

# The Reverend Kenneth Mosley Spooner: African-American missionary to the BaFokeng of Rustenburg district, South Africa, 1915-1937<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

This article examines the missionary and educational work and impact of Kenneth Spooner, an African-American missionary among the BaFokeng African community in Rustenburg district, South Africa from 1915 to 1937. Originally from Barbados, Spooner immigrated to the USA from where he came to South Africa as an International Pentecostal Holiness Church (IPHC) missionary. Spooner's church became very popular among the African communities of Rustenburg. His school, for example, for the first time in the region used English as a medium of teaching, unlike the much older German Lutheran Church school's teaching medium of Setswana; in the mid-1910s in rural South Africa, a black man preaching only in English, with another black person interpreting into an African language, was a spectacle – and another of Spooner's draw-cards. The article situates Spooner and his work in the socio-political context of agitation by white politicians for more and stronger racial discrimination and segregation.

**Keywords:** South Africa; Rustenburg District; BaFokeng; Spooner; Missionaries; Setswana; Lutherans; Hermmansburger.

The tradition of African-Americans traveling to far-flung places as religious preachers dates back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century during the days of slavery in the United States of America (USA) when some individuals, such as G White and J Jea, chose to fight slavery from the pulpit as itinerant Methodist and Baptist ministers in the North.<sup>2</sup> That tradition was later extended to Africa. Regarding South Africa specifically, the major stimulus was provided by the tour of the country by the African-American Bishop, HM Turner, of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1898, when he publicized the need

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1 My gratitude goes to Fred Morton of the Department of History, University of Botswana, for his useful critique of a much earlier draft of this article. Any remaining shortcomings, however, are entirely mine.

2 For some detail see GR Hodges (ed.), *Black itinerants of the Gospel: The narratives of John Jea and George White* (Madison, Madison House, 1993). For the early religious initiatives by African-Americans within America, see, for example, CG Woodson, *The history of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C., Associated Publishers, 1921).

for African-American missionaries to come to Africa.<sup>3</sup>

There is abundant literature on the earliest missionaries in South Africa generally, but most of which is, however, almost exclusively about white missionaries,<sup>4</sup> rather than on African-American ones, presumably because there were so many more white missionaries than African-American.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in 2003, D Killingray stated as follows: "African-Americans constituted a small but visually significant element in the modern Protestant missionary movement. They are generally ignored in the standard literature and mission histories".<sup>6</sup> Very little has been published about Spooner despite his enormous educational and religious contributions to the development of the African people of the Rustenburg region. Chronologically, what first comes to mind is a pamphlet collection of various aspects of the life of Spooner put together by himself in 1930.<sup>7</sup> The Mofokeng writer and politician, N Mokgatle, for example, in his 350-page autobiography and BaFokeng history published in 1970 discusses the missionary work of Spooner in just six pages. Mokgatle tells us in some detail about Spooner what he personally observed and experienced regarding his arrival and settlement in Phokeng, and his missionary and educational work, as well as his impact upon the BaFokeng.<sup>8</sup> In a much later study of BaFokeng women carried out in the late 1980's by the historian, Belinda Bozzoli, she dealt with Spooner in just nine pages but was a little more detailed. That is understandable since her subject of study was not Spooner per se but the women of the BaFokeng community as a whole, and thus could not treat Spooner

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3 G Shepperson & T Price, *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the origins, setting and significance of the Nyasaland native rising of 1915* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1987), p. 99.

4 See for example, CJ Phillips, "Protestant America and the pagan world: The first half century of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1810-1860" (PhD, Harvard University, 1954); CI Mitchell, "The history and development of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in the Union of South Africa, 1887-1958," (MA, Howard University, 1959); AR Booth (ed.), *The Journal of an American Missionary in the Cape Colony* (Cape Town, South African Library, 1968); AF Christofersen, *Adventuring with God: The story of the American Board Mission in South Africa* (Durban, Julia Rau Christofersen, 1967); M Dinnerstein, "American Board missions to the Zulu, 1835-1900" (PhD, Columbia University, 1972); JM Sales, *The planting of the churches in South Africa* (Michigan, William B Eerdmans, 1971); R Elphick & R Davenport (eds.), *Christianity in South Africa: A political, social & cultural history* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997). See also CJ Phillips, "Protestant America and the pagan world: The first half century of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1810-1860" (PhD, Harvard University, 1954).

5 For some examples of the limited nature of the literature on African-American missionary activity in Africa, see, for example, LL Berry, *A century of missions of the African Methodist Episcopal church* (New York, Gutenberg Printing Press, 1942); WC Harr, "The negro as an American Protestant Missionary in Africa" (PhD, University of Chicago, 1945); EA Freeman, *The Epoch of negro baptists and the Foreign Mission Board, National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.* (Kansas City, Central Seminary Press, 1953).

6 D Killingray, "The Black Atlantic Missionary movement and Africa, 1780s-1920s", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 33(1), 2003, p. 8.

7 KEM Spooner, *A sketch of native life in South Africa* (Phokeng, KEM Spooner, 1930).

8 N Mokgatle, *The autobiography of an unknown South African* (Los Angeles & London, University of California Press, 1971), pp. 74-79.

to an appreciable extent. Bozzoli's study used mainly the much earlier works of Spooner's biographical sketch, Mokgatle's autobiography and, especially, extensive oral interviews with old BaFokeng women. Bozzoli portrays Spooner's work in a balanced manner and her own interviewees reveal a balance between Spooner's popularity on the one hand and those of the BaFokeng who did not view him favourably.<sup>9</sup> This article certainly has benefitted from both of the above sources. An important and "comprehensive" book published on Christianity in South Africa as late as 1997, and intended to cover a wide range of topics such as, for example, Lutheran missions, black theology and the Pentecostals, fails even to mention the name of Spooner.<sup>10</sup> However, the latest work by Linda Chisholm on mission education under the Hermannsburg Mission Society missionaries in South Africa generally, is of particular relevance to this article, even though her book is not about BaFokeng history exclusively, but the whole of South Africa.<sup>11</sup>

The first objective of this article, therefore, is to add to the relatively meagre but growing historical literature on African-American missionary activity in Africa.<sup>12</sup> Second, the article seeks to examine the significant contribution of Spooner to the religious and educational development of the BaFokeng and other African people of the greater Rustenburg region specifically and South Africa in general. In this regard, from his arrival among the BaFokeng in 1915 until his death in Phokeng in 1937, Spooner built churches and schools in their area and beyond, through which he spread the gospel and the basics of Western education.

The modern missionary movement from both Europe and North America was primarily Protestant. The first Protestant missionary activity in Africa was started by the United Brethren or Moravians in South Africa in 1737. Other missionary bodies, such as the London Mission Society (LMS), began to send missionaries to Africa in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the United States, the five major Protestant denominations that sent missionaries to Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians and

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9 B Bozzoli & M Nkotsoe, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, life strategy and migrancy in South Africa 1900-1983* (Portsmouth. Heinemann & London, James Curry, 1991), pp. 66-75.

10 R Elphick & R Davenport (eds.), *Christianity in South Africa ...*

11 L Chisholm, *Between two worlds: German missionaries and the transition from mission to Bantu Education in South Africa* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2017).

