

LAY PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS: 2014 CONFERENCE: DURBAN

I am humbled to do my last address to Conference as Lay President since my election at Bloemfontein Conference in 2008 and my first address in Pietermaritzburg 2009. I express a sincere word of gratitude to Conference and all the Methodist people in our Connexion for journeying with me for the past 6 years in office. Without your unwavering support, my stay in this office would have been in vain. In 2009 I moved into an office that was purely ceremonial with no executive power and I now leave an office with functions and duties which include, inter alia, assisting the office of the Presiding Bishop in giving direction and leadership to the Church. I moved into an office where the incumbent required a 75% vote to be re-elected for a second term and I now leave an office which now needs a simple majority, just like all other offices in the church, for re-election.

In particular I wish to thank you for the unprecedented mandate you gave the Lay President at 2009 Conference to convene a meeting of all District Lay Leaders and make proposals to Conference 2010 on their functions, duties and roles. Indeed, an office of the District Lay Leader was created for all the 12 Districts, there was also re-alignment of duties, functions and roles between that office and the Lay President. We are all waiting patiently to see these roles published in the latest edition of our Laws and Discipline.

Given the fact that this year we celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Mission Charter that was crafted in 2004 in the Clarkebury District, I have decided to focus my address on just two of the many resolutions that were taken at the Congress and I am privileged to have been part of that gathering.

Our 2004 Mission Charter reads, inter alia;

We resolve to take intentional and sustained action to implement the 4 mission imperatives in such areas as:

1. BECOMING A CHURCH IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR.

It is a truism that, according to our Wesleyan tradition, we are engaged in a struggle to turn the church towards the excluded, the marginalised, the vulnerable, and the violated, which should be the hallmark of any movement that claims to honour Jesus Christ.

Joerg Rieger and John Vincent in their book entitled "Methodist and Radical: Rejuvenating a Tradition" write the following in the Preface:

"At a time when the rich forget that they are inextricably connected to the challenges of the poor....., the future of the church as a whole and the Methodist traditions in particular can only be conceived if –like Wesley himself- we deepen our conversations with the margins."

This begs the question: does the church ever find time to converse with those at the margins? These two authors, in the first chapter, entitled “What do margins and center have to do with each other? State:

“In order to find out what God is doing, we cannot remain at the center. Those who remain at the center always run the risk of identifying God with the STATUS QUO- and fashioning God in their own image.”

According to them, discipleship alongside the poor becomes learning from the poor. Therefore, the rich and privileged visit the poor in order not only to minister to their needs, but also to learn from them some of the secrets of Christian living. It is about taking a Journey Downwards to be nearer in one’s own lifestyle and economic status to the poor.

Presiding Bishop and members of Conference, I raise these issues with you because I am particularly perturbed by events currently unfolding in 3 member states of our Connexion namely, Lesotho, South Africa and Swaziland. Levels of poverty have reached alarming proportions to an extent that service delivery protests are the order of the day. I am reliably informed, members of Conference, that in a small town of Sterkspruit in the Eastern Cape, the District Synod business was brought to a halt because the Premier of that Province who was to address Synod was not willing to give the poor an audience. The problem was resolved by Solomon’s wisdom after our Bishop pleaded with the authorities-that-be saying to them “Don’t talk to me; talk to the down-trodden and the underprivileged”.

In the Kingdom of Swaziland, the only surviving monarchic state in Africa, we hear of God’s people living in abject poverty while the King enjoys a lavish lifestyle with His family driving around in Limousines and Buicks. What is our church doing to try turn this situation around? Is the church not supposed to be the Voice of the voiceless?

In South Africa, we have the sorry state of affairs where millions and millions of our people are still in dire need of basic services like water, electricity, sanitation, housing, etc., the list is endless, yet the State is able to spend more than R246 million in upgrading, not building, the private residence of one person who incidentally, gets the fattest cheque every month, and will continue doing so until he goes to the grave. I ask again, why is the church silent on such critical issues? How many RDP houses would have been built with that kind of money?

In Lesotho, as I prepare my address, the country is on the brink of a coup d’etat. Had it not been for the solicited intervention of SADC under the chairpersonship of President Zuma, Prime Minister Thabani would have been history by now. The former Head of the Lesotho Defence Force, General Kamoli, is in hiding up there in the mountains waiting to strike at the “enemy”. The People’s

Parliament has been suspended amid fears that a vote of no confidence is likely to be passed against the Prime Minister.

Is it not about time the Church asks herself the question: Romans 8:31-What, then, shall we say in response to this? (Sithini na ke ngoko kwezi zinto?)

The same two authors alluded to above propose that we adopt the strategy of John Wesley which, in his work among the poor, was not designed so that the poor could become rich, but so that the NON-POOR could become Kingdom disciples alongside the poor. They state:

“Yet the one great sign and seal of Wesley’s preferential option for the poor is missed - to be like them, to be alongside them, to have an income nearer to theirs, to CREATE A NEW WORLD with them, on their terms, in their places. Precisely, this was the heart of Wesley’s mission, and the sense of its logic. Jesus took on a “journey downwards”, and became a ‘friend of the publicans and sinners’, ate and lived with them. Wesley followed Jesus’ example, and did the same.”

