JOYS AND IN OUR SORROWS": THE INTIMATE BASIS OF COMMUNITY

Ebenezer's outreach and sustained growth was based as much on its highly developed pastoral care, as on any other attraction of the church. Deacons were expected to take a deep personal interest in individual adherents, a practise which was rooted in frequent house visits. The church was not only present in almost all significant times of their adherents' lives, but actively shaped the experience of these events, giving meaning to tragedy and achievement alike. Although most Christian denominations provided comfort and support in time of illness and death, and encouraged adherents to marry and raise families within the church, Ebenezer's two white ministers and its legion of deacons took intervention into the personal and domestic domain significantly further. In the first instance the church built up an active tradition of huis besoek (pastoral visiting), in a way which appears to have been more thorough-going than that of NGK, who are more usually associated with this practise. Ebenezer deacons were expected to visit every single member in their areas on at least a weekly basis. The ill and infirm would receive even more frequent visits. Mr Noah affirmed:

> "They [Ebenezer] were charismatic in this respect - they weren't clapping hands and playing music - but they were vigilant, they were going around from house to house, on house visitation. Not only the ministers, [but also] the old men, they were in and out of the houses all around. In Sophiatown, Kliptown all along the Reef. They were charismatic in the sense that they made contact with the people." (55)

Every Ebenezer member who was interviewed recalled - often without prompting - that "house visitation" was a primary feature of this church, when compared to the other denominations operating in Coloured areas. Most also recalled, within minutes of starting an interview, the extraordinary rapport that most deacons, and the two white ministers, appear to have built up with their congregations. Every interviewee volunteered that Phillips, in particular, knew both their own names and the names of all the children in their neighbourhood. Mrs Solomon remembered: "We had wonderful ministers, the Reverend CharlesPhillips, and the Reverend Rodgers - they didn't knock at our door, they just came straight in. You know they knew every child by name...". (56) Mr Noah recalled:

> "When they [Phillips and Rodgers] left, you could feel some thing was missing. One of the greatest things those men did was to come to us. They walked to us, Bosmont, Doornfontein, anywhere. They weren't concerned with transport. When they got to there, they knew the people's names. They knew the people by name! They were there in our joys and our sorrows." (57)

Phillips and Rodgers appear to have had prodigious memories; one member suggested that it wasn't hard for them to remember all the names because there was only "a few thousand" members of the Church at that time! Another informant succinctly recalled: "Rodgers and Phillips had a grip on our people, a lot of appeal, because of the

work they did, and the apparent influence they had. They become one with the people."(58)

It is difficult to assess the uniqueness of the relationship between congregation and minister largely because the experiences of other churches are not drawn upon in this study, and because many of those interviewed were born into the Ebenezer church and thus had little to compare it to. But it is clear that the church and its representatives were perceived to be genuinely concerned about Ebenezer members, and that this caring environment, which contrasted dramatically with the privations of social life more generally, was a central part of the church's appeal.

EBENEZER IN THE ORGANISATION OF A COLOURED COMMUNITY

It was from this emphasis on Christian compassion that the church drew Coloureds into more formal involvement in the local "churches" or outstations of Ebenezer. The "grassroots" functioning of deacons was complemented by other important church practices and structures. Ebenezer ensured that each "church" or outstation had a women's prayer group, a Wednesday evening "Seekers class" for adolescents, Sunday school for younger children on Sundays, and both junior and adult choirs. These structures of the church created a powerful basis for contact and communication between geographically distance groups of Coloureds on the Reef.

The most pervasive organisational structure of the church appears to have been the weekly women prayer meetings. As in the case of the African women's manyanos, examined in detail by Gaitskell, the wives of the white male missionaries, in this case Mrs Miriam Phillips and Mrs Mary Rodgers, were central to organising these prayer groups. Prayer meetings are mentioned, in official church reports, for the first time in 1916, and were held to be "well maintained."(59) Groups were steadily established in the 1920s, and by the early 1930s, more than thirty prayer groups had been established across the Reef.

