

CONFERENCE BIBLE STUDY DAY 1 2016

ISAIAH 11 VERSE 1-9

1. A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; From his roots, a branch will bear fruits.
2. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him- The Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.
3. and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears;
4. But with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
5. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

6. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

7. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

8. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into a vipers' nest.

9. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Greetings

Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa:

The General Secretary

The Connexional Lay President

The lay General treasurer

The president of SMMS

The Connexional Unit Directors;

District Bishops;

Colleagues in the Ministry

Representatives of organisations

Conference delegates

Allow me to greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me thank the Presiding Bishop for entrusting the responsibility of Leading Conference Bible studies to myself.

What you have done sir, goes against the norms of society and if I may say, the norms of the Church. In a world that says, “The older, the wiser, in a world that says: the more experienced the better, in a world that says: the more masculine the better.” You, sir have literally broken barriers.

(Pause)

##I can see it so clearly in the eye of my mind, I see it clearly, I feel it in fact... The date is the 28th Of August 1963, In the scorching heat, we stand amongst the crowd of 250 000 civil rights supporters on the steps of the Lincoln memorial in Washington DC.

We are those who are tired of racism and discrimination, we are amongst those who are tired of injustice and we long for a time when all will enjoy the God given land and rights. We long for the equal development of all people, we are tired and have seen the damage that discrimination has caused.

Martin Luther King Junior comes up and addresses us, today it is different, today he speaks prophetically. "I have a dream!" he says! He even quotes from the book of Isaiah 40 and says, "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together." I HAVE A DREAM.

Presiding Bishop and conference. On this historic year in the History of the MCSA, a year when we celebrate 40 of ordaining women. It is the year of the Passing on of the Rev Constance Oosthuizen, the first Woman Minister to be ordained in the Southern African Connexion. It is also a year when we celebrate 200 years of Methodism in the Southern part of Africa.

We are in the aftermath of the Methodist people 2016 election of the presiding Bishop and the many slogans that went with it, happenings that echo and resonate so well with the words of Charles Wesley's' hymn, "What troubles have we seen, what mighty conflicts past, fighting's without and fears within since we assembled last."

We have been the Methodist generation of the# makanikwe, makathathe, asikaqedi, asikaqali, hope for change#. It is in this context that I, like Martin Luther king Junior have a dream. Wont you catch this dream and make it a reality?

This dream is not a fantasy, it is not a series of thoughts, images and sensations that one gets in their sleep, it is not a faraway, unobtainable utopian picture, in fact as Walter Bruggeman would say a dream is indeed synonymous to prophetic imagination.

It is a dream that is attainable, requires radical discipleship and as Robert Jarvik puts it into perspective, "Leaders are visionaries with a poorly developed sense of fear and no concept of the odds against them." This dream requires an

underdeveloped sense of fear AND amnesia to the odds stacked against breaking down barriers. **I have a dream.**

1. The theme

Your theme sir, “**Igniting mission, Breaking Barriers**” is under the umbrella theme, “**together a transforming discipleship movement.**” It is a theme that invokes a **desire to see transformed disciples transforming the Church for the healing of Africa and for the healing of nations**, it invokes a **desire to be a vehicle for mission** and a desire to eradicate all barriers to mission. Allow me to say that your **theme is a dream.**

I have a dream. I am however convinced that at the breaking of Barriers mission can be ignited and I am further convinced that at the igniting of authentic mission barriers can be broken. Both aspects of your theme are interrelated and have a **symbiotic relationship.**

2. Back to text

As we study Isaiah 11 together, I would like us today to draw parallels between the world of the text of Isaiah and our context, deriving important insights for this dream. I would like to propose that he dreamt during a period that is similar to the 21st Century reality.

3. Genre of Isaiah 11. The Poetic dreamer

I could not help but be fascinated by the imagery of Isaiah 11. The words of the text are so poetic and so alive. They lead an individual into saying, “I have a dream.” Bruggeman Author of the book, “Prophetic imagination,” takes us on a journey into scripture, back into the present but also forward looking into the future. He actually says that prophets were poets. He goes to the extent of saying that preachers of the word are also to possess prophetic imagination. Imagine if we could take the imagery created in scripture, explore its and present God to people.