12 JM Chirenje, *Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in Southern Africa, 1883-1916* (Baton Rouge & London, Louisiana State University Press, 1987); WL Williams, *Black Americans and the evangelization of Africa, 1877-1900* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); SM Jacobs (eds.), *Black Americans and the missionary movement in Africa* (Westport, Greenwood Publishers, 1982).

Presbyterians. From 1834, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) also sent missionaries to Africa, including to South Africa where they opened the Zulu mission. By 1840, all these religious bodies had established mission stations in Africa.<sup>13</sup> These missionary societies were motivated by the general premise of the European social and religious theorists of the day that their way of life ought to be applied universally and that it was the European moral duty to take their “civilization” to the “barbarian” races of the world. More importantly, “civilization” and “Christianity” were considered inseparable. As Africans were considered racially inferior, it was the moral duty of the “superior” European race to bring them Western civilization, with Christianity as its integral part. Africans would then “receive all the spiritual blessings of Christianity but still remain within their own ‘inferior’ culture”.<sup>14</sup> With this thinking in their minds, American mission societies began to focus on Africa for possible mission activity.

The coming of African-American missionaries to Africa was a part of white missionary growth and expansion emanating from both the USA and Europe, a phenomenon which became world-wide after about 1880. With increasing wealth and as they put the Civil War and legal slavery behind them, “Americans could now afford to finance more foreign missions.” Missionary bodies such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions increasingly sent missionaries to different areas of the world, including Africa. African-Americans were preferred as missionaries to Africa generally because they were considered to be more able to resist African diseases than whites. The reasoning was that “because they were descended from Africans, Afro-Americans could better adjust to the [African] climate.” A more overtly racist argument was that: “Blacks also would not cost as much for expensive European furloughs, and they could be paid a smaller salary.” White American missionaries used other strategies, such as black religious publications, university, school and church meetings, to exhort and convince African-Americans to evangelise the African continent, and thus rid it of “barbarism”.<sup>15</sup> African-Americans were thus to be used as “civilising agents in Africa,” an idea that “greatly appealed to many whites, especially to white missionary bodies”.<sup>16</sup>

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13 SM Jacobs, “The historical role of Afro-Americans in American missionary efforts in Africa”, SM Jacobs (ed.), *Black Americans and the missionary movement in Africa* (Westport, Connecticut and London, Greenwood, 1982), pp. 7-8; DJ Kotze, *Letters of the American missionaries* (Cape Town, Van Riebeck Society, 1950).

14 SM Jacobs, *The historical role of Afro-Americans ...*, pp. 5-7. Quotation, p. 7.

15 WL Williams, *Black Americans and the evangelization of Africa, 1877-1900* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 6.

16 D Killingray, *The missionary movement and Africa ...*, p. 4. (My emphasis.)

Among the African-American religious fraternity generally at the turn of the 20th century was the conviction that it was their moral duty to “uplift” their “less fortunate brethren” in Africa. During the Ecumenical Missionary Conference in New York in 1900, the Reverend CS Morrison, a leading member of the National Baptist Convention stated as follows:<sup>17</sup>

I believe that God is going to put it into the hearts of these black boys and girls in the schools of the South to go with the message to South Africa and West Africa, and vindicate American slavery as far as it can be vindicated by taking across the ocean the stream of life.

As will be seen further down, Morrison was to eventually settle as a missionary among the BaFokeng in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After the American Civil War, African-American churches began to establish themselves in Africa, with the Baptists taking the lead. In 1792, D George from Georgia became the first African-American missionary to establish the first Baptist church in the new British settlement of Sierra Leone. Another early African-American missionary, L Carey, of Richmond, Virginia, followed George the following year and extended Baptist missionary activity into Liberia. Hence, from as early as the 1830s, African-American missionaries sponsored by white churches were sent to Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Belgian Congo (today the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and Angola.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, with regard to the evangelization of West Africa, during the period Spooner came to South Africa, it was a deliberate aim of the British “civilising mission” to recruit “persons of African descent” from the diaspora “as partners in the evangelization of West Africa”.<sup>19</sup>

But some African-American Christians were also convinced that God wanted them to come to Africa as missionaries. The strongly-worded biblical narrative of exodus from slavery was interpreted by some African-Americans to mean a return to Africa. Thus their strong racial similarity to Africans drew many to the African continent. Yet another reason was the strong feeling about a lost home from which the slave trade had so brutally torn them, especially for those that had only recently arrived in the Americas. As D Killingray has put it: “Race was a dominating theme in this period and black missionary activity

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17 Quoted in G Shepperson & T Price, *Independent African ...*, p. 99.

18 For details of 19th century African-American missionary activity in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Angola and the Congo, see Williams, *Black Americans and the evangelization of Africa*, pp. 10-30.

19 WE Wariboko, “‘I really cannot make Africa my home’: West Indian missionaries as ‘outsiders’ in the Church Missionary Society civilizing mission to southern Nigeria, 1898-1925”, *Journal of African History*, 45, 2004, pp. 222-223.

and experiences were hedged about by questions of colour and race”.<sup>20</sup>

One of the earliest African-American missionaries to come to South Africa was the Reverend W Crowdy, whose Church of God and Saints of Christ worked among the Xhosa-speaking people of the Eastern Cape at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> By choosing to come as a missionary to South Africa, the Rev K Spooner was, therefore, travelling an already fairly well-trodden path. Spooner no doubt must have taken to heart the exhortation to come to Africa when he decided to come to South Africa as a missionary.

### Spooner’s pre-South Africa years

KEM Spooner was born on 8 January 1884 on one of the Barbados Islands, then a part of the British colony of the West Indies. He had a younger brother. His parents were SN Spooner and CL Spooner. The details of Kenneth’s early life and that of his family are unclear, except that both their parents were “very orthodox” members of the Church of England. Thus both boys were exposed to a Christian life from a very early age. Their parents, however, passed away when Kenneth was six and his brother two. The two boys were then taken over by their school teacher maternal uncle and his wife, who enrolled Kenneth into school. Concurrently, his maternal grandfather also taught him skills in blacksmithing and grocery trading.<sup>22</sup>

Spooner was educated in Barbados up to Standard six. Thereafter, he travelled to the United States of America where he enrolled for further education in Boydington, Virginia. Spooner records that he “did not complete” his academic education but, instead, trained for two years as a missionary in Alliance, Ohio. He also states that he trained as a carpenter and painter,<sup>23</sup> perhaps as part of his preparation for a future missionary career in Africa. With regard to Spooner’s nationality, his immediate supervisor and Church Superintendent in South Africa, Joel Rhodes, recorded in 1924 that “though he was born in the West Indies (borned [sic] a British subject) yet he is generally looked upon as an American negro ...”.<sup>24</sup> Whether Spooner formally

20 D Killingray, *The missionary movement and Africa ...*, p. 4.

21 See R Edgar, *Because they chose the plan of God* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1988), pp. 9-10.

22 *Mission South Africa: History of the Pentecostal Holiness Church* (a PHC book, n.d., n.a.), pp. 144-145.

23 National Archives of South Africa (hereafter, NASA), BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: Application for Appointment as a Marriage Officer, Sub-Native Commissioner (hereafter, SNC), Rustenburg, to Secretary for Native Affairs (hereafter, SNA), Pretoria, 17 March 1915; MHG, File 96593: Estate of the late Kenneth Spooner, 5 March 1937.