The importance of these women's prayer groups can be described only superficially: a more detailed analysis of their role and function, and the meanings they provided for their participants is still under preparation. All the groups met at the same time, at three o'clock every Monday afternoon, and interviewees recall with enthusiasm how Coloured women would disappear from the streets of various Coloured suburbs at this time, right across the reef.(60) Mrs Wagner, a member of an Ebenezer women's prayer group since the First World War, recalled:

> "Monday was the women's prayer meeting, every Monday from three to four. You had to sacrifice to get there. In those years there were no factories, so most of the women were home... Monday was, well, washing day. So after washing they would go to their prayer meeting and then after the prayer meeting they would start with the ironing."(61)

Her daughter, Mrs Bartman, recalled that, in the 1930s, this pattern had still not been much altered by industrialisation:

> "All the churches met at Monday at 3.00 pm. It was in the constitution. You wouldn't find anyone out at that time if you know they were a congregationalist. It was something that had to be, you know". (62)

Other interviewees confirmed that the Monday afternoon prayer meetings were popular among women whose main - or almost exclusive - economic activity was the taking in washing from surrounding white suburbs, an activity explored in detail elsewhere. (63)

The main effect of these prayer meetings was to create a deep bond between members. Women members were assured that if they fell ill they would be not only earnestly prayed for, but also visited by some of the women from their group immediately after the prayer meeting. Mrs Noah, active in prayer meetings from a young age, recalled something of the function of these groups:

> "We started with an opening prayer, then perhaps a hymn, then bible reading, a couple of prayers for people. Sometimes people felt they wanted to say something and so they did... Then we would go out and visit the needy." (64)

Although these Monday afternoon meetings, as described by interviewees, appear to have been rather muted and rather brief when compared to cathartic outpourings of African women's maryanos, these prayer meetings did provide opportunities for Coloured women to express themselves, to organise collectively as women and to prepare for advancement within the church ranks. In the oppressive social climate of the 1920s and 1930s, no other structures provided such opportunities. For Mrs Solomon, who joined the prayer groups in the 1920s, there was no doubt that the prayer meetings were the highlight of a week filled with 16 hours of daily washing:

> "It was wonderful, its very uplifting. I find I liked to work with other women. You so looked forward to it." (65)

These women's structures were, with the choirs and youth groups, the basis of Ebenezer's organisation. But Ebenezer gathered together these local community structures into larger structures and, by so doing, dramatically increased the organisational presence of the church in the lives of the Coloured population on the Reef. The basis of this larger-scale organisation, for the mass of membership at least, was the monthly communion. On the first Sunday of each month a communion service was held in either the main Ebenezer church in Main street, Johannesburg, or in the Johannesburg City Hall. By the 1930s, up 3000 people would attend this service, and numbers appear to have been impressive for decades before this. The role of this monthly "Nagmaal" in giving coherence to an otherwise atomised group, spread out across the Reef, cannot be underestimated. In no other area of life was there any regional interface between the mass of Coloureds from different areas, with the possible exception of organised sporting activities. Ebenezer's monthly

communions became, according one church organiser "the hub of excitement" for Coloured people on the Reef:

> "Communion was a big thing - it was even bigger than these Dutch people had when they came to Pretoria square. We had a preparation service, the Nagmaal starts at three, the prep starts at two. In that preparation they saw to the youth, saw to the confirmants, saw to choir, saw to the Deacons. People came from all around: Veeringing, Benoni, even Pretoria, Randfontein... The church was the uniting force...". (66)

Others recall with equal conviction the centrality of the communion service to any feelings of "being Coloured" on the Reef. Mr Weimers asserted:

> "People on the whole were unaware of political associations. In fact they were very subdued, because of the fact they didn't have much voice or say in any particular matter. Ebenezer was regarded as the church... once a month all the church members used to go the church, from the whole of the Reef. The church was packed to capacity every month. We called it the monthly nagmaal or communion where all the ministers [ie deacons, lay preachers etc] were under obligation to be there...". (67)

