

# MISSION CONGRESS 2016

## CONFRONTING RACISM AND SEXISM IN THE CHURCH

### Introduction

In November 2004, the MCSA engaged in its first Mission Congress. The Mission Charter which emerged from that Congress highlighted the relationship between the vision of "A Christ healed Africa for the healing of the nations", the (then) four mission pillars of "... A deepened spirituality as individuals and a Christian community, Justice and service in church and society, evangelism and church growth which build up the people of God, Empowerment and development which give dignity and new purpose to those who have been deprived."

One of the challenges for the Church which emerged from that engagement was expressed in the Charter as follows: "...building meaningful relationships that transcend racism, sexism and all other forms of discrimination...". This, along with other challenges, was envisaged as a work of "... intentional and sustained action..." for the whole Church.

However, twelve years later, we meet at a second Mission Congress and meet in an elective session which focuses on 'Confronting Racism and Sexism in the Church'. Clearly, the work of "building meaningful relationships" is still in progress. One may ask the questions: has this work even really begun? Who does this work? How sustainable and meaningful are the relationships which, hopefully, have been / are being shaped, created, formed, established? Perhaps more pertinent for this conversation is: how do we, part of the Church, the household of God, envisage new possibilities for what meaningful

relationships look like, sound like, feel like - in our private and public spaces?

In order to explore more fully what confronting racism and sexism can begin to look like, feel like, sound like, we begin with some attempts at definitions and meanings.

## **Racism**

I will not attempt a definitive explanation of racism. I will present a few perspectives for consideration. As a starting point, the Oxford Paperback Dictionary and Thesaurus defines racism as - 'the belief that certain races are better than others; discrimination against, or hostility towards, other races'. The Collins English Dictionary expresses a definition as follows - 'the belief that races have distinctive cultural characteristics determined by hereditary factors and that this endows some races with an intrinsic superiority over others; abusive or aggressive behaviour towards members of another race on the basis of such a belief'.

A sociological approach to engaging with racism offers broader and more complex insights: "Racism refers to a variety of practices, beliefs, social relations and phenomena that work to reproduce a racial hierarchy and social structure that yields superiority and privilege for some, and discrimination and oppression for others. ... at its core, racism exists when essentialist racial categories (Black, white, ...) are used to turn human beings into stereotyped objects which justify and reproduce a racial hierarchy and racially structured society that limits access to resources, rights, and privileges on the basis of race. ... racism is about much more than race-based prejudice--it exists when race is used to create an imbalance in power and social status." (Cole). This approach helps us to begin to recognise and identify the intersections between race, power and privilege. Racism extends beyond interpersonal

interactions to "hierarchy and social structure", with deeply entrenched consequences for both those who enjoy privilege as a result, and for those who experience discrimination and oppression. In addition, we are reminded that racism as a system objectifies and stereotypes people; in other words, we are all dehumanised, made less than, diminished by our experiences of and participation in a racist system. We are all, to borrow an expression, 'infected and affected'.

The advent of a democratic South Africa in 1994 was seen by many as the end of racism, certainly the end of a legalised system of racism, apartheid. However, racism has certainly not disappeared; perhaps one could say that it has changed, evolved, is being re-invented as 'modern racism'.

Modern racism can be seen as "... internalised dominance - attitudes (which) are so deeply entrenched that they exist at a subconscious level. ...it is still based on the assumption (the underlying belief) that black people are inferior to white people. ... this more subtle form of racism continues to deny access to black people." (Shifting Paradigms). The corresponding reaction to internalised dominance is 'internalised oppression'. (Ibid)

This perspective and experience of racism is not unique to South Africa. Martha Mukaiwa, in an article entitled 'The limits of being black in Namibia', writes of an experience in Swakopmund, in which she says *"I can feel the stares all the time and I get to noticing that, save one or two black people who never linger, we're the only people of colour for miles not serving, subservient or sweeping."* 'Serving, subservient, sweeping' - still the 'acceptable place' for Black people in a multi-party parliamentary democracy whose motto is 'Unity, Liberty, Justice'.

Thus, Steve Biko wrote "...the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed." (Biko). The sad reality

is that racism still exists, and flourishes even, in most if not all of the countries in our Connexion.

## **Sexism**

I will take a similar approach to engaging with sexism. The Oxford Paperback Dictionary and Thesaurus defines sexism as 'prejudice or discrimination on the basis of a person's sex. The Collins English Dictionary describes it as 'discrimination on the basis of sex, esp. the oppression of women by men'.

Again, a sociological approach helps to challenge and broaden the conversation. Dr Zuleyka Zevallos writes in an article titled 'Everyday sexism in academia' that "Sexism describes the ideology that one gender is superior to another. To put it another way, it's a system of attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, and other types of bias that perpetuate the idea that women are somehow lesser than men. These attitudes may or may not be voiced overtly, but they nevertheless guide social interaction and behaviour." She goes on to distinguish between different 'types' of sexism, namely, 'hostile' sexism - overt physical and emotional aggression, 'benevolent' sexism - inappropriate comments and behaviours which reinforce the belief that women should be judged primarily by their physical appearance and sexuality, and 'accidental or unintentional' sexism - includes jokes, comments and behaviour attributed to ignorance. However, she makes the point that "Their cumulative effect is that women are denigrated, undervalued and expected to "put up" with sexism."

Here, too, then, we encounter the intersection of gender, power and privilege. Here, too, the reminder that sexism dehumanises and diminishes all who experience it and who participate in entrenching and perpetuating it.