24 NASA, BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: JE Rhodes, Krugersdorp, to W Walker, SNC, Krugersdorp, 28 May 1924. Hereafter, all archival references are from the NASA, unless stated otherwise.

took up American citizenship is unclear. But to the Union Government of South Africa and everyone else in and around his Phokeng mission station, he was routinely referred to as the “Negro missionary, Spooner”.<sup>25</sup>

Spooner records that his missionary calling began in 1906, while in New York, when God told him “in audible tones” to go to Africa. While his own church at the time, the Gospel Tabernacle, wanted to send him to the Congo, Spooner, for unspecified reasons, particularly wanted to come to South Africa. After several years of the missionary calling in him growing stronger, Spooner applied to the Mission Board of another American religious body, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church (IPHC), which accepted him as a missionary to South Africa. Before setting sail, Spooner married an African-American woman called MG Warner in New York. The Spooners arrived in Cape Town harbour on 21 January 1915. As black persons, Spooner and his wife were lucky to be allowed in because, as he recorded later, there was “a law that the coloured [that is black] population of South Africa must not be increased from without.” Spooner recalled afterwards that the white harbour official who admitted them into South Africa did so by mistake.<sup>26</sup>

### **The South African context in 1915**

The South Africa in which the Spooners arrived in 1915 was undergoing fundamental transformations as a result of the new Union of South Africa formed a few years earlier, in 1910, which had excluded black people from the constitutional arrangements of the country and denied most of them the franchise. The post-1910 era also saw the emergence and consolidation of Afrikaner nationalism, political dominance and the systematic suppression of African, Indian and Coloured human rights.<sup>27</sup> The Union government led by Louis Botha introduced a systematic extension of, among other developments, the policy of racial segregation, the upliftment of poor whites and the socio-economic marginalization of the majority Africans through a series of racial laws. Such laws as, for example, the Native Labour Regulation Act of 1911 and the Natives Land Act of 1913 strengthened white supremacy and African inferiority. The latter law also aimed at eliminating all forms

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25 NTS 2708, File 53/301, Part 1: Telegram, Acting SNC, Rustenburg, to SNA, Pretoria, 6 April 1921.

26 For details, see KEM Spooner, *A sketch of native life in South Africa* (Publisher/place of publication not listed, 1930), pp. 5-10, Quotations, p. 10. I wish to thank Prof Robert Edgar of Howard University, USA, for kindly making this book available to me: *Mission South Africa: History of the Pentecostal Holiness Church*, p. 238.

27 For details of racial segregation and Afrikaner domination, see B Freund, “South Africa: The union years, 1948 – 1948 – Political and economic foundations”, *The Cambridge History*, pp. 230-250. See also R Ross, *A concise history of South Africa* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter 4.

of tenancy (such as share-cropping) on white-owned farms, except labour. Consequently, thousands of Africans were forced off white-owned farms and became destitute, especially in the Orange Free State.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, after the 1936 Hertzog Bills, a mere 13% of South Africa's entire land was allocated for African occupation and the rest for whites.<sup>29</sup>

The extent of physical and psychological hardship this Act caused among the affected Africans was well documented by the contemporary writer and politician, S Plaatje.<sup>30</sup> This was, therefore, a period of disillusionment among Africans generally, but especially the educated urban blacks who felt the need to do something about it. These issues led directly to the formation of the South African National Native Congress (SANNC) in 1912 by a small number of the urban African intelligentsia. This was the forerunner to the African National Congress (ANC). Although the SANNC was at that time urban-based, its ideas of improved civil rights for Africans would no doubt have seeped into the rural areas, such as Rustenburg.

Landing in South Africa a few years after the formation of Union Government, the Spooners no doubt quickly became aware of the racial make-up and in particular the white political domination of the country. In particular, the Spooners would have been struck by the clear elements of racial segregation of social institutions and amenities in South Africa, much like the USA they had come from. Moreover, as black persons in such a white-dominated and racist South African context, the Spooners would often experience racism, as as the next section will reveal.

### **Spooner settling in Phokeng**

Very soon after their arrival in South Africa, the Spooners proceeded to Johannesburg where they 'heard of the Rustenburg district' and learnt that "the people of that district wanted a missionary." But they were also told that they needed to be introduced personally to that community by a particular Johannesburg pastor. Spooner does not identify this person and refers to him simply as the "Reverend S." In June 1915, the couple was formally

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28 For details of the post-1910 socio-political context in South Africa during the lifetime of Kenneth Spooner, see P Bonner, "South African Society and Culture, 1910-1948", R Ross, AK Mager & B Nasson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Vol. II, 1885-1994* (London, Cambridge University Press, 2011), chapter 6, pp. 254-311.

29 For detail of this Act, see PL Wickins, "The Natives Land Act of 1913 ...", *South African Journal of Economics*, 49(2), 1981.

30 For detail, see S Plaatje, *Native life in South Africa* (London, PS King, 1916).



introduced to the community in Phokeng where they were well received and got temporary accommodation with a BaFokeng family. Spooner's first act was to secure the services of an interpreter, Daniel Tau Rangaka, who was to be his most trusted and dependable ally and religious worker for the next twenty-two years.<sup>31</sup> We will read a little more about Rangaka below.

Spooner was directly responsible to the Superintendent of the IPHC, JD Lehman, a white American based in Johannesburg, who was in turn answerable to the all-white General Mission Board of the IPHC, whose headquarters were in North Carolina.<sup>32</sup> Lehman started the first IPHC in Krugersdorp, South Africa in 1913.<sup>33</sup> Although it is not clear how much Spooner earned, he was financially supported by the General Treasury of the church which in 1924 was based in Franklin, Springs, in the state of Georgia.<sup>34</sup> The BaFokeng among whom Spooner came to work are a SeTswana-speaking African people who, from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, lived as a distinct community close to the modern town of Rustenburg in north-western South Africa. The BaFokeng capital settlements of Phokeng and Luka were established by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Having survived the vicissitudes of the *difaqane* and conquest by the Voortrekkers in the period 1830-1840, the BaFokeng began to buy back their own land from the Boers, which land they had usurped from them upon their conquest. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the BaFokeng had bought 33 farms largely with the assistance of German missionaries of the Hermannsburg Mission Society, who worked among the community from 1866.<sup>35</sup>

The two earliest missionaries among the BaFokeng were Germans, C Penzhorn and, later, H Wenhold, who established mission stations at Kana and Saron. Missionary progress was initially very slow, but by 1886, some twenty years after Penzhorn's arrival, 694 BaFokeng had been baptized by his church at Saron, of whom 150 – 200 attended religious service on a regular basis, while Kana had 518 converts. By the beginning of the 1890s, the number of new baptismal candidates had stabilized at around 80 – 100 annually, and church attendance at 200-250 people.<sup>36</sup>

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31 KEM Spooner, *Native life in South Africa...*, pp. 11-12. Quotations p. 11.

32 NASA, BAO, 7283, File 120/4/990, SNC: Rustenburg, to SNA, Pretoria, 17 September 1915.

33 *Mission South Africa: History of the Pentecostal Holiness Church*, foreword, p. ii.

