

WESLEYAN THEOLOGY AND METHODIST PRACTICE OF MISSION

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1. INTRODUCTION

When God called the church into existence he called it to fulfil his mission in the world. It is the claim of the church throughout history that the church, is chosen by a God who has a vested interest in the kind of people and world we are becoming. The church always knew that it is not an initiator, owner or definer of mission but a respondent to an invitation to be co-creators with God in the pursuit of the “New Jerusalem”. In its response it places its agency, creativity, imagination, power, time and resources to the disposal of God the creator of heaven and earth who continually renews creation. In (re)igniting mission, we accept the responsibility for God to control the Church as servants for God’s mission.

In fact the act of (re)igniting mission is a reminder to us that we are as Methodists, a community of faith that is a “brand plucked from the fire.” We were plucked from the fire of that 18th Century Epworth Rectory for a mission and purpose.

There are three focus areas that I want to submit as fundamental to the sacred task of (re)igniting mission. These are imagination, consciousness and passion.

To be a powerful witness and agent for God’s mission in our world, we have to embrace our own sense of agency and allow our Holy Spirit inspired imagination of new possibilities to guide our thoughts and inspire our action. We have to embrace what Walter Brueggemann calls the prophetic imagination or hopeful imagination or what Matthew T Eggemeier calls “A Sacramental-Prophetic Imagination”. Eggemeier quotes Catholic Feminist Theologian, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza who observes;

“The space of imagination is that of freedom, a space in which boundaries are crossed, possibilities are explored, and time becomes relativized. What we cannot imagine will not take place. The imagination is a space of memory and possibility where situations can be experienced and desires embodied.” (Eggemeier 2014: 6)

Imagination must (re)ignite our collective consciousness as Methodists people. Paulo Freire, Steve Biko and Bell Hooks qualify this as critical thinking that is about questioning and social analysis. Our consciousness for mission must define our character as church, dictate our strategy determine our structure and direct our resources. This consciousness must envelope all parts of the church so as to drive our common action. We need to nurture Methodists to whom mission is an internalised and reflexive virtue. It must be our default position or second nature outlook in life. With imagination and consciousness as our roots and trunk, passion for mission will be our energy. We must engender a deep fiery love for mission deed in our common heart as Methodist. We cannot be luke warm and indifferent in our pursuit of God’s mission. The love for God must burn deep in our hearts and wake us up from our slumber and propel us to acts of love and hope for the sake the Kingdom of God. It is about ensuring that the fire to serve God’s people is kept burning all the way on

the altar that is the world. We must be able to sing with passion; “Blaze, Spirit, blaze. Set our hearts on fire...”

It is important, as we congregate here at the Second Mission Congress of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to reflect and dream of our mission, to remember that our Methodist heritage is first and foremost Wesleyan in nature. Our Mission is built on the specific Wesleyan theology as given birth in the Wesley brothers, nurtured by the followers of the movement they gave birth to, sharpened by the different contexts and cultures around the world in over 300 years and kept alive today in the imagination of many throughout the world in our present age.

Let us agree as we gather here, that if there is one main standard indicator against which we may want to measure our mission work in the past and plan for it in the future, it is whether the Methodist Church is alive or is becoming a dead sect. This is the litmus test and commitment that John Wesley used both at the beginning and the end of his ministry. He pronounced on this for the first time at the first Methodist Conference in June 1744 at Foundry Methodist Church in London. This Conference, attended by six people, reflected on the profound question “What may we reasonably believe to be God’s design in raising up the Preachers [and people] called Methodists?” The answer was an emphatic; “Not to form a new sect; but reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”

He again raised this at the close of his ministry in 1786. He is reported to have said; “I am not afraid that people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid that they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without power.” These are fears of a man who was not even interested in establishing a Church but was just interested in helping the Church to be Church.

This Mission Congress must ask itself without apology, whether we are, in our spirituality and practice of mission, showing signs of being just a dead sect. Are we confident that we are vital or whether we are just stagnant? Are we a Church that is growing or is in fact on an ecclesiastical life-support machine? How hot or cold are we in our mission? What is the level and form and power of our religion in this part of the continent?

2. GOD AND CHURCH IN THE HUMAN WORLD

I submit that the beliefs we hold dear about God, human nature, the broken world and the Church do impact on our understanding of our missional calling and task. Throughout its history and development the Wesleyan movement shared with the broader Christian church the belief in a God who is the creator of heaven and earth. This is the holy God who sustains life and saves the world from its own self destruction and creates a new world order where God reigns.

