

Bambelela 'Hold Fast'

Origins and context

Bambelela was written by members of the JL Zwane Memorial Church in the Gugulethu area of Cape Town in South Africa. It was sung during the HIV-AIDS crisis of the late 1990s and early 2000s to encourage hope in their community. The JL Zwane Memorial Church, along with many other church groups throughout South Africa, was central to fighting stigma, supporting people and educating communities during the HIV-AIDS crisis, and music was a big part of both support and education. Bambelela was sung on a weekly basis during this time, and became a song that was sung all across South Africa in this context as well.

Bambelela was (and still is) sung during the section of the church service where community matters are addressed – a sort of public noticeboard and education space during which updates and information about HIV-AIDS particularly were shared at this time. More recently, information about Covid would have been shared during this time as well. Bambelela is sung to help prepare people to hear potentially difficult news or information; to feel that however difficult what they are about to hear might be, that they can hold on to their faith and hold on to hope.

During the HIV-AIDS crisis many people were themselves affected or had loved ones who were infected or who had died. The messaging that Bambelela helped to carry was that “it is ok to be affected and infected, It’s not the end of the world... In the midst of challenges and obstacles in life, never give up, even in the dark valleys, never give up... Diagnosis is not the end. Something better will happen in the future. You can keep going. We can keep going together.”

Music and style

The ‘call’ for Bambelela will sound different depending who is leading the song. There isn’t a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ version of this, just the version that you are singing today. The same goes for the harmonies – these might change depending who is singing, but the essence of the song remains the same. The song is always sung quite slowly and with gravitas, giving people time to really feel the meaning deep in their bellies. The choir lead this song in the church service, and everyone joins in. You can hear the song here: https://youtu.be/8JF_tfKssdc

Words

The word ‘Bambelela’ literally means ‘hold fast’ and is in the Zulu language. The English words ‘never give up’ are also sung, alternating with ‘bambelela’. The pronunciation is ‘bam-beh-ley-la’ with the other word in the song pronounced ‘bam-ba’.

Sharing the Song

Members of the JL Kwane Memorial Church and choir are happy for others outside of their community to sing Bambelela to help keep hope alive, particularly where people are suffering pain or injustice. You will find below some links to groups doing good work in South Africa where you can make a donation in recompense for the sharing of this song. We can all carry this good work forward.

Links

You can find the JL Zwane Memorial Church here, where you will also find livestream videos of their church services over the last few years (including fabulous singing!): www.facebook.com/jlzwane/

You can make a donation directly to the JL Zwane Memorial Church, who will use the money to support people experiencing poverty in their community, for example giving food parcels to those in need. You can make an international transfer using ‘wise’: <https://wise.com>

Account name: JL Zwane Memorial Church // SWIFT code: SBZAJJ // Account no.: 071323406

And a couple of links to some other organisations doing vital work in South Africa who you can support financially:

AIDS Foundation of South Africa - www.aids.org.za/get-involved

Masimanyane Women’s Support Centre: www.masimanyane.org

Account name: Masimanyane Women’s Support Centre // SWIFT Code: NEDSZAJJ // Account no.: 1210371839