34 BAO 7283, File 120/4/990, SNC: Superintendent Joel Rhodes, Krugersdorp, to SNC, Krugersdorp, 28 May 1924.

35 B Mbenga & A Manson, *People of the dew ...*, chapters 1-2.

36 Printed records of the Hermannsburg Mission Society Hermannsburger Missionsberichte (hereafter, HMB), 12 (December 1892), p. 220.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the association between the Hermannsburgers and the BaFokeng had been well established. This association had its basis both in spiritual conviction and in material interests relating to land-purchasing with which the HMS missionaries had enormously assisted the BaFokeng during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>37</sup> About BaFokeng/HMS relations at the time, Mbenga and Manson have stated as follows: “The hold the Society had over the BaFokeng remained quite strong, even into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Hermannsburgers faced a stronger challenge to their authority from the “English Churches” and “Ethiopianism in its various forms.”<sup>38</sup> This then was the formidable Lutheran “stronghold” into which Spooner entered in 1914.

Spooner was not the first African – American missionary to work among the BaFokeng. He had been preceded by the Rev C Morrison of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC), soon dubbed “the church of Morrison” by the BaFokeng. We know very little about Morrison and his church, but he arrived in Phokeng alone sometime early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before the outbreak of the First World War. In Phokeng he was welcomed and hosted by a well-to-do BaFokeng family headed by one Raisraele. Having obtained King August Mokgatle’s approval to build his church in Phokeng, Morrison began to attract some BaFokeng to his church, some of whom had broken away from the Hermannsburgers. He also established a school in Phokeng which, for the first time, taught English. But in Phokeng, Morrison “did not enjoy a large following” and his congregation consisted of “very few families”. In the larger BaFokeng neighbouring village of Luka, however, Morrison had better luck as he had comparatively many more converts. Here, “the AME built a very large and impressive church and a large priest’s house”. The writer and politician, Naboth Mokgatle, attributes Morrison’s success in Luka to the support he was given by the sub-chief there, Stuurman, some of whose own children attended Morrison’s English school. For unexplained reason(s), however, Morrison returned to the USA before the outbreak of the First World War and both his church and school “died a natural death”.<sup>39</sup>

Spooner arrived in Phokeng in the middle of the First World War and thirteen years after the end of the South African War of 1899 – 1902, a period in which the spectre of Ethiopianism, which began at the turn of the century, was gaining ground nationally. In South Africa during the last two decades

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37 For details of how the missionaries assisted the BaFokeng in purchasing land, see B Mbenga & A Manson, *People of the dew...*, chapter 4.

38 B Mbenga & A Manson, *People of the dew...*, p. 54; G Shepperson & T Price, *Independent African ...*, pp. 72-74.

39 This piece on Morrison is based N Mokgatle, *The autobiography of an unknown South African...*, pp. 66-68.

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first two of the 20<sup>th</sup>, Ethiopianism was generally understood to mean “a form of religious African nationalism which always threatened to boil over into revolt against European rule.” The phenomenon began in South Africa in the 1870s when racial prejudice and discrimination in the mainstream religious denominations prompted Africans to leave and set up their own churches rather than face segregation and humiliation in the white man’s place of worship.<sup>40</sup> Several years after the end of the South African War, for example, a white missionary perception in Phokeng was that of “moral indiscipline” among the African population, attributed implicitly to the new English government of the post-South African War period under which Africans had become, in Penzhorn’s words, “totally free, enjoying many of the privileges which they did not have under the Boers”.<sup>41</sup> Penzhorn’s claim was, of course, incorrect because the post-war British administration under A Milner quickly restored the pre-war racial status quo.<sup>42</sup> Four years before Spooner’s arrival in 1915, Penzhorn wrote that the “spirit of the age in the [Rustenburg African] communities is the following: Break with Hermannsburg, Away with the white teacher. An independent national church with a black priest is their ideal. We are now only tolerated, but no longer loved”.<sup>43</sup> Penzhorn had noted further that post-war “anglicisation” was responsible for the emergence of an “evil” spirit among the African population, which led to “false stirring for independence by the blacks, their mistrust and arrogance towards whites, and how difficulties arise from this for mission work”.<sup>44</sup>

### **Establishing the IPHC: The challenges**

It is in the foregoing context that Spooner’s arrival was understood by the BaFokeng. They had great expectations of him. Their understanding of Spooner was that because he was not just an educated black man, but also from the USA, he would be much more than a missionary. For these reasons, he was expected to be their political spokesperson and, perhaps, even a liberator! However, the BaFokeng quickly realized that he was neither of these, and they

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40 For details about Ethiopianism, see Shepperson & Price, *Independent African ...*, pp. 72-74. Quotation, pp. 72-73.

41 HMB, 2, February 1908, p. 39.

42 For details of how Alfred Milner’s administration quickly and forcefully restored the pre-South African War racial relations in the Pilanesberg region in the Western Transvaal, see B Mbenga, “The role of the Bakgatla of the Pilanesberg in the South African War”, G Cuthbertson, A Grundlingh & ML Suttie (eds.), *Writing a wider war: Rethinking gender, race and identity in the South African War, 1899-1902* (Athens, Ohio University Press & Cape Town, David Philip Publishers, 2002), chapter 5.

43 HMB, 3, January 1911, p. 10.

44 HMB, 1, January 1911, p. 8.

were disappointed. Consequently, they became apathetic towards him and his work. Bozzoli has recorded that at the beginning of his work, Spooner met a great deal of resistance.<sup>45</sup> Spooner writes as follows: “We had to work real hard for the first two years as the people were somewhat disappointed in us. They thought that we had come to give them an education and to preach politics. So when we began to preach the Gospel, we met with some opposition”. Within the first two years, this “opposition” grew so intense that, Spooner records, he became “doubtful” whether he and his wife “would ever be able to settle in Phokeng”. Even after Chief Mokgatle had offered the Spooners a plot of land to settle and build on, “there was so much opposition and false representation made to the chief concerning us, that we were at the point of being driven from the village at any moment”.

The lowest point came one Sunday morning, just before church service on 10 September 1916, when a group of BaFokeng rushed into Spooner’s church and physically fought D Rangaka, accusing him of disclosing “all their secret moves” against the IPHC to Spooner, an accusation which Spooner denied. The attackers then told Spooner and his wife “to clear out and go back to America” and also ensured that the church service was not held, by “guarding the door with sticks, ready to beat anybody who would enter the church”.<sup>46</sup> Further trouble was averted when Spooner reported the matter to the police in Rustenburg. But before the police arrived, Chief Mokgatle requested Spooner to ask the police not to come, which he acceded to. The chief then promptly held court, fined the offenders and warned them to stop harassing the Spooners and their congregation.<sup>47</sup> This was the end of trouble for the Spooners from their BaFokeng hosts.

Undoubtedly, much of this “opposition” to Spooner was being fermented by the German Lutheran head missionary, Penzhorn, who saw him as an intruder into ‘his’ missionary field. For that reason, Penzhorn “disliked him intensely”.<sup>48</sup> In his annual report for 1920, Penzhorn’s reasons for his strong dislike of Spooner came out as follows:<sup>49</sup>

So-called Christians [have] sent their children to his [reference to Spooner’s] school. Even three of our church wardens set this evil example. We also have an evening school for the herdsmen, in which religion, Setswana,

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45 B Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng* ..., p. 67.