The emotional content of the Eucharist in Christian faith gave these occasions an almost cathartic significance in the lives of many adherents. A deep bond was created between members, which, although experienced as a religious sentiment (the ramifications of which are not explored in this paper), also had profound social implications. An elderly member remembered: "everybody meets everybody. It was wonderful. All the churches [had their] deacons there, sometimes five, sometimes six, sometimes four. All the people. It was so wonderful." (68) As is explored elsewhere, and by others, Coloureds developed a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group largely through a process of exclusion and discrimination. Here was a "positive" force which yoked together Coloureds from across the Witwatersrand and encouraged a sense of strength and communality. These meetings, which took place every month and every year since 1896, (with a short break during the South African war) could only have provided a significant spur to Coloured group identity.

The Ebenezer Congregational Church built on these monthly mass communions with more elaborate and detailed structures which regularly fused together elected representatives of far-removed Coloured groups. Firstly all the women's groups met collectively four times a year. The women's structure was entitled to choose representatives for the Ebenezer church board, and an organisation called the "Women's Federation of South Africa", a coordinating structure for all CUSA local women's organisation started by the Congregational union in 1922. Although this Federation appears to have focussed a great deal of its energy on white women members, the Federation noted, a year after their inception, that "women in our Coloured and Native churches are being drawn together in fellowship", a trend

which increased in next two decades.(69)

Another significant macro-structure of the Ebenezer church was the monthly meetings that all deacons and lay preachers were required to attend. In these meeting the leadership of thirty different Coloured areas, in the 1920s, and of forty communities by the mid-1930s, would meet together to discuss church policy and, it appears, matters of wider social and political concern. Mr Weimers recalled:

> "We used to meet once a month as the 'joint church council' from all the various churches. We had to send reps from each church. We would report on 'home affairs' and we were told what would happen next - and we had to carry news back to the church and implement [that which] we were told to do. We had a fair gathering - 200 to 300 people. The meeting would start at six [pm on Sunday evenings] and go sometimes to one in the morning, despite the fact that people had to travel back to Potchefstroom, to Klerksdorp and so on."(70)

Although no minutes of these meetings appear to have survived - as with much of Ebenezer's archives and records - there can be little doubt that this forum was the foremost Coloured "political" structure operating on the Rand in the 1920s and 1930s.(71)

A final significant factor in Ebenezer's creating of a greater sense of community among Coloureds, was the church's policy of sending deacons to do duty in areas far from their home. This was done as part of a conscious desire to bind the church together across the Reef. A member recalled:

> "We all knew the Deacons on the Reef. It was a close bond in the church. I went out with my father [who was a deacon]. I remember going to Crown mines, Aurora west, Roodeport, all over. He was mostly on the West Rand... The list was issued monthly, the 'preachers plan'. Being a youngster I knew the prominent families on the Reef, because I would read these names on the list...".(72)

Ebenezer was the only real force in Coloured social life in Witwatersrand of the 1920s and 1930s. Coloured political organisation in the Transvaal was moribund and elitist, and the arcane fraternal lodges, although more active, were even more elitist.(73) Ebenezer was the only real channel for getting to "know the names" of both the "prominent" and the ordinary members of the Coloured population of the Reef in this period. As such, the church played an important role in development the sense of "being Coloured" in the wider Johannesburg and Reef area, and of "being part of" a developing Coloured community.

CONCLUSION

The Ebenezer Congregational Church played a number of important roles in the lives of Coloureds in Johannesburg and on the Witwatersrand. Within a general context of Christian faith, Ebenezer provided an avenue for social mobility that few other institutions could match, as well as unparalleled access to education. Ebenezer brought together a dispersed and often demoralised group, which was spread out throughout Johannesburg and the Reef, and allowed them to create rudimentary weapons of community protection. The church's schools, self-help schemes, women's prayer groups, deacons' meetings, and discreet but consistent lobbying for social resources from the state, were essential parts of the defensive culture that Coloureds developed in this period. The Ebenezer Congregational Church reached into every facet of Coloured life and stressed the value of "knowing all the names". This emphasis on human interaction, and on building an atmosphere of compassion and outreach, provided the "social cement" of whatever community Coloureds in the Johannesburg area were able to establish in the inter-war years.(74)

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(1) I would like to thank Philip Bonner and Deborah James for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.