Why is it that the church cannot do the same if we are serious about being in solidarity with the poor?

This leads me to the second area that was dealt with at the Mission Congress, namely:

2. INFORMING OUR PROPHETIC MINISTRY BY RESEARCH INTO SOCIO-ECONOMIC ISSUES.

My main area of concern here is whether or not “we, as a church, have a Prophetic Ministry at all? If so, how, where and when is it expressed? My sense is that, if we have a prophetic voice, its silence is deafening, to say the least.

In the last few months, issues that have received wide coverage in the media revolve around the office of the Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela, who has executed her duties excellently without fear, favour or prejudice. She has however,-received widespread criticism from various quarters for her courage and boldness to take the bull by its horns and speak truth to power, whenever a need arises.

She has recently been involved in the investigations of the so-called Nkandlagate scandal, the fitness of the chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission to occupy that office as well as the appointment of the Chief Operations Officer of the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

All that I am pleading for, members of Conference, is for the voice of church to be heard pleading and begging the citizenry to respect the Constitution, the supreme law of the land, particularly the Chapter 9 institutions like the Public Protector who render a meritorious service in the best interest of all the people of the Country.

During the SABC saga, I was shocked to see on television a group of clerics that came out in support of the official and they vilified the Public Protector, even threatening to go to her office “to cast out demons” thereby implying that she was possessed by demons in arriving at the findings she had made about the official. The real issue of the official applying for a job well-knowing that he did not have a matric certificate is not being addressed.

Again, she has been attacked on various occasions by members of the cabinet and the executive of the ruling party about her findings and recommendations on the Nkandlagate scandal. A Deputy Minister of Defence even went to an extent of accusing her of being a CIA spy who “thinks she is God”. He is quoted to have said at the unveiling of a tombstone;

“We can’t allow people to hijack the ANC. We’ll fight and defend the African National Congress. Thuli must tell us who her handler is. These Chapter 9 institutions were created by the ANC (?) but are now being used against us, and if you ask why, it is the Central Intelligence Agency”.

Nothing could be further from the truth. We all know that our Constitution was drafted by a Constituent Assembly led by Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelf Meyer and was representative of all the people of South Africa. Furthermore, these Chapter 9 institutions are intended to address violations of the provisions of the Constitution by any person, irrespective of party affiliation. Perhaps the Deputy Minister needs to be reminded that Haman was hanged on a tree he himself had prepared to hang Mordecai.

It is my humble opinion that the voice of the church needs to be heard on such issues, condemning such unfounded and scathing attacks on an office which is a critical foundation of our democracy. She has also been accused of overstepping her powers and persuing a personal vendetta against the President of the country. We need to remember that the incumbent of this office has impeccable credentials including being voted as among Time Magazine’s top 100 most influential people in the world. She was appointed by the President after being recommended by Parliament. Time Magazine found her to be an inspirational example of what African public officers need to be.

The Congress of the South African Trade Unions has broken ranks with the other members of the Tripartite Alliance and come out in support of the office of the Public Protector. The Archbishop Emeritus of the Anglican Church Tutu and his daughter have added their voice in support of the office. I have also heard the Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court speaking in support of the offices of Public Protector and National Prosecuting Authority. We long to hear the voice of our church and the South African Council of Churches speaking vocally in support of Institutions of democracy. I am afraid that if the church is silent on such critical issues, “the stones will cry out”.

The former President of the Democratic Alliance, also a former Ambassador of South to Argentina Mr Tony Leon wrote an article in a Sunday newspaper two weeks ago entitled “**How much more abuse can the Constitution take from the President?**”. Towards the end of that article, he quoted from a dissenting judgment that was delivered in 1928 by an American Judge, Justice Louis Brandeis who wrote;

“Our Government teaches the whole people by example. If the Government becomes the lawbreaker, it breeds contempt for the law; it invites every man (person) to become a law unto himself (herself); it invites anarchy.”

In conclusion, Bishop and members of Conference, we need the Nathans and Daniels of our time to prophesy to our leaders, be they Prime Ministers, Kings or Presidents, read them verses from the Bible so that they themselves can discern God’s will. For example, Luke 12:54-56 read;

“When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘its going to rain’, and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘its going to be hot’, and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?”

Presiding Bishop, allow me to say this to you as our John Wesley. Your late parents, gave you the name DANIEL for a good purpose. They did so after having discerned God’s will about you. Little did they know that on this day and era you would be occupying the offices of Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church and President of the South African Council of Churches. Only God knew and He said to them:

“Call him Daniel for, when the wise men of this earth are unable to interpret the writing on the wall ‘MENE MENE TEKEL, FARSIN’ for the Kings, Daniel will do it in the name of our Lord and for the Glory of God.”

This is what you called upon to do by the Lord on this day and era. And, as you do that, don’t forget John Wesley’s words of wisdom to Alexander Mather, one of his assistants when he said;

“Give me 100 preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen, such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth.”

I therefore humbly urge all the Methodist people in the Connexion to rally behind you as you lead us towards the future. May the good Lord be with us all at these trying and turbulent times.

Thank you!!! Thank you!!! Thank you!!!