46 All quotes in this part come from KEM Spooner, *Native life in South Africa*..., p. 12.

47 KEM Spooner, *Native life in South Africa*..., p. 13.

48 N Mokgatle, *The autobiography of an unknown South African*..., p. 78.

49 HMB, 11, November/December 1920, p. 214.

and English are being taught. But they leave our school and go to the Ethiopian Baptists [sic], because English is spoken there. We have opposed this energetically.

As Mbenga and Manson have pointed out, Spooner and Penzhorn remained implacable foes, “until their deaths in 1937 and 1940, respectively”.<sup>50</sup>

Spooner faced a different set of problems from another front. One of his roles as a religious minister was to marry couples in his church. But to do so, he had to obtain a licence from the government to allow him to perform the role of Marriage Officer. But because, as a black man, he could marry only black couples, he had to obtain such authority from the Native Affairs Department in Pretoria, to which he duly applied in August 1915, about two months after his arrival.<sup>51</sup> Spooner did not find it easy to obtain the required licence. The Secretary for Native Affairs (SNA) in Pretoria demanded a copy of the constitution of Spooner’s church and much more information, before he would consider Spooner’s application. In any case, the Sub-Native Commissioner (SNC) for Rustenburg rejected the application, claiming that Spooner’s “role as a marriage officer is not necessary to meet the needs of his congregation ...”.<sup>52</sup> We should note that in the racist context of South Africa at the time, Spooner was considered simply as a “Native,” albeit a slightly “elevated” one because he was American.

The racist attitude of the government towards Spooner was indicated in another manner. In November 1915, Spooner applied to the Minister of Native Affairs for permission to allow into the Union of South Africa three black women guests from the British West Indies, one of them his seventy-five year old mother-in-law and another his sister-in-law for, as Spooner put it “the sole purpose of doing missionary work in connection with the IPHC stationed at Phokeng, Rustenburg District”.<sup>53</sup> This request had two implications. First, it suggested that pressure of work for Spooner was so much that he needed extra help and, second, that Spooner’s connections with his original homeland of Barbados were still quite strong despite the very many years he had been away. Although Spooner emphasised to the Minister of Native Affairs that the women were “British subjects” who had “all passed the age of thirty” and were “reliable Christian workers”,<sup>54</sup> the matter dragged

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50 B Mbenga & A Manson, *People of the dew...*, p. 66.

51 BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: Kenneth Spooner to SNC, Rustenburg, 17 August 1915.

52 Spooner to SNC.

53 BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: Spooner to Minister of Native Affairs, Pretoria, 8 November 1915.

54 Compare with: Spooner to Minister.

on into early in the new year, 1916, with the SNA wanting to know from the SNC in Rustenburg if there would be accommodation and subsistence for the women in Phokeng, whether Spooner was “a European or a coloured man”, and apparently a host of other frustrating questions.<sup>55</sup>

Spooner’s answer that his five-roomed house in Phokeng was ready for the women and that they would receive financial support from his church in New York could not sway the Minister of Native Affairs. He rejected the application without giving any reasons.<sup>56</sup> Thinking that he might have better luck next time, Spooner re-submitted the application three years later but was, again, turned down.<sup>57</sup> However, he had better luck with his much earlier application for a Marriage Officer licence, which he was finally granted in November, 1922, some seven years after his first application. By that time, the SNC for Rustenburg, H Griffith, had known Spooner well enough to declare him “of good character” and “a well-educated man,”<sup>58</sup> while a few years later another senior Native Affairs Department official described him as “by far the best and most capable of any black ministers in the district ..., a well-dressed, respectable and respectful man”.<sup>59</sup>

The precise extent of racial practice within the IPHC during Spooner’s time is unclear. However, Spooner does appear to have experienced a degree of racism from the white leadership of the IPHC in South Africa, and there are a few indications in this regard. First, although the Spooners arrived in South Africa in 1915, they were ‘officially recognised’ as members only during the church’s national conference in 1922, some seven years after their arrival at their Phokeng mission station. This delay in recognition is not explained in the official church records, but could be due to racism. Second, Spooner, who was elected as Assistant Superintendent of the church at the same conference, remained in that position until his death in 1937. Yet, JE Rhodes, a white American missionary who arrived in the country two years after Spooner, was made Superintendent over Spooner. This is ironical, for a man who is described by a contemporary white observer as follows:<sup>60</sup>

Mr Spooner became the personal friend of most Europeans ... with whom he came in contact, and even those whom he only occasionally met always

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55 BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: SNA to SNC, 3 January 1916.

56 BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: SNC to SNA, 10 Jan. 1916; Acting Secretary for the Interior to SNA, 21 January 1916.

57 BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: Spooner to SNC, 13 February 1919.

58 BAO 7283, File 20/4/990: SNC to SNA, 15 November 1922.

59 BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: SNC, DR Hunt, to Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, n.d.

60 *History of the Pentecostal Holiness Church*, pp. 1-2. Quotation, p. 2.

spoke very highly of him. The reason was that the goodness of his character was transparent. One had only to meet him to appreciate his frankness and candor.

Perhaps a clearer indication of racism towards Spooner was the fact that when Rhodes and his family went back to the US on furlough in 1924, it was not his assistant, Spooner, who was chosen to act in his place, as would be expected. Instead, another white missionary, JW Brooks, who arrived in South Africa later than Spooner, was chosen to act in Rhodes' position as Superintendent of the IPHC.<sup>61</sup> This is perhaps not surprising, given the racist milieu of South Africa at the time, in which a black person giving leadership and instructions to whites would have been unacceptable to the latter.

Nevertheless, Spooner was single-minded about his missionary purpose in Phokeng. He built a church and a school and began to preach and make conversions. Many of the IPHC doctrines were familiar to the BaFokeng through the Lutheran Church, such as the need to conform to the teachings and exhortations of the Bible. However, other IPHC doctrines were completely new to the BaFokeng. According to the church constitution published in 1921, members, for example, were "forbidden to have fellowship with oathbound [sic] secret societies, social clubs, and corrupt partisan politics" or to participate in "worldly amusement, such as motion picture shows, baseball games, picnics, circuses, dancing halls, pool rooms, billiard tables, gambling dens of all kinds, county and state fairs ...". Membership of unions was expressly forbidden, as was the consumption of "intoxicants" of all kinds, "the use of tobacco in any form," as well as the wearing of jewellery and all kinds of "outward adorning" of one's body or clothing.<sup>62</sup> But it is not clear to what extent BaFokeng followers of the IPHC adhered to these strict rules.

Despite these seemingly austere regulations, many BaFokeng, including Hermannsburgers, were attracted to and joined the IPHC. Spooner's church, therefore, became an immediate challenge to the long-established German church. There were four facets that attracted the BaFokeng to Spooner's church. First, the manner in which he conducted baptism was new and seemed fascinating. He held baptisms in the open rivers, lakes and ponds, just like Jesus did. This, according to the MoFokeng author and politician,

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61 *Pentecostal Holiness Church: Discipline of the Pentecostal Holiness Church* (Royston, Georgia, USA, Publishing House of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, 1921), pp. 7-8.

