


Ubufundisi bonyana womgquba: In memoriam of Vuyani Shadrack Vellem

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Dates:

Received: 29 July 2022
Accepted: 03 Sept. 2022
Published: 21 Dec. 2022

How to cite this article:

Buqa, W., 2022, 'Ubufundisi bonyana womgquba: In memoriam of Vuyani Shadrack Vellem', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(1), a7969. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7969>

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Vuyani Vellem was a distinguished scholar of black theology of liberation. A number of giants of black scholarship and theologians have written constructive tributes in recognition of his work, particularly in academia. He has rightly been lauded as an excellent academic, but very little has been said about his role as a churchman. Despite being an outstanding African theologian, Vellem's ministerial formation was hewed in the context of the black-conscious minister from the African Christian missionary church enterprise. He was a trailblazer, a voice of the voiceless within the church, in South African black communities, in ecumenical relations and globally. This article reflects on the crucial role of *yobufundisi bonyana womgquba* or *womthonnyama* [ministry of the son of the soil, land or earth], in which Vuyani Vellem relentlessly served the church until his untimely death at the age of 50 years on 04 December 2019. The article argues that Vellem unrelentingly loved and served the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) with distinction as its first black general secretary at a transitional epoch in the postapartheid era where the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa came into union with the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa in 1999 to form the current UPCSA.

Contribution: The scholarly contribution of this article adds value and significant tribute to the ministry of Vellem, his quest for justice and unshackling of the church. It seeks to espouse *ubufundisi bakhe* [his ministry] within the UPCSA, his perpetual calling in serving the needy and downtrodden. Moreover, the article contributes a *practica reflectere* of his spirituality, black consciousness and life identity with underprivileged black churches and communities.

Keywords: theology; ministry; liberation; church; *umgquba*; *umthonnyama*; spirituality; *ubufundisi*; *unyana*; Vuyani Vellem.

Encounter with Vuyani Vellem: A tribute!

I was shocked and at the same time surprised to hear a strange baritone voice on the other end of the telephone line in early January 2002 while on vacation in Cape Town. The voice said:

*Dlamini*¹ [clan name], how are you doing? I am Reverend Vuyani Vellem. I want to check up with you and confirm if you did receive a message that you should be moving from the University of Fort Hare to the University of Pretoria this year.

I was ecstatic to get a call from *umfundisi* [Reverend] Vellem, although he never mentioned how he got my contact details. I did not mind as I was astonished that he addressed me accurately and in humility *ngesiduko* or *isithakazelo*² [clan], which was typically Vellem's style of addressing black people by their clan names. I used to listen to my fellow students talking about the young black intellectual ministers and the prospective Vuyani Vellem in the leadership of the church. I yearned for a long time to meet this Vellem, who had called me that day, and took it as a remarkable and impressive signal in my life. I first met *umfundisi* Vellem in September 2003 at the funeral of the late Rev. Ntobeko Hudson Mabuda in the Eastern Cape at Mount Ayliff [*Emaxesibeni*]. My first impression of Vuyani was a true reflection of what the students shared with me; he was an interpreter of the preacher the Rt Rev. Dr Graham Duncan, the General Assembly Moderator of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) in 2003. I was officially introduced to Vellem by Dr Duncan as I was looking for a lift from the funeral to Pretoria, and I drove with him alone for eight hours.

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1. My clan is Dlamini; I come from a Xhosa nation, and my Dlamini is different from the popular Dlamini, like the former President Thabo Mbeki. The Dlamini I am is exactly the same as with Dr Nokuzola Mindende, which we recite as Dlamini, Cubungulashwe, Gugulamagwala, Zizi, Lamyeni, Lunika, Nomana, Lubokoboko, Mtatele, et. cetera ...

2. *Isiduko* is clan in isiXhosa and *isithakazelo* in isiZulu; when one calls a person by their *isiduko* or *isithakazelo* name, it is a sign of respect and honour, especially if a person is an adult and you avoid his or her first name, as it is considered rude in African culture to call an adult person by his or her first name. Moreover, clans are used as well to call the young ones as part of African identity.

