The Passing of Pastor Victor Vilakazi

Introduction

On a Monday came the sad news via Anneke Rabe:
"It's with sadness to announce the passing of Rev Vilakazi of the Lutheran Church in eThandukukhanya yesterday at the mission house. May we continue to pray for his family and the church, it's a sad moment for the church in Mkhondo." and my response to her:
"O Lord, this is incredibly sad. We mourn with his family and the Zulu people of Mkhondo and wider. How blessed we were to have briefly journeyed with Pastor Victor."
By Wednesday, I knew that I had to go and on Thursday I could write to Anneke:
"I will be on my way to Mkhondo tomorrow for Pastor Victor's funeral and will be staying with Irma and Kurt for two nights."
Looking back on the weekend of 17 August 2024, I can see it as a continuation of our prayer outreach to Mkhondo in March 2023 and the journey to Germany in September / October 2023. It is these impressions that I would like to share.

Preparation

Most of the preparation went into preparing a story - 'Faith of Our Fathers' journey from Mkhondo – combining the outreaches to Mkhondo and to Germany, because the one would not have happened without the other. Finally, just before leaving for Mkhondo, copies could be printed and put in envelopes for sharing. By then I was ready to call the story 'From Mkhondo to Germany – with Pastor Victor'.

What a blessing it turned out to stay with Kurt and Irma. When the Waze road helper on my phone finally said: "You have reached your destination", I had stopped on dirt road in front of corrugation gate leading to a small track into a pine forest with just a small board saying something like B20. Where to now? At that moment Kurt phoned and I just had to follow the path through the forest to their farm homestead. The two days with them and Irma's granny felt like a week of blessing – devotions, prayer and singing together and all the time digging deeper into the mission history of the area. Both her Granny Prigge's and Kurt Lammerding's ancestors had come on the Candace, sent by Louis Harms, missionary Prigge with the second journey.

On Saturday evening Irma could share with us a video she had been unable to share in Hermannsburg, because of time and technical constraints. It is only then that I learned of the challenging ministry Kurt and Irma have taken on. As descendants of the first missionaries to the Zulu people, they do not want this God purpose to be lost, despite waning interest in both the Zulu and the local German communities. Around the year 2000, Zulu people made it known that they did not want any more missionaries from Germany. This also impacted the mission fervour of the local German communities. It seemed as if Kurt and Irma were on their own with their various mission initiatives:

- Devotions on surrounding farms
- Training of Evangelists
- Tent evangelism
- Early Childhood Development (ECD)

Irma's participation in the 'Faith of our Fathers' journey to Germany last year has given them a fresh hope to continue. Their Braunschweig Church is supportive and has started to cooperate with Lüneburg Church, which has similar initiatives. One thing is certain – to keep the mission ministry alive and growing, will need a lot of prayer support.

The funeral

I had imagined that we would be going to a township church, but Pastor Victor's church turned out to be the Salem mission church in beautiful natural surroundings some 5 km off the road between Paulpietersburg and Mkhondo. If one carries on with the road to Mkhondo, one can however see the vast Mkhondo township coming closer. It is a beautiful church on a very large open property, which today also contains the Salem school. We found just about the last parking space among a multitude cars, busses and people.

Salem Mission Church near Mkhondo on 17.8.24

There was not much time to watch the last preparations outside and the last to arrive. We had just made it in time for 09h00 and when we were ushered in, the church was already packed and filled with brass band sound and singing.

From the programme, we could see that it was going to be a long service, with speaker after speaker from family, friends, neighbours, church, local churches fraternal, diocese and finally the sermon by the bishop. The singing between each item, accompanied by brass bands, was powerful. I could recognize a lot of Lutheran lithurgy and hymns, all in Zulu. When the coffin was slowly carried in, the brass bands led with 'Jesu, geh' voran' (Jesus go ahead). We started recognizing the order among all the anguish. When a speaker did not find his ending, there would be soft stirring in the church and ultimately the person would be led aside by one of the many robed men.

We learned that Pastor Victor was born in 1973, and died much too young at age 51. On the programme it said:

DEATH WE ARE NOT SCARED OF;
DEATH TO US IS VICTORY!!
~ VICTOR VILAKAZI

We learned that in 2004, Victor married Khanyisile ('she is shining') Nkosi, a respected teacher in Mkhondo. The memorial letter from wife and daughter was read by a friend to much exclamation of the women present, mostly in the uniform of the Lutheran prayer women.

The Prayer Women's League (PWL), or Abasizikazi in isiZulu, provides a platform for women to work and pray for the growth of God's kingdom amongst all people. They provide spiritual and material support to its members, as well as to the congregations and community as a whole. Weekly meetings are held in the congregations and homes are visited, especially to give support in times of personal crisis. Meetings on a parish, circuit, and diocesan level include Bible studies, praise and worship, and speeches and discussions on a broad range of social issues.	

Bishop Maragelo brought consolation with his message that our citizenship is not of this world and that we are all pilgrims on the way to heaven, a destination that Victor had reached.

The packed Salem Church, taken from the last row in one of the side arms

With all the dignitaries of the Lutheran Church of Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal around, we did not think that we would see the widow Vilakazi, let alone bring a personal word of consolation. However, as the procession moved to the nearby graveyard, we met an aunt who insisted that she would take us straight to Mrs. Vilakazi. And so God helped both Irma and me to give Mrs. Vilakazi a hug and express our love. I believe, that she recognized me from the visit I had been able to pay Victor in November (below), only a month after we had returned from Germany. It had been such a blessing to see him completely healthy with his beloved Khanyisile. He had phoned her every night from Germany. I pray that the little booklet 'From Mkhondo to Germany' will bring her and the whole family encouragement in years to come. Pastor Victor had indeed been the heart of the first 'Faith of our Fathers' outreach to Germany and had established a hope that Godly reconciliation between German and Zulu people was possible. May our brother Victor rest in peace!

'Faith of our Fathers' team in Hermannsburg (Sept. 23)

Back in Mkhondo with Victor and wife (Nov. 23)

Prayer

The 'Faith of our Fathers' vision came about, for Africans to take prophetic thanksgiving for the gospel, brought to our continent from Europe, back to Europe and thus bring a rediscovery of the God's purpose and healing in both Europe and Africa. Pastor Victor's response to the call and the impact it had both on our hosts and on himself became a clear confirmation of the vision. And so we pray:

* May Pastor Victor's family and his church find consolation and a wonderful fresh growth in the knowledge that Victor had been a pioneer of reconciliation between nations in response to God's call in this time;
* May Kurt and Irma, and others with the same heart, be encouraged that their mission ministry in the Mkhondo area is from God and will bear fruit in God's perfect time;
* May the Church in Mkhondo in all its worldly diversity (Salem, Wittenberg, Lüneburg, Braunschweig, Augsburg, Mkhondo …….) find the unity that Psalm 133 speaks of and a kingdom building purpose, to become a shining light for our whole nation South Africa;
* Pray that over time whole teams representing the Khoi, Xhosa, Zulu and Tshwana people of South Africa could wonderfully bring thanks for their gospel heritage to Germany and help grow the kingdom relationship.
* May it be heart-felt, persistent prayer that brings about each of these wonderful changes and may it make us aware again that nothing is impossible with God, our Father in Heaven.

Eberhard 23.8.24