62 *Pentecostal Holiness Church...*, For detailed secondary sources on the origins and development of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, see V Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal tradition: Charismatic movements in the twentieth century* (Michigan & Cambridge, 1971); AD Beacham, *A brief history of the Pentecostal Holiness Church* (Franklin Springs, 1983).

N Mokgatle, “sunk deeply into the minds of those who later made up their minds to join Mr. Spooner’s church”. Second, during prayer in church, each congregant appealed directly to God, instead of the priest doing so on behalf of the congregation, as practised in the Lutheran Church. Third, in Spooner’s church, baptism was given only to believers over the age of sixteen, a stage when they were considered to be mature enough to ask for it themselves, unlike in the Lutheran Church where parents would decide for their babies to be baptised.<sup>63</sup> Fourth, Robert Edgar has given another reason why Africans more readily accepted the message of Christianity from African-American missionaries generally than from Europeans and states as follows:<sup>64</sup>

Many Africans had a positive image of black Americans because they had originally come from Africa. They had acquired skills and education and they were sympathetic to their African kinfolk. Thus they were more acceptable as missionaries than Europeans.

Spooner himself confirms this point when he says that in the many far-flung areas of the Rustenburg district where he and D Rangaka preached, people accepted the message of God because “they enjoyed hearing me, a black man, speak English and Dan interpret. This novelty proved an instrument in God’s hand to bring many to the feet of Jesus”.<sup>65</sup> Yet other BaFokeng who joined Spooner’s church did so because it was widely rumoured that he could heal the sick by praying for them.<sup>66</sup>

The depth of the religious impact of Spooner’s church upon the people of Phokeng is illustrated by the departure of, arguably, the most important Lutheran MoFokeng stalwart of Penzhorn’s church, D Rangaka, who had joined Spooner’s church within a year of its establishment in Phokeng. Rangaka was one of the first teachers of catechism in the Bible School of the Lutheran Church. He was also a highly skilled carpenter whose practice “brought him immense wealth and dignity”. A pillar of the Lutheran church and well-respected member of BaFokeng society, Rangaka would sometimes preach during Sunday service in the absence of the missionary, Penzhorn. Penzhorn trusted Rangaka so much that he allowed him to baptise babies and hold confirmation classes even while he was around. It is therefore understandable that Penzhorn became very disappointed when Rangaka

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63 N Mokgatle, *The autobiography of an unknown South African...*, p. 74.

64 R Edgar, *Because they chose the plan of God ...*, p. 9.

65 KEM Spooner, *A sketch of native life in South Africa ...*, p. 31. Spooner was subsequently able to speak Setswana fluently.

66 B Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng ...*, p. 68.



left the Lutheran Church to join the IPHC.<sup>67</sup> Rangaka soon became a very prominent and influential leader in the IPHC, second only to Spooner himself, just as he had earlier been in the Lutheran Church. Phokeng was now the regional headquarters of the church from where it spread to the wider Rustenburg and neighbouring districts. Rangaka, together with other leading African members of the church, such as N Mokgatle, became its spiritual pillars who spread the gospel to other BaTswana communities, such as the BaKgatla-ba-Kgafela, BaBididi and BaHurutshe. Rangaka himself became an itinerant missionary to the north, with his base at Kolontoaneng among the BaHurutshe where he eventually died in the early 1930s.<sup>68</sup>

However, the most important terrain of struggle between the IPHC and the German missionaries was the issue of day-school education. Penzhorn, who saw himself both as an educator and a preacher, believed that all teaching should be conducted in the local African language of SeTswana, while the curriculum content ought to be largely religious. His school, therefore, provided basic religious training that ended in confirmation of the pupils.<sup>69</sup> In this sort of thinking, Penzhorn was simply following the accepted white missionary philosophy in South Africa generally, at the time but the Transvaal especially, which saw the teaching of the Gospel in African schools as the most important component of education, with literacy and the rudiments of Western education coming a poor second. In espousing the purpose of education in Dutch Reformed Church schools in the Pilanesberg, the church's senior missionary and scholar, WL Maree, put it explicitly as follows: "The purpose of education is to develop understanding, empathy and to win the children for Christ".<sup>70</sup> Perhaps even more revealing, and complimenting the missionary position, was the official view of the Transvaal Department of Education which, as late as 1930, stated that mission schools for Africans "are regarded as ancillary to the religious activities of the missionary societies with which they are connected".<sup>71</sup>

Following this philosophy, in the Lutheran school of missionary Penzhorn in Phokeng, teaching was conducted entirely in the SeTswana language

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67 N Mokgatle, *The autobiography of an unknown South African...*, pp. 68-69. Quotation, p. 68.

68 N Mokgatle, *The autobiography of an unknown South African...*, pp. 81-83.

69 GN Simpson, "Peasants and politics in the Western Transvaal, 1920-1940" (MA, University of the Witwatersrand, 1986), pp. 376-377.

70 WL Maree, *Uit duisternis geroep* (Johannesburg, Voortrekkerpers, 1966), pp. 65-66. For details of this 'educational' philosophy of the DRC, see B Mbenga, "The Bakgatla-baga-Kgafela in the Pilanesberg district of the Western Transvaal, 1899-1931" (PhD, University of South Africa, 1997), p. 74.

71 TKP, Vol. 239, The Transvaal Education Department Report, 31 December 1922.

because, he believed, doing so in English would alienate the pupils from their culture and tradition.<sup>72</sup> Unlike in Penzhorn's school where "the only medium of instruction was the vernacular" and the "most important books were the catechism and [the] Bible ...",<sup>73</sup> in Spooner's school, teaching was in English, which was also an important subject in its own right, while curriculum content and instruction were largely secular. In the mornings and afternoons, the church building was used as a school by BaFokeng children learning the English alphabet and to speak, read and write English. All BaFokeng parents were eager for their children to learn English and, therefore, "sent them to Mr. Spooner's school in large numbers". The IPHC accepted all children, irrespective of their parents' religious denomination. Penzhorn tried to discourage this trend among his church members, arguing that it was not necessary for their children to learn English because it was a foreign language. The BaFokeng, however, rejected Penzhorn's argument, saying that their children needed to learn English because they "were bound to have dealings with the English people who had established their rule in the country". Perceiving that Spooner must be behind all this, Penzhorn simply loathed the man.<sup>74</sup>

The Lutheran school finally began to offer some English lessons as a way of counter-acting Spooner's influence, but continued to place much more emphasis upon the teaching of catechism than English. This Hermmansburgers' reaction achieved very little. The children who attended Spooner's school became far more competent at writing, speaking and reading English than those in the Lutheran school. In order to placate their German pastor, however, the Lutheran BaFokeng parents devised an interesting practice. They sent their sons to Spooner's school, and daughters to the Lutheran school!<sup>75</sup> This is explained by the fact that the patriarchal, male-dominated Tswana societies placed more value on sons than daughters. But, it must be pointed out that in Spooner's school, religious education was certainly a very important subject also, but the difference being that it was not as dominant as in Penzhorn's school.<sup>76</sup>

The BaFokeng desire to learn English, perhaps a consequence of having a British government following the South African War of 1899-1902, was very

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72 GN Simpson, *Peasants and politics ...*, p. 377.

