

An Anglican Tribute to the 'Tiny Giant', Emma Mashinini

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The Archbishop admits 'Tiny' Mashinini into the Order of Simon of Cyrene.

The Anglican Church of Southern Africa admitted Emma Mashinini to the Order of Simon of Cyrene at Provincial Synod last September. After her death this week, the citation is an eloquent tribute which helps us to celebrate her life:

If anyone meets the criteria set out by the House of Bishops for the award of the Order of Simon of Cyrene to a Lay member of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa, Mrs Emma Thandi Mashinini is one such and thus truly worthy of receiving this award. Indeed, on reflection the award is long overdue.

All Christians by virtue of their baptism are admitted into a community of believers who are called, after the example of Jesus Christ, to servanthood. The Order of Simon of

Cyrene takes its inspiration from the one who was compelled to carry the cross of Jesus and we are all called to “bear one another’s burdens”.

Emma Thandi Mashinini, or the “Tiny Giant” as she is fondly referred to, was born in Rosettenville, Johannesburg, in 1929 and attended the Bantu Secondary School in Sophiatown. At the age of 14, she was forced to drop out of school and go to work due to domestic circumstances. In Soweto she was a member of the Parish of Holy Cross in Orlando West where she was also a member of the choir. Mama Emma regards the church as her stronghold.

In 1956, she took on a full-time job working in the Henochsberg’s clothing factory and there joined the Garment Workers’ Union (GWU). Later, when it was rendered difficult for blacks and whites to belong to the same trade unions (although not unlawful!), she became active in the National Union of Clothing Workers whose General Secretary and leading light was Mrs Lucy Mvubelo. That meant that this union of predominantly black women became a satellite union of GWU. She was elected shop steward by her co-workers in 1970 and was later appointed floor supervisor by management. In this capacity, she fought to improve the working conditions of the employees. In standing up to a labour system that disadvantaged black women in particular, she achieved one of her greatest victories – the breaking of job reservation at Henochsberg’s. Her union was able to negotiate better working hours, wage increases and the right of workers to have unemployment insurance. She was elected to the National Executive Committee of the National Union of Clothing Workers (NUCW).

In 1975, Mrs Mashinini resigned from Henochsberg’s and took up a position as president of a new union that she had helped to establish, the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA). Despite a slow start, the union had 1 000 members by 1977 and, within five years, had opened offices in Durban and Cape Town. By this time, CCAWUSA was the second largest union in the country behind the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). She is very proud that during her time as President of CCAWUSA her union was among the founding affiliates of COSATU in 1985.

In 1986, under the influence of then Bishop Desmond Tutu, who was Bishop of Johannesburg, but previously General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, Emma Mashinini took up a position as Head of the CPSA’s Department of Justice and Reconciliation, in which role she worked alongside the likes of Sheena Duncan, and the SACCs Dependant’s Conference. She valued the opportunity given to her by the church to serve in this capacity, and it added to her own role as an active

member of the Mothers' Union in her parish. In this role she dealt closely with the families of detainees who had been incarcerated during the state of emergency.

From 1993 to 1995, she served as deputy chairperson of the National Manpower Commission, a state body under the Department of Labour at that time. She was appointed Commissioner for the Restitution of Land Rights, with responsibility for the Province of Gauteng. Emma Mashinini is a patron of the Council for the Advancement of the South African Constitution (CASAC) and is also a founder member of both United Cerebral Palsy and of the women's stokvel "Be United".

Mama Mashinini has been widely recognised at home and abroad for her sterling contribution to justice and equality, and for her support of the struggles of the people. Perhaps the most prestigious of these is the Order of Luthuli (bronze) awarded by the President of the Republic of South Africa in the National Honours Awards 2007. In 2012 the University of South Africa conferred on her the D Litt et D Phil honoris causa.

Mama Emma has been a lifelong, dedicated, faithful and active member of the Anglican Church. As a Christian she has given sterling public service to the benefit of others – as a trade unionist, a community worker and as a member of the Mothers Union. Mrs Mashinini has been a fighter for justice not just for the workers, but also for gender equality, and land rights. It is therefore, as a courageous campaigner for justice, and as a faithful Christian that the Anglican Church acknowledges her contribution in the most fitting manner available to the church.

Wife, mother, factory worker, trade unionist, leader and role model; fearless and unrelenting fighter for equal rights in the workplace, a social justice campaigner, as much as a human and gender rights activist. The indomitable Ma Emma, the "Tiny Giant", now in her eighties, continues to uplift many a person in the new environment of South Africa, giving hope to many and a role model to younger generations.