(2) Following recent academic convention, the arbitrary classification "Coloured" is taken to refer to grouping of people often described in other societies as "mulatto", "mixed", or "half-caste". From the 1890s this name was legislatively imposed on a number of groups, who, for a variety of reasons, adopted the term, and came to use it in self-description. Many of those so classified, especially since 1948, have rejected the term "Coloured", and race-classification system on which it is based. Nonetheless the use of parentheses or the prefix "so-called", to indicate objection to the term "Coloured", is avoided in recent academic literature, and in this paper.

(3) G.F. Ferguson, CUSA: The story of the Churches of the Congregational Union of South Africa, p 205.

(4) Interview with Mr B. Weimers, June 1990. In both the 1921 and 1936 Census, Ebenezer was found to be the third largest urban congregation in the Transvaal, after the Anglicans and the Methodists. In many towns on the Witwatersrand, such as Krugersdorp and Roodepoort, Ebenezer was the largest Coloured denomination. These figures are taken from the 1936 census and show denominational membership in the urban areas of the Transvaal, as well as total Transvaal membership of the major denominations.

	Total Transvaal urban membership		Total Transvaal membership	
Anglican	9459		11 755	
Methodist		5539		7619
Congregational	5046		5664	
NGK		4792		7069
Lutheran	3653		3034	
Roman Catholic		2658		3179

Figures from Sixth Census of the population of the Union of South Africa, 5th May 1936, Vol VI, Religions, (UG No. 28, 1941)

(5) I take "communities" to be both partly "imagined", to use Benedict Anderson's evocative phrase, and partly rooted in the shared experience, by a group of people, of a set of common situations and, most usually, privations. This paper attempts to deal with one aspect of community formation and must be located in the context of a wide vary of other factors, some of which I explore elsewhere. see B. Bozzoli, "Class, Community and Ideology in the Evolution of South African Society", in B. Bozzoli (Ed) Class Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives Raven Press, Johannesburg, 1987, for a cogent summary of recent debates over the concept of community, and of issues related to this conceptual category.

(6) This paper is a summary and condensation of Chapter Six of my thesis, "Class, Culture and Segregation: Johannesburg's Coloured Community, 1918 - 1939", University of the Witwatersrand, forthcoming, 1992.

(7) Interview with Mr B. Weimers, June 1990.

(8) Very little is known about the areas of origin, motivation, or gender ratios of Coloureds who migrated to the Reef. For a detailed discussion of the available evidence see my papers: **"The Coloured community in Johannesburg 1910-1936, with particular reference to the Malay Location and surrounding areas"**, University of the Witwatersrand History Masters group seminar paper, June 1989, and, for a discussion of the "first wave" of Coloured migration, **"The Roots of a community: Coloureds in Johannesburg before the South African War"**, Chapter Two of my forthcoming thesis.

(9) Mr J.W. Ontong's "Reminiscences of Johannesburg", Van der Ross Collection, Document 41, Library of the University of Cape Town, p. 1, 2.

(10) Interview with Mr B Weimers, June 1990.

(11) As Mr Ontong recalled:

> "In 1890 a few Coloured families who were non-conformist met with a view to establishing a place of worship. Then we (a group of DRC members) met and decided to approach the non-conformists... with a request that an independent branch be established for Coloured people."

Mr J.W. Ontong's "Reminiscences of Johannesburg", Van der Ross collection, op cit, Document 41, p. 2.

(12) G.S Ferguson, Cusa, p. 205.

(13) The LMS gave their Coloureds congregations a considerable degree of independence. After the defeat of the Kat River rebellion, and after decades of sustained pressure to "free" Coloured labour on mission stations, the LMS began to encourage its missions to be entirely independent. See T. Kirk, "The Cape Economy and the expropriation of the Kat River Settlement 1846-53" in S. Marks and A.