The eight hour duration with Vellem felt like three hours. I was a second-year student born and bred from the rural areas of the Eastern Cape kuGatyana or Willowvale³ and ignorant about the dynamics and politics of the UPCS Church. Vellem gave me a full lecture on the black Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (RPCSA) church formation in which he grew up, now a constituent part of the UPCS. He cited significant historical church events, names, years and the ministers who contributed enormously to the growth and development of the RPCSA. He opened my eyes; somehow, he challenged my spirituality, caused me to rethink deeply about my calling and at the same time he reassured my faith in the liberating and saving Christ Jesus. Having been introduced to Vellem by the Rev. Prof. G.A. Duncan, the strong relationship between the two ministers was visible and feasible. I knew Graham Duncan from 2001 while at the University of Fort Hare. He was a straightforward person; he would not endorse a person if he had some reservations about that particular individual. Duncan (2020) states the following in support of Vellem:

I was Moderator of the General Assembly of the UPCS in 2003 when Vuyani was elected the first black General Secretary of the denomination, and I was privileged to induct him into that office. We worked together, and got along well, respecting each other's roles and supporting one another. (p. 2)

Concurrent with Duncan, while Vellem was the general secretary of the UPCS, I was a theology student at the University of Pretoria. There were a couple of important meetings where Vellem and selected students would meet him for a dinner at Duncan's residence or a restaurant and Vellem would share his church objectives, challenges and frustrations. These meetings exposed the students to the lived realities of church politics, white racism, power struggle, black-on-black and pseudospirituality. Vellem was meticulous in the articulation of his challenges in the church, his eagerness for UPCS transformation, empowerment of black churches and their leaders. However, his ideas were often met with disappointments, including the black ministers. Interestingly, one thing I value, recognised and observed in Vellem's personality, character and leadership style was his emotional intelligence and resilience, even when it hurt. This was demonstrated in 2007 when the UPCS organised a ministers' retreat, which was held at Eston Farm Campsite. Two young black ministers were at loggerheads in a lengthy dispute on the formation of the joint associations of the UPCS following the union (RPCSA 1998:149). Vellem responded calmly and professionally. Vellem (2017) wrote a paper to specific black ministers and some black members of the UPCS, clarifying his position regarding the contention in the church associations of the UPCS (see Buqa 2012):

I can claim without blowing my own horn that I was among those who played a major role in re-building and re-directing the associations of the former RPCSA to embrace union and to unite with the equivalent associations of the then PCSA. During my

3.I was born and bred in the Eastern Cape (formerly Transkei) in Willowvale, known as kuGatyana, in a rural area called Ntsimbakazi. I come from the Xhosa Gcaleka nation, known by King Hintsa as *amaTshawe [clan]* kingdom.

term as the General Secretary of the UPCS. Associations were targeted to keep black people in the UPCS divided for truly speaking, the unity of black people in the UPCS is a menace to the white power structure that is in control to this day. The white power structure is hidden in the spiritual realm. It is cunning, it is cruel. It is cruel, it creates its own blacks and destroys the masses at the level of spirituality. (p. 8)

I was privileged and honoured to have graduated with a Master's in Church History in September 2007, at the same graduation ceremony where both Vellem and Duncan obtained their PhDs (Duncan's second) at the University of Pretoria. Vellem came to my ordination service in March 2008 at Mamelodi Presbyterian Church, and above all, attended my wedding ceremony as a guest speaker in September 2010 at kuGatyana in the Eastern Cape. Vellem recruited me to the Council for World Mission (CWM) to work on the committee which was training young people for six months in South Africa. The CWM members came from different parts of the world for a Christian mission, and he would reprimand me, '*Dlamini! ungawiswa ngababantwana*' [watch out for the girls]. I submit that Vellem loved the church, died being a minister of the UPCS in outstanding ways and was always committed to the ministry of Jesus Christ through the UPCS. In Vellem's (2007:38) words, 'God acts salvifically [liberatively] through our actions with Christ as the Liberator'. Henceforth, his home congregation in Welkom was renamed after him on 14 May 2022. On the Memorial plaque in his memory at the church is written:

The Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa. Rev. Prof. Vuyani Vellem Memorial Congregation. To the Glory of God and for the advancement of His Kingdom. This stone was laid on 14 May 2022 by the Moderator of the General Assembly Rt. Rev. S.J. Mtetwa, Moderator of Trans-Xhariep Presbytery Rev. C.M.M. Letseleha and the Moderator of Session Rev. M.A. Ngqungwana.