73 GN Simpson, *Peasants and politics ...*, p. 376.

74 N Mokgatle, *The autobiography of an unknown South African ...*, p. 78.

75 N Mokgatle, *The autobiography of an unknown South African ...*, p. 79.

76 GN Simpson, *Peasants and politics ...*, p. 376.

strong. But it was also seen as a threat by the Lutheran missionaries because it inculcated a sense of, as Penzhorn put it: “being clever and distinguished too. Because all these superior people speak English, that language becomes the epitome of all intelligence”.<sup>77</sup> Several of the women interviewed in Bozzoli’s study of BaFokeng women in the late 1980s confirmed that the community placed enormous pressure upon Penzhorn to accommodate their desire for English and the ‘more open’ and ‘superior’ education which they perceived to come with it.<sup>78</sup> Presumably, that is why Penzhorn belatedly emulated Spooner by introducing the teaching of English into his school afterwards.<sup>79</sup>

It was this secular nature of the education Spooner provided that so strongly appealed to African parents and children not only in Phokeng but much further afield. Mokgatle states that pupils from as far as the Pedi areas of northern South Africa came to attend Spooner’s school.<sup>80</sup> To start with, Spooner taught the pupils himself and, in August 1915, he had 25 pupils in his day school and 42 others in the night school.<sup>81</sup> By 1917, the school had grown from 6 to 100 pupils and Spooner had to extend the buildings and employ another teacher to help him. In 1933, the school had classes up to Standard Six and, the following year, the government allowed him to open a boarding school.<sup>82</sup> He was doing very well indeed. By 1936, Spooner had established satellite mission stations in far-flung parts of the Rustenburg District, such as on the farm Tweelaagte 180 and Ottoshoop Location.<sup>83</sup> In addition to these missions stations and his work in Phokeng, he presided over IPHC churches and schools at Ratsegaestad, Palmietfontein, Pella, Grootfontein, Naauwpoort, Mabieskraal, Stroomrivier, Matau, Middlepoort and Koffiekraal (this last one under Daniel Rangaka), – all in the wider Rustenburg and Marico Districts.<sup>84</sup> These are the reasons why Bozzoli records that “Spooner’s greatest contribution lay in the field of education”.<sup>85</sup>

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77 HMB, 2, February 1908, p. 39.

78 B Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng ...*, pp. 69-75.

79 N Mokgatle, *The autobiography of an unknown South African ...*, p. 79.

80 Cited in GN Simpson, *Peasants and politics ...*, p. 378.

81 BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: SNC, Rustenburg, to SNA, Pretoria, 17 September 1915.

82 GN Simpson, *Peasants and politics ...*, p. 378.

83 NTS 707, File 340/110: Spooner to Additional Commissioner (ANC), Rustenburg, 14 Oct. 19135; TPB 1302, File TA 10819, Part 1: SNA to Provincial Secretary, 24 April 1936.

84 BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: Superintendent Rhodes, to SNC, Krugersdorp, 28 May 1924; BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: DR Hunt, SNC, to Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, n.d. (c. 1925); NTS 696, File 61/110: SNA to NC, Zeerust, Marico, Pentecostal Holiness Church: Church Site at Maramange in the Moiloa Reserve, District of Marico, 28 January 1929.

85 B Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng ...*, p. 69.

In Phokeng itself, while Spooner's school was thriving and seemingly destined for much more success. Ironically, however, the government's Department of Education began to thwart his efforts, presumably prompted by his white missionary competitors in the area. T Rangaka, one of the leading BaFokeng Christians at the time, recorded the problems brought by Spooner's success as follows:<sup>86</sup>

His educational policy being in striking contrast to that of other missions working in the same place, aroused great antagonism. This was the inevitable result of keen competition on the educational field. He was accused of teaching English at the entire exclusion of the vernacular. The department and the local authorities were influenced by those who had easy access to the powers that be. In 1917, his school was nearly closed down ... [He] stood his ground with Christian fortitude. But he was handicapped by the fact of his being classed as a native – the fact of his colour.

Another problem Spooner had to contend with was the lack of official recognition of him by the government. Four years after his arrival in Phokeng, the government was still very reluctant to give official recognition to Spooner's church because of the deep suspicion that it was, as the Secretary for the Interior put it, a "Separatist Church," a label which the IPHC Superintendent in Johannesburg vehemently denied. However, finally, after some representations and explanations from March 1920, the church was eventually 'regarded as a recognized Christian denomination' by the Union Government.<sup>87</sup>

Undoubtedly, the fact that Spooner's superior, a white man, took up this difficult issue of government recognition of a black man, helped greatly. As a black person, Spooner on his own was less likely to succeed. Indeed, towards the end of 1920, rumours began to reach the SNA in Pretoria to the effect that Spooner might be engaging in "undesirable political propaganda" among the black communities of Rustenburg. Consequently, the local SNC, H Griffith, was instructed to investigate the matter, but found the rumour to be false.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, the Native Affairs Department officials remained apprehensive about possible "subversive" activity by Spooner. The SNA, therefore, wrote to the Secretary for the Interior, describing the church of "the only alien Pentecostal Coloured Missionary known to this Department" as being "under

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86 T Rangaka, quoted in Malista Geraldine Spooner *et al* (eds.), *Sketches on the life of K.E.M. Spooner*, n.d., pp. 61-62.

87 BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: JO Lehman, Superintendent, IPHC, Johannesburg, to Secretary for the Interior, Pretoria, 4 March 1920; BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: SNA to Lehman, 30 March 1920.

88 BAO 7283, File 120/4/990: SNA to SNC, 29 October 1920; SNC to SNA, 1 November 1920.

loose [sic] control,” as well as “hysterical and a not [sic] particularly reliable organization”. He also hinted at the possibility of the IPHC ending up like “the events at Bullhoek...”<sup>89</sup>

Politically, the middle of 1921 was a particularly sensitive time in terms of race relations in South Africa. On 24 May 1921, a force of 800 white policemen and soldiers confronted an African religious prophet called E Mgijima and his followers known as the Israelites at Bullhoek near Queenstown in the Eastern Cape. The Israelites, whom the government claimed were squatting illegally on some land, believed that the world was about to end and refused to leave their holy village of Ntabelanga when they were instructed to do so by the authorities. Using machine guns and cannons, the government force went into ‘battle’ with the Israelites, who were armed with only sticks and spears. The result was over 200 Israelites dead and many others wounded. This episode became known as the “Bullhoek Massacre.”<sup>90</sup> Following this incident, the government became ‘jumpy’ about the slightest indication of insurrection in African-led churches.

White fears of a possible insurrection by Spooner and his church were understandable but misplaced because Spooner was pacifist by nature. We have already noted how, by the end of 1922, the local Native Affairs Department officials, once they had come to understand the true nature of Spooner’s character, described him in such glowing terms. Spooner’s character is further vindicated by the fact that in February 1930, when he applied to the Secretary for the Interior for a South African visa to go on furlough for a year to the USA, about nineteen of the most prominent white citizens of Rustenburg, including businessmen, attorneys and government officials, endorsed his application, each appending his own signature. A part of this letter of recommendation described Spooner as “a native of intelligence, education and standing in this district” and “in all respects a desirable influence on the native people and we are of the opinion that if he visits his home in America he should be allowed to return to his work in this country”.<sup>91</sup> Another endorsement, by the Additional Native Commissioner, JE Liefeldt, added that Spooner was “thought very highly of by all sections of the community and the schools under his supervision are admirably conducted”.<sup>92</sup> For these reasons, the

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89 BAO 7283, File 20/4/990: SNC to SNA, 30 June 1921.

