

# *This Month in Moravian History*

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commemorating events from Moravian History

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## John Zwelibanzi, Native Minister in South Africa

*This month marks the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of John Zwelibanzi, native teacher and minister, on February 11, 1883 in Clarkson, South Africa.*

Zwelibanzi was born April 12, 1832 in Burnshill by Lovedale, South Africa. Bishop Christian Breutel, during a visit to South Africa in 1853, recalled meeting Zwelibanzi's parents, members of the Fingo (Mfengu) tribe, who told him that "all their children, except one son, John Zwelibanzi ... had been taken from them by the Caffres, cut in pieces, and eaten in the general famine." Tribal rivalries, war and famine plagued 19<sup>th</sup>-century South Africa. Despite these hardships, John Zwelibanzi attended the Teachers' Training College at the Moravian mission of Genadendal. He was confirmed at Genadendal on April 22, 1849, at age 17. A couple of years later he was noted "as a hopeful candidate for usefulness as a schoolmaster and evangelist," and in December 1852 he was assigned as a catechist to the Fingo population in Clarkson where he lived with his stepbrother, an interpreter for the Moravian mission, for several years.

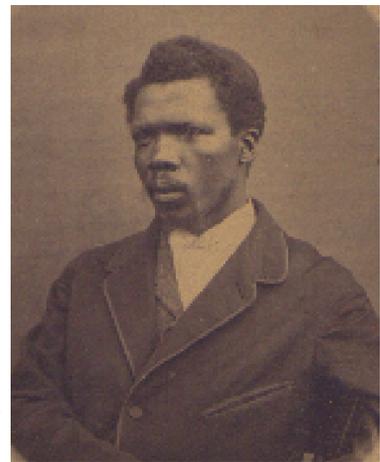
Throughout his ministry Zwelibanzi was noted as a gifted linguist and teacher. Besides mastering various tribal languages, he was fluent in German and Dutch. He excelled as a teacher despite poor conditions, his home often serving as both church and school. Bishop Breutel described Zwelibanzi's classroom near Clarkson:

"The table consists of a few boards nailed upon some stakes, driven into the ground. A box, in which are a violin and some school-books, forms the seat of the schoolmaster. Some blocks, with beams laid upon them, serve as benches for the children. Poor, indeed, as the outward appearance of this school might seem, I do not think, that I ever left any school with a more satisfied feeling. Everything was in good order. The children, to the number of about 30, sat round the walls, and were very attentive. A portion of them were able to read very well. They seemed to be properly instructed in Bible-history, writing, and arithmetic."

In 1855 Zwelibanzi married his wife, Johanna Utimkulu, and soon after moved to another village, Snyklip, where he taught both children and adults and held a weekly religious service. Opposition to his ministry at first was

strong. Women moved to become Christians endured physical abuse from their husbands. Zwelibanzi's crops were destroyed and he was not welcome in people's homes. "When I visit such persons [non-Christians], they do not ask me to sit down, or offer me a mat or Fingoo chair, but I have to sit on the bare floor, and it is as once seen that one is come whose presence is not agreeable."

In 1860 Zwelibanzi was made an acolyte. His competence as a teacher and his consistent Christian character eventually won hearts in the village. By 1863 his meetings were well attended and several were baptized who had at first opposed him. Due to the sudden relocation of many at Snyklip, Zwelibanzi was reassigned to the village of Witkleibosch near Clarkson in 1866, where he served for the next 27 years. On February 11, 1883, he was ordained a deacon of the Moravian Church during a festive service in Clarkson. In 1893, at age 60, Zwelibanzi moved to a new mission at Enon. He served Enon and its filial congregations, Malmaison and Etembeni for the next few years, before retiring in 1895. Leaving a legacy of ministry full of "earnestness and warmth which is grounded on faith in Christ," Zwelibanzi died on May 27, 1901, in the village of Doriskraal near Clarkson, South Africa.



Sources: Dienerblatt; references from *Periodical Accounts*, 1848-1895; Minutes of the Unity Elders' Conference, 1895.

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