Unyana womgquba or womthonyama⁴

In isiXhosa, when a man is considered *unyana womgquba* or *womthonyama* [son of the soil, land or earth], it is an honour or affirmation of the identity of that person as the true child of the community, a patriotic person who can be trusted by the family, community members and the nation, even to death. In this article, I use the terms 'soil', 'land' and 'earth' interchangeably. *Unyana womgquba* or *womthonyama* or *wegazi* [blood] also means a person born from the family bloodline who can be entrusted with the responsibilities, heritage, traditions and customs of the family. According to Goduka and Kunnie (2017:232), *umgquba* or *umthonyama* indicates authenticity as well as the deep rootedness of one to the group to which he or she belongs. The earth needs *umgquba*

4.*Unyana* means the son. Goduka and Kunnie (2017:232) describe *umgquba* as dry old cow dung found in a cattle kraal (*ebuhlanti*) (see Kobo 2020:2). *Umthonyama* literally means the decomposed under-layers of cattle deposits, dry old cow dung found in a cattle kraal (*ebuhlanti*). The reference to both *umgquba* and *umthonyama* represents the importance of cattle and kraal as symbols of wealth, and the latter is also a sacred place in which ancestors dwell. *Umthonyama* or *emthonyameni* is considered the deep place inside the kraal or *ebuhlanti* at the back, where there is a high accumulation of *umgquba*; amaXhosa would say *emthonyameni* or *emgqubeni*. In rural areas, *umgquba* is basically used as manure in the gardens and fields to grow food. It is also used to make fire for cooking *eziko* or fireplace as well as to warm *ifatyi* or barrels to ferment traditional beer, *umqombothi*. There is worth and value in keeping *umgquba* for agricultural purposes.

to be productive, while *umgquba* is the cycle of agricultural and traditional manure process from the livestock animals used in African rural homes for farming. There can be no more powerful symbolising of continuity from the past to the present than the value of *umgquba* or *umthonyama* (Goduka & Kunnie 2017:233). I regard Vuyani Vellem as the true reflection of the African son of the soil and *umgquba* to the African people. Even at his death, he transcends to be *umgquba* to the land and adds spiritual value to the living: *efile nje usathetha* [he still speaks, even though he is dead] (Heb 11:4 NIV). Hence, upon his death, there are numerous gurus of black scholarship and theologians writing tributes in recognition of his work, including this article. I concur with Kobo (2020:6) in her assertion that while 'he is not here physically *ebuhlanti* [kraal], our black prophet is not dead, but has joined a cloud of witness and has become our ancestor'. He has now gone to rest with our ancestors, Steve Biko, Tiyo Soga, James Cone, *Elele nje usathetha, Camagu Msimang, Songo, Nonkosi, NoThabizolo!* [Vellem's clan names].

It is clear that Vellem as a black churchman, *umfundisi* and *unyana womgquba* who studied and consciously embraced the black theology of liberation, wrestled with the pervasiveness of poverty, inequality and injustices affecting black people in their land and other spaces. Vellem (2007:440) laments that black people could still say the roots of black theology go back to Africa's singers across the Atlantic who found themselves in a strange land, having been ferried as slaves uprooted from their motherland. He also articulates that it is necessary to stress that black theology, as it has manifested itself since the early 1970s, is the first full-blown liberation theology to arise on South African soil (Vellem 2007:112). Vellem understood that African people are raised in an environment of agricultural labour. Vellem (2007:166; cf. Mugambi 1995:12) observed that the question of land is central to the struggle for liberation. It is a well-known fact that black people in South Africa share only 13% of the land, and the rest of the land is in the hands of the white minority, that is, 87% of the land. Land reforms in South Africa involve physical moves by people to their previously dispossessed lands. In addition, *umfundisi* Vellem (2007:167) articulated that if the Bible was the only thing left in the hands of the oppressed after their land was dispossessed, then the Bible should be used to claim back the land, meaning through the liberation struggle. In an attempt to respond to Vellem's quest for the repossession of the land and black liberation, Prof. Itumeleng Mosala⁵ preached a eulogy sermon at the funeral of Vellem on 13 December 2019, reading from Psalm 24 (NIV):