90 For details, see R Edgar, *Because they chose the plan of God...*

91 NTS 2708, File 53/301, Part :, Letter of recommendation: Reverend Kenneth Spooner, 20 April 1929.

92 NTS 2708, File 53/301: Additional Native Commissioner, JE Liefeldt, Rustenburg, to SNA, Pretoria, 30 April 1929.

Secretary for Native Affairs promptly endorsed Spooner's application to the Secretary for the Interior.<sup>93</sup>

As a black foreigner in the Union of South Africa at the time, Spooner must have been well aware that if he was to remain in the country to do his missionary work for as long as he wanted, he had to keep completely clear of politics – and he did just that. Contrary to some of the prevailing government and missionary notions of the time, not all African-American missionaries who came to evangelize in Africa sought to stir anti-colonial protest or insurrection among Africans. Indeed, some could be overtly placatory towards whites. In January 1930, for example, the *Rustenburg Herald* reported that a visiting African-American Bishop, GB Young of Texas, who had just attended the annual conference of the American Methodist Episcopal Church in Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe), addressed the delegates stating, among other issues, as follows: “Don't make enemies – make friends. Cultivate the goodwill and sympathetic interest of the white man”.<sup>94</sup> This was Spooner's attitude too.

In his efforts at the general development of the African community in his district, Spooner singled out the youth and catered specifically for them through a number of social projects. In Phokeng, for example, he established sports facilities for boys and girls, an unprecedented development in BaFokeng society. Not long afterwards, Penzhorn emulated Spooner in this regard. From 1922, Spooner organized an annual “youth camp meeting” in which he initiated religious and social activities for what he termed “religious youth revival” among the BaFokeng. In 1933, after a few of such meetings, Spooner could claim that ninety-four young men and women had ‘converted immediately’ to his church.<sup>95</sup>

Spooner believed in involving himself in community activities. In keeping with this philosophy, he was also responsible for “the successful Agricultural and Native Craft Shows” which he held annually in the district during his last few years.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, in a meeting in Rustenburg at the end of January 1937, just two months before his death, he became a founder member of a branch of the Joint Council of Europeans and Africans. Two of the objectives of this body were to promote “good inter-racial relations through discussion

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93 NTS 2708, File 53/301: SNC, FJ Kockott, Pretoria, to Secretary for the Interior, 1 March 1930.

94 *Rustenburg Herald*, 3 January 1930.

95 GN Simpson, *Peasants and politics ...*, pp. 375-376.

96 *Rustenburg Herald*, 5 March 1937.

and cooperation between European and Bantu” and to “investigate and report upon any matter affecting the relations of the two races.” Spooner was elected Assistant Secretary, the only black member of the branch executive, consisting of the town’s magistrate as Chairperson and the Public Prosecutor as Secretary. The meeting had been convened by Rheinhallt-Jones, the national organizer of such councils in the Union of South Africa who had travelled from Johannesburg specially for this meeting.<sup>97</sup> It was through this Council that a health clinic was eventually built in Phokeng,<sup>98</sup> the initial efforts presumably having been Spooner’s.

On Sunday 28 February 1937, Spooner died of natural causes in the Rustenburg Hospital, aged 57, leaving behind his wife, Malista Geraldine, and one adopted MoFokeng daughter, Wilhemina. He died with the rank of District Superintendent of his church. The enormous popularity of the man was revealed during his burial ceremony in Phokeng, shortly after which the local *Rustenburg Herald* newspaper reported as follows: “Besides the 2500 natives there were about 100 Rustenburg, Johannesburg and Pretoria Europeans amongst whom were [sic] Mr. Tym Saffary, from Johannesburg, Secretary to the Institute of Race Relations”. The people who officiated during the burial ceremony were the IPHC’s national Superintendent, J Rhodes, and the Native Commissioner for Rustenburg, a Mr Emmet. Among the many eulogies during the ceremony were that Spooner had been “a mediator between the two races in South Africa,” and “a strong link between the Government and the thousands of natives who had belonged to his church”. In particular, Chief Mokgatle expressed deep gratitude on behalf of his people, especially the youth who “had benefited [sic] greatly” from the life and work of the Reverend Spooner.<sup>99</sup> Spooner’s widow, “Mother Spooner,” as she was affectionately known, remained in Phokeng, working with BaFokeng women’s two religious organisations she had founded in the village earlier. She passed away in Phokeng on Christmas Day in 1971 at the age of 98.<sup>100</sup>

## Conclusion

Spooner arrived in South Africa at a momentous time, just after the formation of the Union of South Africa by the Boers and the British which excluded blacks from the constitutional arrangements of the country. Some critics

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<sup>97</sup> *Rustenburg Herald*, 29 January 1937.

<sup>98</sup> GN Simpson, *Peasants and politics ...*, p. 376.

<sup>99</sup> *Rustenburg Herald*, 5 March 1937.

<sup>100</sup> *Mission South Africa: History of the Pentecostal Holiness Church*, pp. 3-4.

might see him as an Uncle Tom who perhaps ought to have tried to fight the racial injustices in the society in which he operated. But it must be appreciated that Spooner was in a very difficult situation in which his circumstances were circumscribed by not only the austere constitution of his church, but also the overall political situation in which black people had neither political nor civil rights. However, despite all the odds being against him, Spooner, nevertheless, made a multi-faceted and outstanding contribution to the African people of South Africa generally and left an immeasurable legacy. He spread the Gospel and Western education far beyond the BaFokeng community. By the time of his death in 1937, Spooner's church had expanded into many other parts of South Africa, resulting in 60 mission stations, seven primary and 23 high schools. The fact that the Reverend Spooner is still very well-regarded and widely remembered in Phokeng today – even by BaFokeng who were born some twenty years after his death – is a strong pointer to his legacy, as is the fact that many BaFokeng today bear the surname Spooner with pride.<sup>101</sup>

Image 1: Reverend Kenneth Spooner, Phokeng, Rustenburg, late 1920s



Source: Dr Frank G Tunstall, "K.E.M. Spooner, IPHC's first African American missionary" (Paper, 26 November 2015), (available at [www.hughnews.com/newsletter-posts/](http://www.hughnews.com/newsletter-posts/), as accessed on 30 November 2018).

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101 B Mbenga (Personal Collection), interview, T Tsambo, Mmabatho, South Africa, 29 July 2003. Ms Tsambo comes from the BaFokeng heartland, Phokeng, and a direct descendant of the great 19th century king, Mokgatle Thethe of the BaFokeng.



Image 2: Grave of the Reverend Kem Spooner in Phokeng. The epitaph reads:

*I have not done much, but what little i have done i did to the best of my ability. I have tried to do my little bit.*



Source: F & M Duncan "You gave, Yet Africa Calls", typescript by IHPC members, n.d., p. 92.