Atmore, Economy and society in pre-industrial South Africa, p. 243.

(14) The fist constitution of CUSA stated, as the second of the denomination's two "fundamental principles": "the union recognises the right and duty of every individual church to manage its own affairs and that, as a rule, this duty cannot, with advantage to the church, be delegated." see CUSA Yearbook 1892, Constitution of CUSA, p. 2, 3. See also J. Seales, Mission Stations and the Coloured communities of the Eastern Cape 1800-1852, (AA Balkeme Cape Town 1975), p. 155.

(15) The origins of the name Ebenezer are unclear, and widely conflicting meanings are ascribed to this name. In 1831 a mission station was established by the Rhenish mission at the Olifant's river in the Cape and called Ebenezer. (J.S. Marais The Cape Coloured People p. 249). In Congregational history it is recalled that a Bartholomew Ebenezer Anderson become minister of the Coloured congregation in the Dysseldorp Congregational mission station, located near Oudtshoorn, in 1844. (D.R. Briggs and J. Wing The Harvest and the Hope p. 44). Either of these two sources might suggest the origins of the name chosen for the Coloured church on the Reef, or, at least, might indicated the availability of this term for use by the Coloured community.

(16) Reminiscences of Mr J.W.. Ontong, Van der Ross Collection Document 41, p. 2.

(17) Cusa, Yearbook, 1895, p. 12.

(18) Through this transfer, the link between the eastern Cape and the Ebenezer Congregational Church was strengthened, and this laid some basis for the growth of this independent church. For those Coloureds who came to the Witwatersrand for the eastern Cape, Ebenezer was often the denomination of choice. But, as this paper explores, this regional connection appears to have been only a part, and possibly only a small part, of the church's overall appeal to Coloureds on the Reef.

(19) I have dealt with the usefulness of term "constituent group" (as used by Trapido) and of other terms, in detail elsewhere. See S. Trapido "The friends of the natives' (op cit.) and S. Newton-King, "The Labour market of the Cape Colony, 1807-28" in S. Marks and A. Atmore (Eds), Economy and Society in pre-industrial South Africa p.200, (note 4) in which the semiotics of the term "Hottentot", and other terms is explored. See also the paper referred to in footnote eight.

(20) J.S Marais, The Cape Coloured People, p 144.

(21) These figures are taken from G.S Ferguson, CUSA, p. 23.

(22) The effects of this provision of land to Coloureds was the basis of a fractious historiographical debate in the 1920s and 1930s. This debate revolved largely around questions about whether the LMS had "spoiled" the emerging Coloured groups by providing them with limited protection from absorption into white society, and for

fighting for measures such as Ordinance 50 of 1828. These debates obscured the more important role of missionaries among these groups in the 19th century; the very act of "protecting" Coloureds on mission stations promoted the development of a common identity among the defuse and disconnected "Coloured" groups that missionaries sought to represent. See G.M. Theal's History of South Africa; W.M. MacMillan, The Cape Colour Question: A historical survey, (Faber, London 1927) and J.S Marais, The Cape Coloured People, (Witwatersrand University Press 1939).

(23) D.R. Briggs and J. Wing, The Harvest and the Hope, p 36.

(24) Ibid.

(25) Three recent monographs on Coloured history and politics in South Africa deal sparingly with the role of religion in the creation of a Coloured identity. Given the especially high levels of religious adherence among the Coloured group, and the centrality of religion to the way in which Coloureds appear to have seen themselves, the omission of more detailed analysis of Coloured religiosity undermines the comprehensiveness of these works. See I. Goldin, Making Race, The politics and Economics of Coloured identity in South Africa (Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town, 1987); G. Lewis, Between the wire and the wall: A history of South African 'Coloured' politics, (David Philip, Cape Town, 1987); and R.E. van der Ross, The rise and decline of Apartheid: a study of political movements among the Coloured people of South Africa 1880-1985, (Tafelberg, Cape Town 1986).