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. (v. 1)

In his sermon reflection, posing the question on the issue of land and possession of South African land by the minority, Mosala admitted and confessed that Vellem often asked him

5. Prof. Itumeleng Jeremiah Mosala is a guru of black theology of liberation and is one of the theologians who influenced Vellem in his academic writings and thinking. Mosala is a minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa who was invited by Vellem's family to preach at his funeral on Friday, 13 December 2019 in Welkom Town Hall.

difficult questions about the land that he could not answer, and he died with Mosala still owing him answers. In my observation of Vellem's spirituality and consciousness as *unyana womgquba* and *umfundisi*, in his doctoral dissertation (Vellem 2007:324), he espouses that the de-mystification of empire takes place through the sign and the symbol of the kingdom of God expressed in the life of Jesus Christ – God's incarnation in the world. This Son is the one who appears to share food among thousands and multiply it for the starving multitudes to have a share (Jn 6:1–14). According to Vellem (2007:38), God intervenes through his Son with the view to restore his creation to his original intent. I would contend that Vellem was such a deeply spiritual and conscious son of the land whose faith was found in Christ as the liberator of the oppressed and suppressed in all forms of injustices. Therefore, he was an outstanding academic, accessible to the poor, the church, the ministers and township communities. He begins the acknowledgement in his doctoral thesis by expressing his Christian faith and closed it in the same latter (Vellem 2007):

Let me first express my gratitude to my parents, who raised me as a Christian child. Little did they realise that I was going to take this faith quietly and seriously! Lastly, may God's name be magnified and glorified. (pp. viii–ix)

He was fearless, brave and above all, he was the voice of the voiceless *engumfundisi!* He was the black prophet who refused to use Jesus and Biko to further his career. With great integrity, 'he sought to wrestle with Jesus, in faith, from the black experience, and to grapple with Biko's black consciousness' (Van Aarde & De Beer 2019:1).

Ubufundisi bakhe

In this section, *ubufundisi bakhe* [his ministerial involvement], I will begin by unpacking his calling to ministry and his language proficiency and conclude with Vellem's contextual ministry in the five congregations he served, let alone the congregations in which he was an interim moderator [assistant]. Vuyani Vellem (1968–2019) was born and bred in Thabong township, Welkom, into a Presbyterian family. His parents originated from the rural Qumbu district, formerly Transkei, in the Eastern Cape, and they came to Welkom as migrant labours. With the discovery of gold, Welkom became an industrial, economic, racial and ethnic melting pot as it drew disparate groups of people from near and far. According to Rev. Dr Malinge Njeza⁶ (2021:9), the Thabong and Welkom historical realities, 'circumstances and conditions' contributed to making and shaping the consciousness, the thinking and the praxis of Professor Vellem. In these experiences of exploitation and exclusion in Welkom, and the spirit of revolution and resistance in Thabong, Vellem found a critical and permanent source for doing theology. Vellem's calling to ministry was birthed and nurtured from the former RPCSA, in which he grew up and which is now a constituent part of

6. Rev. Dr Malinge Njeza is a minister in the UPSCA who ministered at the same time with Rev. Prof. Vuyani Vellem while he was in G.G. Ndzotyana Memorial Congregation in Kayamandi township, Stellenbosch, Western Cape. Njeza was invited to present a memorial lecture by the UPSCA as a webinar on 20 September 2021, a paper titled, 'Of pioneers and prophets: Reclaiming the legacy and heritage of Rev. Dr Prof Vuyani Vellem'.

the UPCSA after union with the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (PCSA) in 1999. He was clear in his mind that a black church such as the RPCSA had to make a theological as well as a material difference to black lives. For him, embracing the cross included both the spiritual dimension of prayer and the struggle for justice. That is why he dedicated his life to a gospel of faith and reason, *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis*, because for him, in the words of Oscar Romero (2018):