Allow me to quote his words. “But you see what the Church does with its creeds and traditions, it flattens out all the images and metaphors to make it fit into a nice little

formulation and then its deathly. So, we have to communicate to people. If we want a God that is Healthier than that, we are going to have to sit with these images and let them become a part of our prayer life and our vocabulary and our conceptual framework.” In short, we have to dream. The images in Isaiah therefore are rich as they give us more access to God and they help us dream of a different world and a different Church.

4. Period and authorship: Who was this dreamer and in what period did he dream

The prophet Isaiah dreamt that a shoot will come from the stem of Jesse.

Who is this shoot? The person of this shoot remains a debate between the biblical scholars. My focus is not on the shoot but on the dream world that will be created by this shoot. Isaiah is in essence saying, the impossible will be made possible, enemies will reside together and on Zion the sacred hill, there will be nothing hurtful and harmful.

The **author of the text is known as the 1st Isaiah or Proto Isaiah**. He is said to be the son of Amoz. He was active in Judah and prophesied for a period of approximately 50 years between 739 BC and 690 BC.

His style of writing **portrays him as a learned person who was either royalty** or part of the elites. Evidence of this is seen in the manner in which he was familiar with kings, take for instance the **King Hezekiah** who sought Isaiah's advise. **He sends for Isaiah in 2nd Kings 19: 2** and he sends Eliakim the official in charge of the palace, he sends Shebna, the court secretary and he also sends the senior priests.

5. Did the dreamer dream alone? Had he no partner?

This dreamer according to Isaiah 8:3 had a partner, a wife. **I do want to note before we go any further that his wife remains nameless**, a behind the scenes sort of person and yet she was there. She was and is **not the first** woman to be unnamed and invisible in scripture. **There's Cain's wife, the daughters of men, priestly daughters, Hebrew women, women caught in adultery....** What happened to their names?

One of the greatest ways to offend a person is to forget their name, not know their name. This woman existed but was non-existent, she is mentioned as a by the way sort of person: wife to Isaiah and mother to his children.

She is like so many women in history and today who are nameless and invisible. **Women like Wangari Mathai, a Kenyan born Activist-Awarded the Nobel peace prize for her efforts to prevent conflict through protection of scarce resources. Women like Malala Yousafzai who defied the Taliban in Pakistan and fought for the right to education, women like Indira Gandhi who became the third prime minister of India.**

Women like the Asante Queen Mothers of Ghana, the Zulu Queen Mother Mkabayi kaJama of the amaZulu people, the legendary Queen Mother of the AmaSwazi, Labotsibeni Gwamile Mdhluli, the Modjadji Lovedu Rain Queen, Hosi N'wamita of the VhaTsonga people. Who are the many gifted sisters and mothers in the Church who are in the shadows?they are here!!

Women have over the **centuries become the forgotten daughters of eve** and I have a dream that women who are made invisible in the MCSA will raise their hands and be counted, men and women will open their eyes and begin to see the gift that both male and females are to the Church. Women cannot remain in the shadows forever. 40 years ago the first woman was ordained, the church has come a long way since then but at the moment we are crawling at a snails' pace. Barriers need to be broken and representation of women in all structures of the Church be attained. **I have a dream.**

6. The dreamer who dreamt during the devided kingdom.

Divided kingdom- divided ministry

Isaiah finds himself ministering during the divided Kingdom and he finds himself ministering to Judah. I would like to note that the divided kingdom was weakened because of the devision. The division was caused by conflict, by animosity and by the struggle for power. Because the kingdom was divided they were vulnerable to their enemies after all: **“United we stand and divided we fall.”**

The discourse of the nation is similar to the one we find ourselves in as the MCSA, divided and thus weakened. We are dealing with the aftermath of the election of the presiding bishop and I am afraid to say that we are a divided house. In his paper entitled, “**Electioneering in the Church.**” The Rev Vusi Vilakati notes the records of John Wesley dated October 1774 where Wesley records, “**I met those of our society who had voted in the ensuing elections and advised them: To vote without fee or reward for the person they judged most worthy. To speak no evil of the person they voted against and to take care their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side.**” The Barrier to mission is our divisions and camps, stereotypes and biases. I have a dream that there would be no divisions in the MCSA.