(26) The category "mixed and others" excluded both "Malays" and "Bushmen" who were enumerated separately. "Bushmen", despite missionary efforts remained one of the least devout communities: some 22 000 of a total of 50 000 people so defined, claimed to have no religion as late as 1891. Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope Government printers Cape Town 1892, pp 114, 115, 124, 125.

(27) At Graaff-Reinet two Congregational Churches, one for Coloureds and one for the "Basuto", had a combined membership of 650, as well as four Sunday schools with over 200 scholars. The Coloured church at Grahamstown had 376 members and a regular attendance of over 800 members. The Coloured Congregational Church in Port Elizabeth attracted a regular attendance of over 500 Coloureds members each week. See J. Seales, Mission Stations and the Coloured communities of the Eastern Cape 1800-1852, and CJ Kriel, Die Geskiedenis van die Nederduistse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika 1881-1956, (Paarlse Drukkers 1963). This rough division of Coloured religious preference between DRC and Anglican in the Western Cape, and Congregationalism in the Eastern Cape, gives some clues as to the origins and backgrounds of Johannesburg's Coloured community.

(28) A.L. Behr, "Three centuries of Coloured education; Historical and comparative studies of the education of the Coloured people in the Cape and the Transvaal 1652-1952", (PhD University of Potchefstroom 1952).

(29) Johannesburg Health Committee, Report of the Director of the Census, 1896, (ZAR 151) p. 29.

(30) Population figures for the Coloured population of smaller Reef towns, especially before 1921, are very difficult to find. From a variety of non-census figures, it is apparent that some sizable Coloured communities were established on both the west and east Rands by the time of the South African war. See my paper, **"The Roots of a community: Coloureds in Johannesburg before the South African war"**, Chapter Two of my forthcoming thesis.

(31) A.L. Behr, "Three centuries of Coloured education", p. 279.

(32) Interview with Mr Bobby Weimers, June 1990.

(33) Interview with Mr Noah, June 1990.

(34) Interview with Mr Peterson, first interview, February 1988.

(35) A.L. Behr, "Three centuries of Coloured education", p. 281. A number of informants suggest that this arrangement had the negative side-effect of encouraging the government not provide it own facilities for Coloureds. Mr Peterson suggests that for the government it was "so easy to rent the Congregational Church, [and provide] one teacher, two teacher", that they neglected to provide any other alternatives for Coloureds. Mr Charles, a Coloured school teacher, recalled "Churches were used for our schools, until later on the Teachers' Association objected and said they were encouraging the authorities not to build schools." (Interview with Mr Charles, Bosmont, July 1990).

(36) G.S. Ferguson, Cusa, p. 206.

(37) The Report of the Wilcocks Commission, p. 12. The number of Coloureds in Johannesburg increased by 86% between 1921 and 1936, by the far the highest increase for any ethnic group. Although these figures must be regarded with some caution, based as they are on census figures, they do indicate a trend of rapid Coloured urbanisation in this period, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. This trend finds some corroboration in evidence from other sources. See my paper, "Working-class gambling and the creation of community in Johannesburg's Coloured areas between the two World Wars", presented to the Canadian Association of African Studies conference, Toronto, May 1991.

(38) Figures from assorted year books of Cusa , and from G.S Ferguson CUSA. The Congregational Church grew by 60% between the 1921 and 1936 census, more than double the rate of NG Kerk, and substantially more than the 2.3% rate of the Anglican church. Only the Catholic church grew at a rate faster than Ebenezer, and that was from a very much lower base. See the 1936 Census, Vol VI, p. 91.

(39) G. Lewis, Between the wire and the Wall, p 30.

(40) This sentiment was repeatedly emphasised by Milner is his first address to Coloureds in Johannesburg in 1903, and by many other

officials thereafter. See, transcript of Milner's speech to an assembly of 600 Coloureds in the Ebenezer Congregational Church in Burgersdorp, July 1903, The Star, July 17 1903.

(41) Interview with Mr Noah, first interview, July 1990.

(42) Rev John McKenzie, CUSA yearbook 1893, p. 23.