A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed – what gospel is that? Very nice, pious considerations that don't bother anyone, which is the way many would like preaching to be. Those preachers who avoid every thorny matter so as not to be harassed, so as not to have conflicts and difficulties, do not light up the world they live in. (p. 1)

In the RPCSA, Prof. Vellem served in the church union negotiations with the PCSA, representing the RPCSA (RPCSA 1998). True to form, he was there in advocating for an ecclesiastical, doctrinal and theological union agreement that did not compromise the heritage of the RPCSA. In the words of Njeza (2021):

Vellem was agitating – because he was not in the inner circles of RPCSA power. While he deservedly made his way through the governance structures of the RPCSA, the greatest accolade in my view, was his appointment as the Clerk of the General Assembly. This was following the demise of the longest serving General Assembly Clerk of the RPCSA, the redoubtable Rev JC Khonyane. Professor Vellem was still at a tender age at this appointment, but he did not disappoint. (p. 11)

Vellem's identity was underpinned by an unwavering black consciousness and always by black people's struggles in the church and outside ecclesiological structures.

Vellem was conversant with almost all South African languages. He appreciated language – as he believed that (Eyoh 1985):

[L]anguage is a carrier of a people's culture; culture is a carrier of a people's values; values are the basis of a people's self-definition – the basis of their consciousness. (p. 157)

In his articulations, preaching and academic writings were devoid of his home language, isiXhosa. Vellem (2007:318) would express his theological ideas in English and isiXhosa: 'The word we use in isiXhosa for the economy is *ubutyebi* [wealthy] the latter which resonates well with the word *ukutya* or *ukudla*, meaning to eat'. Primarily, his intellectual fluency in English was beyond comprehension, although he was in touch with people. According to Urbaniak (2020):

Professor Vellem's theological writings are not always easy to penetrate, to say the least. Some avoid them because of their personal ideological bias; others – I have witnessed it among a number of my students – 'give up' because of the density of his language, often lavished with metaphors and references to indigenous terms. (p. 3)

This was endorsed by the Rev. Lulama Mshumpela during the renaming ceremony of his home congregation, where Vellem accepted the call to ministry under his spiritual leadership and guidance. Rev. Mshumpela (14 May 2022) put it in this manner:

'I was fascinated by Vuyani Vellem's brilliance and questioning while he was my youth member, he was always inquisitive, listening and enquiring, at the age of 19 years, I preached on a particular Sunday, Vuyani came to me and asked what is the meaning of the word exegesis and I answered him. He was always having a book note and pen during worship services to write the words I used in sermons and later asked for meanings as most of the theological terms were not available in the ordinary dictionary in those days'. In the words of Rev Mziwonke Goba, whom Vellem studied with at the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa (FEDSEM); 'Vuyani often had a dictionary in his hand even at meal times.'

Contextual ministry

Vellem's first years in ministry began in the Northern Transvaal, which is now known as Limpopo province; he served his probation in Donhill Congregation, Mamabolo township (1992–1994). According to Thema (2021):

Vellem was the first minister to teach the *Manual of Law Practice and Procedure* to the Kirk Session and Deacon's Court members – He ensured that every Church leader owns the Manual and knew it. (p. 74)

Since he came to Donhill, there was a spontaneous growth in membership; he empowered leadership. In the words of Rev. Mamalotji Magagane, who was a youth member during his tenure at Donhill, Rev. Vuyani Vellem loved *Amadodana* [men's fellowship]; he made sure that a majority of men in his session were robed, as in Northern Transvaal, the *iimanyano* [fellowship] of *Amadodana* was not active; he *Africanised* the church. According to Malibongwe Gwele, whom Vuyani Vellem mentored while in the Western Cape Presbytery (RPCSA 1998:86) at G.G. Ndzotyana Memorial Congregation, Kayamandi, Stellenbosch, from 1998 to 2002 (Vellem 2002; see RPCSA 1999:12):

Vuyani Vellem came towards the end of 1997, his intelligence and seriousness in sermons appealed to me as someone who takes his audience serious [*sic*] and respects them despite varied levels of education and literacy. He presented to us the kind of church that I was always yearning for, a church in the community with the community. In 1999, he took a group of young people to Multi Event 99, which sought to rethink the role of religion in public life and this was held at the University of Cape Town (see Vellem 2002:138). This important step led to his pursuit of an ecumenical youth group in Kayamandi which wrestle with the practice of religion in public life. This group was late known as Simanyisizwe⁷ Christian Community Project, a joint venture of youth from Kayamandi churches. (p. 145)