There is a need for us to regroup, refocus and become a community if we are to break barriers for mission. The division because of race, gender, ethnicity challenges us to **begin again and form community within the MCSA. I have a dream.**

7. How do we then become a United Kingdom?

Morgan Scott Peck an American Psychiatrist and Author wrote a book entitled, “**The different drum**” and he notes that the formation of community cannot occur overnight:

He proposes the stages of community formation, the stages that will move the MCSA from being a divided kingdom to being a **United Kingdom** and they include:

- Pseudo community;
- Chaos;
- Emptiness and
- Finally, community.

He goes on to say, “Pseudo community is when members of a group attempt to be an instant community by being extremely pleasant with one another and avoiding all disagreements. **Is the MCSA a Pseudo community**, avoiding all the thorny issues, being pleasant and yet superficial? **Among the thorny issues, we have are the ff: ethnicity and tribalism, gender disparities and patriarchy, racism, same-sex debate which we cannot seem to resolve, party politics, and financial disparities. The list is too long.** In pseudo-community, a group attempts to

purchase community cheaply by pretence-this is usually done unconsciously and is driven by the desire to avoid conflict”

In the **stage of Chaos, individual differences are right out in the open.** Only now **instead of trying to hide or ignore them,** the group is **now trying to eliminate them,** this is **carried by the desire to convert others** to one’s own point of view. **Are we here as a church? have we have become so polarised in our views on the thorny issues,** that we are in a stage of Chaos? Are we a **chaotic and divided Kingdom, hurting each other** in the fight for dominance?

Emptiness is the hard part and yet it is crucial. This stage involves that everyone empties themselves of barriers to communication, empty ourselves of **preconceptions, assumptions, prejudices, stereotypes, jokes** at other people’s expense, and the need to solve, heal, convert, fix or control others in the group. **Emptiness will happen when we are deliberate about fighting pride,** the fear of being perceived as weak for crossing over to the other.

Israel and Judah were only a United Kingdom after they were stripped and emptied by God through exile. The elite,

the power hungry were taken into exile and only after the return did they co-operate with the dream of God. Emptying is crucial.

Self-emptying is nothing foreign to us Methodists. We are **the people who religiously recite the apostles creed** and are familiar with the words, **“He was conceived by the holy spirit and born of the virgin Mary.”** We are familiar with a **Christ who was incarnate and emptied himself into human form whilst remaining divine.**

We are the ones who are familiar with **Pauls’ words in in Philippians 2verse 6-7,”** **Who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness and being found in human form.”** We are a people familiar with **Charles Wesley** speaking to our conscience when he writes of Christ and says, **“He left his father’s throne above, so free so infinite his grace, emptied himself of all but love and bled for Adams’ helpless race.”**

We are a **people familiar with Kenosis:** A **Greek word, derived from Kenoo** which literally means **emptiness.** The

spirituality on self-emptying. Kenosis is the **emptying of ones will in order to be receptive to God's will.** A **United Kingdom, a united church will only exist once we empty ourselves** through the strength of God, allow him to fill us and thus refrain from creating barriers. I have a dream!

(Pause)

Community being the outcome is able to hold differences respectfully and peacefully. The **vulnerability of members is held with gentleness,** there is no uneasiness in the silence, **the truth is honoured and trust is secure.** Cohesion is attained.

“The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines social cohesion as: a cohesive society works towards the wellbeing of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust and offers its members an opportunity of upward mobility.” I **have a dream that we will not remain a divided Kingdom** like the kingdom Isaiah ministered to but we will be a community. I have a dream.

8. The dreamer who dreamt during a time of Spiritual emergency

Isaiah prophesied during a time when Israel was in a spiritual emergency. The worship of Yahweh was threatened in Judah. Public worship was observed but inner decay existed in people. The nation was at its worst spiritually to the extent that God was pronouncing judgment and exile was eminent. The **cult officials whose task was to guard worship were silenced** and the nation had lost its conscience.

Central to the mission imperatives of the MCSA is spirituality, it is the root that feeds the branches of this discipleship movement and yet like Isaiah, are we at a stage of a spiritual emergency.

The MCSA is at the brink of witnessing John Wesley's greatest fear come to life. **"I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the**

case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

I HAVE A DREAM that all **Methodist people** may rediscover what the apostle Paul terms as our first love.