Key to the Methodist theology is the understanding of a God whose compassionate love for his people and creation is self-defining. This understanding of God permeates the nature of the relationship God has with God’s people and the world. The God who is full of excelling love for a sinful and broken world, cannot but pursue humanity and creation, undeserving

as they are, with an all-encompassing grace. God becomes the initiator of the restoration of the relationship with his creation even to the point of his own wounding and death on the Cross with a commitment to the newness of life through resurrection. It is a God whose compassionate love and grace draws him closer to the lived, active and practical experience of his people.

In this context the Methodist theological reflection on the condition of humanity also shares the broader church's understanding that humans originate from God's creative intent and power. It is also accepted that the nature of being human comes with being vulnerable to sin, and ultimately falling under the weight of that very sin. In this fallen state humanity is unable to save itself and is totally dependent on the saving act of God. Through the life, passion, death and resurrection of Christ humanity is saved and formed for the purposes of God. For Methodists the human being is not merely a fallen being, but a loved being. It is, for Mr Wesley, all of humanity that needs to be saved and can be saved to the uttermost to the points of knowing and assurance.

The broader Christian church insists that God has not given up on the world and its current broken state. God is committed to saving the world because indeed "God so loved the world ..." God has a plan to renew this world and bring it back to what it was intended to be and fulfil its good purposes that God has set from the beginning. This plan from God for Creation is one of justice, reconciliation, peace and prosperity in a covenantal relationship with God. It is aptly reflected in the vision Isaiah's eschatological vision in chapter 65:17ff;

"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind... No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime... for one who dies at a hundred. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands."

Methodist theology teaches us that the church is a community of love called by God into existence to reflect God's revealed grace for the transformation of the world which God loves dearly. Through baptismal individuals are reconciled to God and enter into this community to be shaped and formed as servants of God's mission in the world. They become holy, set aside, so as to fulfil that sacred calling of being agents of God's kingdom in a broken world in deep need of God's love that reconciles and heals all divisions.

Like the two Methodist sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist which are the outward visible signs of grace, the church itself becomes a Community of God's love and visible means of grace. The church itself is the body of Christ in solidarity with the broken ones, the little ones of God, broken for many, for the forgiveness of sin and renewal of all. This church places itself with all its vulnerability, its resources and talents at the disposal of God in service to the world. This is the church that is not dominator of the world but instead, like salt, finds its power in disappearing in service. It finds its power by pointing away from itself

and communicating the presence of this reckless transforming grace to an undeserving world.

It is understanding in the God who never gives up on humanity and is prepared to die to save the broken world that must spur the Church to a similar missional commitment. We dare not give up on the world irrespective of how messy and unworthy it may appear to us. It is such a Church that is a beneficiary of God underserved grace that is able to sing with Charles Wesley;

Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

3. AFRICA IS OUR PARISH

The phrase “The World is My Parish” has become for the Methodists, more than just an empty public relations slogan. It is instead a fundamental commitment that was born out of deep conviction. Wesley made this assertion and commitment after being accused by an Anglican Priest, Rev James Harvey, for pastoral interference by preaching to a congregation in an open air after he had been barred from preaching in Anglican pulpits.

Wesley responded firmly that he was going to obey God and preach irrespective of whose congregation it is. He recorded his response in his journal entry of Monday 11 June 1739; “Suffer me now to tell you my principles on this matter. I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation.” (Wesley 1837:138)

18th Century England that was part of his parish, displayed a very contrasting context within which Methodism was founded and flourished. It was, on the one hand, at the height of the industrial revolution with accompanied booming commerce. It was on the other hand full of social ills and erosion of moral values. Wesley modelled for us a Christian mission that takes seriously the *Sitz im Leben* – the socio-economic and political context and the Church that is responsive to it.

We as Methodists in the Southern African Connexion have discerned for our times the powerful vision of; “A Christ Healed Africa for the healing of nations.” We however, have the moral responsibility to do a soul search and frankly ask ourselves whether we truly believe in this Africa that can be restored – the risen Africa that has the latent ability to bring healing to the world and the rest of humanity.