Vellem became a minister in KwaZulu-Natal, Newcastle Congregation, Emadadeni township, from 2002 until he was

7. *Simanyisizwe* means we are uniting the nation. The Simanyisizwe Christian Community Project is a direct offspring of the Kayamandi group, which was formed by an ecumenical workshop organised by Vuyani Vellem. He has written a good deal on this project in his master's dissertation in Chapter 5, Kayamandi and Democracy (Vellem 2002).

appointed as the UPCSA General Secretary in 2003. Elder Bongani Charles Ntshingila expressed that Vellem's first workshop was for the stewardship committee. He titled that programme *Sithengiwe* [we are bought]. He said a congregation must act like a home (*oikos*) where all members share the same identity. He emphasised the importance of teamwork in congregational operations, where all people act under the knowledge of the greatest sacrifice God offered for our sins. That was his point of departure. Another workshop he conducted was at the presbytery level which descended the sessions, where he titled it 'Open the Mealies'. He advised in it that as elders, we must learn to come closer to the issues of our congregations, look and listen carefully to all parties involved, find the rot in the mealies and take it out. The mealies might be right after all.

Vellem sought to be faithful to Jesus right to the end, in practising an option for the poor. Even in his sickness, he took up the position of pastoring Diepkloof Presbyterian Church, Soweto – a mere few weeks ago – to stay close to his people (Van Aarde & De Beer 2019:1). In the words of the session clerk at Diepkloof Congregation:

'Prof. Vellem was with the Diepkloof congregation for less than 6 months as a minister in charge, and his interactions with him at the leadership level provided a view that the congregation would move to greater levels. The interaction with the congregation as a whole has a positive impact on his ministry and the experience of the teachings he provided in the various workshop he had facilitated when invited to do so before his appointment. He was a servant in the true sense of the word, i.e. humble and committed to ministry. He shared his knowledge and experiences and did not want to be put on a pedestal because of his academic qualifications and experience in ministry.'

Prof. Vuyani Vellem was an interim moderator at B.E. Ngubane Memorial Congregation in Alexandra township from 12 September 2018 to 04 December 2019. The session clerk describes him as follows:

'What I observed about him, he was a very intelligent, knowledgeable, committed, passionate, patient man of God, full of respect for all irrespective of their status. Within a month with us, he already knew 80% of our members by *serato* [or] *sithakazelo* and [would] always address us as such, i.e. *ka serato*. He trusted me so much that we ended up sharing all most [sic] everything. Everything he does, he always refers to the *Manual of Faith and Order*. He helped us develop a working Financial Policy and later our books were audited for the first time in so many years. He conducted a Stewardship workshop for the whole congregation. No outstation was allowed to hold church money, i.e. all must be banked in the Church account. We learned more about Sunday offerings as a way to thank God for the whole week and no one should take that money for granted. For the first time in over 31 years, our mission got a title deed.'

Lament for *imvuselelo* and *iimanyano*

Vuyani Vellem, like any black experienced minister growing up in the black RPCSA Church, had a calling and spiritual