I agree with **the Dalai Lama** who writes the following about our times:

THE PARADOX OF OUR TIMES

“The paradox of our times: is that we have taller buildings, but shorter tempers.

Wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints

We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often

We've cleaned up the air, but polluted our soul.

We've split the atom, but not our prejudice.

We've higher incomes, but lower morals.

We've become long on quantity but short on quality.

These are the times of tall men, and short character;

These are the times of world peace, but domestic warfare,

**These are the days of two incomes, but more divorces;
Of fancier houses, but broken homes.”**

The paradox of our times is that we have full Churches but empty hearts, numerous denominations and Churches and yet very little spiritual and theological depth. We are like the people Isaiah ministered to. We are faced with a spiritual emergency. **What are the signs of this emergency?**

Thom Rainer writes an article entitled, “**Autopsy of a deceased church.**” I would like to propose that the results of the autopsy offer us insight on the cause of death and hence speeds up our action and reaction whilst on emergency. He makes the following observations on death of a church:

- **The church refused to look like the community**
- **Members became more focused on memorials/ certain Eras in the life of the Church instead of being in the present and planning for the future.**
- **Members had more and more arguments on what they wanted**
- **Pastoral incumbency grew shorter and shorter**

I have a dream that we will return to our Wesleyan roots, a dream that we will return to Wesleyan Spirituality and come out of the state of emergency. Trevor Hudson in the book, “Rediscovering Wesley for Africa,” Reminds us of these spiritual roots that we need to return to when he says the following:

- **“Wesleyan spirituality is a spirituality that fuses together the personal and social dimensions of Christian discipleship.**
- **Wesleyan spirituality is a spirituality of mind and heart, faith and works, it has a focus.**
- **Wesleyan spirituality is a spirituality of mutual accountability**
- **Wesleyan spirituality invites us into a life long journey of inner transformation.”**

In the same book, Andile Mbete reminds us of our spiritual roots which need to be contextualised to the Southern Africa context. He asks an important question: **“How do we reach the ears of our young people, both black and white, whose ears are familiar with amagwijo etoyitoyi, rap and kwaito songs?”**

9. The dreamer who dreamt during a period of Economic inequalities

At the time of Isaiah's writing there was a huge gap between the haves and the have nots. There was classism because of this gap. There was no justice, in fact justice was bought and sold. There was no justice for the likes of the family of Reeva Steenkamp who was murdered by her lover, there was no justice for the Marikana workers whose living conditions have gone from bad to worse whilst mining giants count their profits.

People were in debt and sinking in debt just as the ordinary person today is. Politicians and priests were getting wealthier; tax payers were bearing the brunt.

Until we accept that there are inequalities, there will never be equality. Until we accept that the Church in the inner city can afford more agency than the church in Nongoma, whilst the Church in Nongoma requires the agency but cannot afford it. Until we continue to be intentional and even radical by subsidising, we cannot attain the dream.

Aren't we like Isaiah's time? Has money not been mismanaged and misused in the context of the Church? Instead of having a **single district or an organisation spending a million for people to travel overseas, I have dream of a church that would use such resources to build a **university** to **develop the poor of the poorest, especially in these difficult times of #FeesMustFall.****

The Lay general treasurer's report to conference 2015 contained in the 2016 yearbook states the following, **“some circuits pay their ministers directly thus tax is evaded, in the general treasurer's words, “This is not only dishonest but simply put, it is fraud.”**

Our context is similar to Isaiah's context. I have a dream.

Conclusion

- We find ourselves **surrounded by women who have stripped off their name and rights, women in society, in the secular world and in the church. I have a dream.**
- We find **ourselves in a devided house dare I say a divided kingdom. I have a dream.**

- We find ourselves in **paradoxical times** in a state of **Spiritual emergency. I have a dream.**
- We daily **witness glaring economic inequalities. I have a dream.**

Dear Methodist people, our context necessitates that we become dreamers, it is time to dream again, I have a dream. **It is time to, “Think big, believe big, dream big and attain big results.”** In the words of **Yoko Ono**, **“A dream you dream alone is only a dream. A dream you dream together is a reality.”**

Tomorrow we will wake up and we will dream together as we together seek to, **“Ignite mission and break barriers.”** We will in one accord agree with **Tupac Shakur** when he says, **“Reality is wrong, dreams are for real.”** We have a dream.