It is my suspicion that we, despite the hard attempts by the late Prof Gabriel Setiloane, have not yet developed an affinity beyond just sentiment, with the soul of Africa. We are still to

develop our consciousness of Pan Africanism and deepen our conviction of this continent as what Kenyan Methodist and former General Secretary, Sam Kobia describes as the primordial home of humanity, the sacred ground of being and the eco-utopian biblical vision of the Garden of Eden and “a crucible of history, a place of struggle to regain human dignity, integrity and freedom to make choices affecting the future.” (Kobia 2003: 11)

We are still to conscientise ourselves of the struggles, the pain and scars that slavery, colonialism, apartheid and even globalisation have left on the soul of Africa. We will make no progress until we confront the post-liberation and continuing scars of greed and corruption that African leaders have and are continuing to inflict on their people.

Today our parish, Africa, faces high levels of intergenerational poverty, stubborn unemployment and the rising inequality in which the gap between the few filthy rich and the poor is increasing at an alarming rate. The challenges of migration and wars continue to undermine the vision of the African Renaissance. We are observing a deep alienation and disconnect from institutions that hold society together for many of our people.

4. THE INSTITUTION AT THE SERVICE OF MISSION

The missional strength of the Methodist Church is also in the legacy of the structural ecclesiology configuration of Connexionalism that John Wesley left for us. Wesley designed the Methodist Church structure to facilitate an integrated, interconnected system of the different and yet inter-dependent elements of the Church from the Class Meetings, to the society, the circuit, the district and up to the Conference - that work for a common purpose. Connexionalism is the glue that holds the entire Methodist Church to operate together. The United Methodist Church interprets Connexionalism thus; “... all leaders and congregation are connected with a network of loyalties and commitments that support, yet supersedes, local concerns.” In a Connexion, the entire mission is held in trust by the collective to cooperate together rather than compete against each other. It is a polity that is the opposite of Presbyterianism and Congregationalism where individual congregations are somehow autonomous.

This polity has implications on the unnecessary debate and tension on the demands between the local church and the Connexional office. A strong Connexion is able to provide strategic and empowering leadership that creates an enabling environment to the local church to implement mission imperatives. This ecclesiology is further driven by a spirituality of solidarity and sharing of resources where the community resources are available to the collective needs of the community regardless of their origins.

True Connexionalism must, in spirit, lead us to a true ecumenical outlook and expression. It is about the Church that is connected through networks that include ecumenical partnerships. The Methodist Church must resist the creeping temptation of denominationalism that is only competitive in spirit. The Ecumenical Affairs Unit must develop a sound theology of ecumenism that is missional in character. The practice must demonstrate the commitment to the country, continental and world councils up to the

World Methodist Council and the World Council of Churches. We must accept that God's mission is not the sole preserve of Methodists, for indeed God's Mission is Kingdom centred for the sake of the world.

It is in the spirit of Connexionalism that the Mission Unit must be given the room to serve as the heartbeat of our existence, the custodian of our strategy and plans and hub where the other units and organisations are held together in a synergic manner in order that they can cooperate and contribute to a common missional goal. Each and every unit must demonstrate in theory and practice how it is contributing to the bigger missional picture of the Church. All organisations must be held accountable to do the same. Indeed our structures and discipline must be servants to mission not mission seeking to adapt to our structures. Purpose must determine structure and not the other way around.

Leadership is the most important element of mission. There is need for mission champions who are visionary and inspirational to the general church membership. It is these who must embody the imagination, consciousness and passion we spoke of earlier. One of Mr Wesley's strong points in building the Methodist Church into a mission serving institution was his prioritisation of the development of both clergy and lay leadership. He enlisted those members who showed leadership and preaching ability to become helpers. He invested in them but also held them accountable. He developed the twelve rules of a helper as model of leadership and a form of a code of conduct to hold accountable those who desired high office. The very first rule; "Be diligent, never be unemployed, never be triflingly employed, never while away time and spend more time at a place than it is strictly necessary" is an indication what Wesley expected from those who are to be his helpers. Competence and diligence rather than mediocrity became the primary virtues.

5. SCRIPTURAL HOLINESS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

It was at that first Conference mentioned above that John Wesley declared and committed the Methodist Church's mission to "... to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness in the land." It is important to note that Wesley avoids the Church pontificating and wanting to hold the world accountable to something that the Church itself cannot demonstrate. Whatever the Church wants to transform must start first in the Church. He emphasised that it is "particularly" the Church that must be changed. It is only the Church that is renewed, transformed that is able to engage in transformational mission.