formation which was nurtured from *iimanyano*⁸ [the gathering of faithful uniformed members], who could not disintegrate or disassociate themselves from *imvuselelo* [revival or renewal]. Intrinsic to the origins of the RPCSA, and quite uniquely so, is this phenomenon of *iimanyano*, which predates the very establishment of this denomination (UPCSA) (Vellem & Dibeela 2007:47). Vellem (2007:208) articulated this clearly in his words that one of the key liturgical symbols of *iimanyano* is the notion of *imvuselelo*; it is a liturgical–ecclesiological symbol of renewal and reconstruction which harnesses the black church. Vellem (2007:208) describes *imvuselelo* as a symbolic profession of reviving past communities in the present to embrace faith claims and counterclaims for the task of the theological hermeneutical method. Vellem (2019:87) traces *imvuselelo* from the spiritual black church context; as distinct from the Sunday worship service liturgy [*inkonzo*⁹ *ka eleven*], it is a form of liturgy that is popular among black South African churches – *imvuselelo* is the trademark liturgy of *iimanyano* that could be interpreted as a symbolic encapsulation of the total rhyme and drumbeat of life among black Africans liturgically. Vellem lived the life of *imvuselelo* whenever he occupied space in academia, church, local communities, meeting individuals and the world. He lamented that the black people in the UPCSA should return to the basics of *imvuselelo*, and he was often invited to speak in denominational conferences of *iimanyano yamadoda* [uniformed men's associations]. In September 2017, at Mthatha, the Men's Christian Guild *iimanyano* (MCG) of the UPCSA conference invited Vellem to present a paper themed 'Towards a vibrant, relevant, responsive, sustainable and prayerful guild'. Vellem appeared dressed in his MCG *manyano* uniform; in the paper, he stressed that the strength of the black churches is based on *imvuselelo* and *iimanyano*. He was perturbed that *iimanyano* were perceived by some UPCSA members as the cause of conflict, power struggle and division rather than as a spiritual tank and unity through *imvuselelo*. In agreement, Buqa (2012:iv) states that 'the tensions¹⁰ of the *iimanyano* were a threat to the union of the UPCSA'. In the conference, Vellem lamented vehemently that *iimanyano* was originally formed as a spiritual tank of *imvuselelo* to evangelise and reach out to black people within a cultural ethos. I would argue that Vellem loved the UPCSA; to substantiate that, his daughter's response on behalf of the Vellem family in Welkom on 14 May 2022 said, 'I wondered at times why my dad loved this church that

8.The *iimanyano* are normally identified by means of a specific uniform in black churches, even though the UPCSA (as with the reformed church tradition) does not generally wear a uniform (Buqa 2012:iv); see further Kobo (2018:2), *A Womanist Exposition of Pseudo-spirituality and the Cry of an Oppressed African Woman*.

9.*Inkonzo* is a worship church service in isiXhosa which can be categorised as different liturgies, like *inkonzo yesikhumbuzo* [remembrance service], *inkonzo yemithwalo* [service where people cast their burdens to the Lord] and *inkonzo yemvuselelo* [spiritual service]. *Inkonzo ka eleven* is the term used as most rural worship services start at 11:00 on Sundays; this 11:00 is traced from Scotland as farmers would start in their fields before coming to the Church.

10.The tensions in *iimanyano* came after the union of UPCSA. The RPCSA was a larger constituent of the black church established and supported by the Scottish missionary enterprise, while the PCSA was a minority church established by the white settlers with high numbers of black people but financially controlled by the white minority. The amalgamation of the RPCSA and PCSA's tension through *iimanyano* has been suspected to be caused by the third force, which has been studied by Buqa (2012); see his master's dissertation, 'Conflicts between the church associations of the UPCSA, with special reference to the Presbytery of Tshwane: A narrative approach'.

often hurts him and yet continues to serve God in the same church'. In association with his unwavering calling in ministry, Vellem (2017:1) described himself 'as a pastor, manager, ecclesiastical bureaucrat, researcher and teacher'. He rendered faith and theological views in isiXhosa on the *Umhlobo Wenene* FM SABC (Frequency Modulation South African Broadcasting Corporation) programme on Sunday mornings, *Ukholo Nengqiqo* [Faith and reasoning]. *Lomkhonzi kaThixo othembeke kangaka!*

No prophet is accepted in his hometown

Jesus said to them, 'Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'" Then He added, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown"' (Lk 4: 23–24, NIV)

The aforementioned biblical quotation about the rejection of Jesus' ministry in his hometown is a reflection of the theological and prophetic ministry of Vellem in the church, although Vellem's proven leadership and administrative abilities were recognised in the UPCSA when he was headhunted to serve as the first black general secretary of the church (Duncan 2020:2). But Vellem's sharp mind and acumen were never accepted in his church or in spaces mostly controlled by white supremacy. Prof. Vellem continued to serve the UPCSA diligently in countless other commitments after his term at the Church Central Offices. However, despite his many achievements and sacrificial service on behalf of the black Presbyterian Christians, Professor Vellem did not receive the acknowledgement that he deserved, particularly from the same powerless people whom he courageously stood up for. In the words of Njeza (2021):