(43) Statement by Rev. D.R. Briggs to the Assembly of United Congregational Church of Southern Africa in 1980, in J. Wing (Ed), Jesus is Lord in Church and World, p. 10.

(44) This relatively egalitarian spirit appears to have been an important part of the Church's appeal. Although the first Coloured minister of the Ebenezer was only ordained in the early 1940s, and the first Coloured chairman of CUSA, the Rev C.Z. Hendrickse, only elected in 1946, CUSA did have Coloured and African Moderators among its seven person Church Council from the early part of this century. S. Patterson, Colour and Culture in South Africa, p. 135.

(45) The Ebenezer Congregational Church was broken up in the 1970s amid heated and often acrimonious controversy between those who stressed the autonomy of each individual Ebenezer church and those who wished Ebenezer to remain a sub-section of the Congregational Union. All Ebenezer churches are today completely independent and relate directly to the structures of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA), the coordinating structure of congregationalism since the late 1960s.

(46) Interview with Mr Bobby Weimers, Bosmont June 1990.

(47) G.S. Ferguson, CUSA, p. 33.

(48) Interview with Mr Noah, June 1990.

(49) Interview with Mr B Weimers, June 1990.

(50) Interview with Mrs Wagner, June 1990.

(51) Interview with Mr B Weimers July 1990.

(52) CUSA year book, 1935.

(53) Interview with Mr B Weimers, June 1990.

(54) Interview with Mrs Mooi, July 1990.

(55) Interview with Mr Noah, first interview, June 1990.

(56) Interview with Mrs. Mabel Solomon July 1990.

(57) Interview with Mr Noah, first interview, July 1990.

(58) Interview with Mr Charles, (together with Mr Noah), July 1990.

(59) CUSA yearbook , 1916.

(60) Interview with Mrs Bartman and Mrs Wagner, July 1990.

(61) Interview with Mrs Bartman and Mrs Wagner, July 1990.

(62) Interview with Mrs Bartman, July 1990.

(63) For a detailed account of laundry work, and Coloured women's role in family-income enhancement, see Chapter four of my forthcoming thesis, op cit.

(64) Interview with Mrs Noah, July 1990.

(65) Interview with Mrs Solomon, July 1990. A further sense of "belonging" to these prayer groups was created and emphasised by the Ebenezer church's adoption of a uniform for the members of the prayer groups. These uniforms were sometimes worn to Monday afternoon meetings but were more usually reserved for formal occasions such as memorial services. This echoes the widespread practice among Coloureds in Johannesburg for expressions of organisational identity through uniforms, which I examine elsewhere.

(66) Interview with Mr Noah, first interview, July 1990.

(67) Interview with Mr B Weimers, July 1990.

(68) Interview with Mrs Mooi, July 1990.

(69) CUSA Yearbook, yearbook for 1922. Although the Congregational Church was a deeply patriarchal structure, it was formally committed to both racial and sexual equality. In 1937 Emily Solomons was elected chair of CUSA, the first women to reach the highest office in CUSA. Her father, Edward Solomons, had been the Chairman of this same body in 1877. An active liberal, Solomons fought for Coloured and African franchise rights. Women deacons were active in CUSA, but no informants could recall this among Coloured adherents until after the Second World War. see D.R. Briggs, and J Wing, The Harvest and the Hope, p 292/3.

(70) Interview with Mr Weimers, July 1990.

(71) I am currently working on a paper entitled "Coloured politics on the Witwatersrand, 1902-1939", which examines the paucity of Coloured political activity on the Reef in this period.

(72) Interview with Mr Charles, interviewed together with Mr Noah, July 1990.

(73) Fraternal lodges are explored in my paper, "Becoming a somebody: Fraternal lodges among the Coloured middle class in Johannesburg in the 1920s and 1930s", History Workshop Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, February 1990.

(74) For a interesting exposition, and critique, of sociological theories which emphasis religion's role as "social cement", unifying and giving coherence to otherwise disparate groups, see the essay by K. Thompson, in K. Thompson, Beliefs and ideology, (Ellis Horwood Limited Chichester, 1986), pp. 30-65.