The commitment to spreading scriptural holiness was to be done mainly by avoiding evil and doing good. Avoiding evil was, on the one hand, about avoiding any social acts that would hurt people. It was on the other hand, doing good by engaging in the works of piety and works of mercy. This is where the works of piety were more about growing in faith and knowledge of God and the works of mercy were practical acts of the Church in the world.

John Wesley further strengthened this teaching by emphasising that scriptural holiness has an integration of both the personal and social holiness. Methodists are therefore called to a personal relationship with Christ. This relationship is never adequate of itself if it does not flow out into transforming the power structures of society and the world. The power of the Holy Spirit that we receive must drive Methodists into public prophetic witness.

Although John Wesley was politically conservative, especially on the issue of democracy versus the monarchy, his “evangelical economics” was progressive for his time. He promoted what Jennings refers to as “practical divinity” (Jennings: 18) Wesley demonstrated incarnational ministry and mission by being rooted amongst the people. He was an example of what Pope Francis advocates for – that a shepherd must smell like sheep.

Wesley demonstrated a disposition towards transformation and protest against injustice and exploitation. The starting point of his solidarity with the poor was the demystification of wealth with practical social action. “Thus solidarity with the poor includes not only a positive concern for their welfare but a protest against forms of injustice as well.” (Jennings: 71). The starting point of his protest was radical attitude towards such professions as merchants, distillers, doctors and lawyers that he perceived to be exploiting the poor. Jennings quotes Wesley’s position on merchants in his treatise on the Doctrine of Original Sin;

“I must acknowledge, I once believed the body of English merchants to be men of the strictest honesty and honour. But I have lately had more experience. Whoever wrongs the widow and the fatherless, knows not what honour or honesty means.” (Wesley in Jennings: 72)

There are few mission programmes through which Wesley demonstrated his active protest against socio-economic injustice. He spoke strongly against war in which thousands of men fought and killed each other to prove who of their kings was right in a quarrel. He was very harsh against colonialism in which he saw the English to be more “...corrupt, devilish, in their tempers and practice” compared to the colonised Indians. He supported William Wilberforce and partnered with the abolition movement to campaign against slavery. He put the blame squarely at the door of the plantation owners and courageously confronted them;

“Now, it is your money that pays the merchant, and through him the captain and the African butchers. You therefore are guilty, yea, principally guilty, of all these frauds, robberies, murders. You are the spring that puts all the rest in motion; they would not stir up a step without you; therefore, the blood of all these wretches who die before their time, whether in their country or elsewhere, lies upon your head.” (Wesley in Jennings: 86)

The challenge for the Church is, in this context of creeping conservatism, rigidity, legalism and parochialism, self-preservation, self-service and microwave popcorn spirituality to establish a prophetic and practical divinity anchored in social justice that prompts it to establish who the exploitative merchants are against whom we must stand up and speak out.

We must identify issues of socio-economic injustice we must engage through prophetic or faith-based action. Important as political activism is, it cannot be at the exclusion of economic literacy and activism. Although the political remains important, the struggle has now shifted to the economic front and the Church is ill-prepared for that. We are not vigilant and empowered to engage such issues as those dealt by the Competitions Commission like the price fixing in the bread, milk, construct and other industries and

sectors. We are not empowered even to enter the more complex issues of the minimum wage. Let alone addressing the thorny land issue.

6. CONCLUSION

The task of (re)igniting mission has an inherent faith conviction that it is not just an individual who will catch the fire of the gospel but the entire church. To be sustained, the (re)ignited mission can only be sustained through a deliberate imperative of activating, galvanising and mobilising all Methodists for mission. The mass mobilisation of all Methodist people is an affirmation of the fact that mission is no more an exclusive monopoly of the ordained ministers. Each and every one of us need to hear God call them with their unique gifts that can be used in the different parts of the Church.

Wesleyan theology and Methodist mission practice is incarnational and prophetic in character. It is that is driven by a Church that is rooted and immersed amongst the people of God. It is undertaken by the Church that challenges and questions the status quo. It pushes boundaries and makes the Church to cross frontiers. It unsettles the powerful and exposes exploitative systems.

The (re)ignition of mission is a bold act of faith born out of the assurance Christ gave to us;

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

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