We must note that the words 'sex' and 'gender' are not to be used interchangeably. 'Sex' refers to the physiological differences between women and men (although such a binary distinction in terms of physiology are not always helpful or appropriate for many). 'Gender' refers to differences between men and women which are socially constructed, social, cultural, religious expectations of men and women (how they should present, behave, etc.) based on their physiology.

The context of South Africa continues to challenge all of us in terms of sexism, and gender issues. South Africa's constitution provides for the recognition of equality and basic human rights for all people, but in practice these principles are often ignored and violated. August is Women's month in SA, and every year the campaign for 16 days of activism against women and child abuse is highly publicised, yet rape and sexual abuse, and domestic violence and abuse are on the increase. In a report titled "Criminal Injustice: Violence Against Women in South Africa", released by People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA), Aids Legal Network, Solidarity with Women who Speak Out, and Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) in 2010, the following was noted: "VAW (Violence Against Women) cuts across race, class, ethnicity, religion, and geographic location. It is enmeshed with particularly violent histories of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and apartheid. ... All of these have left in their wake social and gender relations of a militarised society that has nurtured extremely violent masculinities to the detriment of women (and of men)." (p. 7). They go on to note that the prevalence of violence against women is unknown, but that in 2002 the Medical Research Council estimated that up to 88% of rape cases go unreported.

In other countries in the Connexion, questions of gender equality are also of concern. In an article titled "Not yet uhuru for women in Botswana", published in the Botswana Guardian in August 2015, it is

noted that efforts by the Botswana government '... to achieve gender equality have been a mixed bag of successes and failures.' The article goes on to state that part of the problem is that there are '...no properly defined policies and strategies for the political, economic and social advancement of women.' There is an explanation of something of the impact of the Beijing conference of 1995, but clearly, progress has been slow. One of the results is that there is negligible political representation for women in that country; 'The highest percentage of women representation ever in the Botswana Parliament was in 1999 when women constituted 18.2 percent of the MPs. To-date, Botswana has not met the 1997 SADC Declaration on Gender and Development's 30 percent quota and the representation has been systematically going down.'

### **Confronting Racism and Sexism in the Church**

Having begun exploring racism and sexism, we return to the focus for this session: Confronting Racism and Sexism in the Church. Alan Storey has the following to say about the church: "(The work of the church is) relationship building. Relationship building with God, with one another, with one's self and with creation as a whole." He also reminds us that "The Church is a community that celebrates diversity ...This is a community of belonging, openness, caring, co-operation, healing and growth, forgiveness, patience, weakness and strength."

As a diverse community whose work is building meaningful and transformational relationships, we have no choice but to be intentional in this work, to engage our own racism and sexism, to interrogate our structures and policies, to explore courageous conversations, to listen, read, ask, challenge constructively.

A brief look at the MCSA: Since Conference 2011, the only resolution which begins to raise awareness of the need for

intentional relationship building is found in Yearbook 2013 - resolution 7, p. 80 re cross-cultural ministry preparation. The Book of Order, in the section containing Miscellaneous Resolutions, has two resolutions on p.230, one calling on '...all Methodists to continue striving against all forms of racism in Church and Society...' and the other a follow-up on the 1958 'One and Undivided' resolution, calling for '...conversations on the practices of disunity ...in our Connexion...' and for programmes to manage diversity while new structural solutions are sought.

In terms of gender issues / sexism, the Statement on Women is found in the Miscellaneous Resolutions section of the Book of Order. This Statement contains the oft-referred to '...all structures within the Church should include at least 40% women...' - and much more. However, given the struggle which continues in all levels of Church structures to adhere to the 40% requirement, one wonders how seriously the Church takes its own statements on gender justice.

The Yearbooks from 2012 onwards all contain resolutions on gender issues as follows: Yearbook 2012 - representation of women and youth (p. 88); Yearbook 2013 - women ministers and gender concerns (p. 79); Yearbook 2014 - gender based violence and abuse of children (p. 91) and sexual harassment (p.92); Yearbook 2015 - Thursdays in Black (p. 85) and policy on sexual harassment (p.87). The 2016 Yearbook, possibly in the light of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ordination of Women Ministers in this year, contains three resolutions relating to Women in Ministry: Woman Ministers, Nomination of Women Ministers into positions of leadership, and Appointment of Women Ministers as Superintendents. However, these resolutions all reveal that gender justice, certainly for women ministers, is still a long way off.

Where, then, do we go from here?

As part of the process for this elective session, I invite us to engage with the content of this paper, and with a specific text from Scripture, and encourage us to have courageous, intentional conversations and interactions. I urge us, particularly as we work with Scripture, to *engage with Scripture and our context, to question, learn and discuss, rather than to look for 'answers' to the struggles we face.*

This will allow us to embark on a journey of growth and discovery, together and individually.

We will share in small groups and in the larger group.

I also invite us to engage with different perspectives on racism and sexism as reflected in the quotations placed around the room.

As we listen and share, learn and talk, I ask that we hold together what Prof. Njabulo Ndebele, in the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Helen Joseph lecture given in September this year, refers to as "...victimhood..." and "...agency...". Racism and sexism exposes all of us to 'victimhood', albeit in vastly different ways. This is unavoidably part of our identity, throughout the Connexion. What are the questions we need to ask to move us from 'victimhood' to 'agency'? What will this look like? How does our faith speak to us, challenge us, inspire us to continue to build meaningful relationships?

## **CONCLUSION**

Professor Angela Davis, in giving the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Steve Biko Memorial Lecture at Unisa on 9 Sept. 2016, said "There will always be unfinished activism."

May we not grow tired of doing this work, the work of God.

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