They could not discern his sacrificial efforts on their behalf. At best, some ignored him, at worst, some hated him. This black indifference to one of their own; possibly their brightest shining star since 1999, really needs to be interrogated. Was it deliberate or was it blindness? Was it a lack of empathy or was it an expression of black self-hate? Prof Vellem was too black for some and so could not be understood by the black people who lost black consciousness mind. (p. 12)

This is how Tshaka (2014:6) explains it: '[t]he flight from the black-self, which is manifested in the pathological self-hate of black people, is an experience that is uniquely African'. Tshaka (2014) concludes that much still has to be done by Africans themselves to avoid our prevailing self-destruction. It would not be far-fetched to observe that, in fact, the entire UPCSA was indifferent to Prof. Vellem. Explaining this, the UPCSA's indifference to one of its most loyal members, Van Aarde and De Beer (2019) assert this:

Not all understood him. Some were nervous around him. Some did not want to understand him, the truth he told, and the anger he held, at injustices in the subtlest and most overt of forms, simply could not be borne by all. It was too heavy. His truth-

telling also sat heavily on himself, with his gentle soul. The gift of Vellem's life and wisdom often travelled far (away) places, transforming hungry souls, whilst back home his gift was yet to be fully embraced. (p. 1)

Like the prophet that he was, he never found recognition and honour at home. In this regard, Prof. Vellem was thus a man ahead of his times, whose real value and worth are only recognised posthumously. Vellem (2017) awakened fellow black ministers and black members of the UPCSA:

I canvassed an idea of *Vukani MaRhabe* [*wake up Presbyterians*], with the view to addressing what I saw and argued to be a calamitous pact which cared less for a preponderant black section in the UPCSA. This project was subverted, unbelievably so by our own black colleagues when almost all members of different congregations in that Presbytery has [*sic*] embraced it with zeal. (p. 1)

Unshackling the Church continues!

In this section, I intend to reflect on my tribute to Vellem in the Church, particularly in the last years towards the end of his life on Earth, and conclude the article. In 2019, the UPCSA Ministers' Retreat was held at eMseni Christian Centre from 25 February to 01 March 2019. The areas of focus included the following: *mending the relationships, healing memories, building a missional church and leadership capacity development* (Presbytery Link 2019:3). Vuyani attended the retreat, and he unshackled the church in the robust discussion regarding the aforementioned areas; it was interesting and calming to listen to his capacity of thinking and interpretations. Vellem challenged the UPCSA that our theological reflections must address the real context of African situations and seek to resolve African problems. Vellem emphasised the significance of education; in the same conference, he called me into his vehicle and encouraged me to leave the military for academia. Little did I know that year would be my last opportunity to engage with him.

In 2019, Vuyani Vellem invited me twice when he was frail and fragile to preach on the Holy Communion service at B.E. Ngubane Congregation, Alexandra, and secondly to present on the elders' and deacons' workshop he conducted at Rocky Valley, Krugersdorp. He was rebuilding and fostering unity among black congregations, teaching them to sustain themselves and be independent. Little did I know I would become his successor at B.E. Ngubane Congregation. The elders confirmed how he fought and defended the congregation during difficult times in eGoli presbytery disputes. I visited him unexpectedly in his house towards the end of November 2019; he was weak, and I had to be strong before his smiling face. Vuyani, as usual, said, 'thank you, *Dlamini*' for coming and called his wife, using her Xhosa traditional marriage name, '*Nolungile*, please make a coffee or tea for *uDlamini*'. Vellem amazed me when I asked if I could pray with him – he called the entire family and asked us to hold hands together. He then allowed me to

pray, pronounced the benediction and repeated, 'thank you, Dlamini,' and that was my last time with him. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord (Rv 14:13 NIV)! Long live the spirit of Vuyani Vellem! *Enkosi Msimang, Songo, nyana womgquba!*

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Mrs Pumeza Nolungile Vellem, the wife of the late Prof. Vuyani Vellem, for her tremendous support in conducting this research. *Amade ngawetyala!*

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

W.B. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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