

# **Together, creating a youth and children centered church through grace and love<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The paper is based on the narrative of Joshua 6: 1 – 15 which deals with the Israelites' conquest and capture of the Canaanite city of Jericho. The work is located in a postcolonial paradigm, albeit limited to spatial perspectives. The method of spatial perspectives for both the narrative and the contemporary reader is applied to explore the idea of the youth of the MCSA creating a youth and children centered church.

## **Introduction**

We meet here at the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary as the youth leadership of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa at a time when the plight of the youth in South Africa. We meet at a time when the world is discussing the impact of the fourth industrial revolution on the economy of the world. We also meet a time when Statistics South Africa informs us that the percentage of youth unemployment in South Africa and surrounding countries continues to grow more and more. We meet at a time when the youth continues to fall more and more into the background and the margins of the economy of the country. Coordinator Sir, we meet at a time when femicide<sup>3</sup> continues to spread across the country like a vicious virus. Today HIV seems to be a minute problem compared to the senseless killings of our sisters. We meet at a time Mr. Coordinator when there is nothing pleasurable about a young person. Why must one enjoy being a young person when it only comes with problems and a sentence of unemployment and poverty? Why must one enjoy being young and full of energy when all that energy is pushed to the margins of society?

Mr. Coordinator, your theme interests me at a time when the Presiding Bishop declares that the church should spend a year focusing on the youth within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. As much as the youth in society occupies the periphery of socio-economic life, the situation is the same in the church. Your theme "Together, creating a youth and children centered church through grace and love" is relevant Mr. Coordinator. It is relevant because even though the 2009 conference which met here in Pietermaritzburg was almost adjourned because of the low representation of the youth at conference, the youth remains in the periphery! This theme is important Mr. Coordinator because when the youth raise their hands and avail themselves for leadership they are either told that they are too young or we don't want to be led by the laity. This theme is important Mr. Coordinator because when the youth take leadership of the church the older people withdraw their presence, support and their money.

Allow me Sir to problematize the position of the youth in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Allow me to argue that the Methodist Church of Southern Africa has no serious

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<sup>3</sup> A contemporary phrase coined to describe the phenomenon of men abusing and killing their girlfriends and wives.

intention in developing its youth. This year conference will elect or re-elect the General Secretary of the MCSA, *akhona amahashi*, but there is no one of them who is a young person. This year conference will appoint a new HR Director, I am not holding my breath that there will be a young person emerging in that position.

### **Methodology: Spatial Perspectives**

Mr. Coordinator allow me to venture into Spatial Perspectives as my methodology for these Bible lessons. Spatial perspectives is a method of biblical interpretation and its main proponent is an American biblical scholar Laura Nasrallah.<sup>4</sup> The method I want to employ in the lesson is a method that talks fundamentally to the issue of space, what we perceive space to be, how we look at space and how then position ourselves in space. In this method we argue that human beings are part of space, but human beings are not placed, they bring space into being. Therefore our conception of space must hold that human beings: the youth and children cannot be placed in the centre of the church, but they bring the centre of the church into being. In other words, the space which is the centre of the church cannot have meaningful existence if it does not have the youth and children. The youth and children are not placed, they bring place into life, they define the space of the centre of the church and they illuminate the meaning and importance of the church.

Nasrallah argues that the biblical texts as we have them as the Holy Scriptures came from a variety of times and places and where they came from matters; to whom they were sent matters; space matters. I want to emphasise this point: Space matters. If space did not matter, we wouldn't be talking about the land today. We are debating land today because the space in which you live, the space you inhabit matters. Nasrallah argues that what you see depends on where you stand. Where you stand determines how you see things. How you see things determines what you will do about them. My approach for this lesson is that we first acknowledge our position in the church and in society, then place ourselves in the reading of the text, choose a position and look at the text from a centred position. If we want to create a youth and centred church in the MCSA we must begin by moving from the periphery to the centre. Our position in the periphery prevents us from making a difference in the church. If we remain standing in the periphery then we cannot see what God wants us to see and we cannot do what God wants us to do. So for us to see and do what God wants from us, we must to the centre.

### **Background to Joshua**

The book of Joshua comes immediately after the five books of Moses. It is the first book of the historical books of the Old Testament. It begins the story of Israel after the forty years in the wilderness. It is the book of Joshua that begins to tell the story of Israel no longer under the

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<sup>4</sup> Nasrallah, Laura S. 2012. "Spatial Perspectives: Space and Archaeology in Roman Philippi" in Marchal, Joseph A. (ed.) *Studying Paul's Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press

direct leadership of God, but begins to be led by Judges. Joshua becomes the first judge of Israel. If we read the story of the Pentateuch. The history of the Israelites begins in Genesis when God promises Abraham that God will bless him not only with children, but also with land. Their story continues with generations living on the hope that one day they will be taken to a spacious land. In the book of Exodus we are told that a new Pharaoh emerged who did not know Joseph and decided that the only way to secure the future of Egypt was to enslave the Israelites so that they could work for the Egyptians. In the same book God raises Moses to deliver God's people out of Egypt to this spacious and special land that overflows with milk and honey. The Israelites travel for forty years with the hope that they will receive a spacious land. The book of Deuteronomy ends with the death of Moses. Moses goes up on top of Mount Nebo across the Jordan and God shows him the whole land of Canaan. This is the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses dies at the mountain and we are told that the Lord buried Moses. Then the Lord raised Joshua to take over the baton of leading the people of Israel in the quest for land. Joshua takes over and sends spies to Canaan to scout the safety of the land. After forty years of looking for land the Israelites finally cross the river Jordan and stand in front of the city of Jericho. The Israelites are at the gates of the Canaanite land. They are standing in front of Jericho, in front of a closed Jericho. What they see depends on where they stand. Because they are standing in the periphery, they see a centre that is closed off. The journey of the Israelites has come to an end.

### **Capturing Jericho**

*Now Jericho was shut up inside and out because of the Israelites; no one came out and no one went in.*

They get to Jericho and the city is closed up inside and outside because of the Israelites. The walls are built so high that the Israelites cannot enter. The walls of Jericho were built in the year 9000 B.C.E.<sup>5</sup> and it was one of the oldest cities in the world. It was built thousands of years before Joshua was born. Joshua leads the people of Israel to capture a land that is surrounded by walls that were built thousands of years before he was even born. He stands at the periphery of Canaan, the people of Jericho are at the centre of the land. Because he is standing in the periphery, all he can see is closed walls. What you see depends on where you stand. If you are in the periphery of society, all you will see in the world is closed doors. All you will experience, all you will feel is negativity because you are standing at the wrong position! You are in your youth; you are full of energy; you have potential to be what you can be, but because you are standing at the wrong position, you only see negativity, you only see a cul-de-sac! But while Joshua sees closed walls, God sees an opportunity to make God's people great, God sees an opportunity to uplift God's people, because our thoughts are not God's thoughts; our plans are not God's plans. When we see obstacles, God sees opportunities to raise God's people from nobodies to great people; When we stand at the wrong position and see closed walls God sees an opportunity to raise a Caster Semenya out of the negativity of the world that continually seeks to close doors for her, and because she is standing at the right position, she does not see closed walls, she sees an opportunity to invent a way of breaking a

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<sup>5</sup> Nelson Richard D. 1997. Joshua. Louisville: John Knox Press

wall. Remember when Solomon Mahlangu was about to be killed by the apartheid regime, when everybody saw closed doors for him, he saw an opportunity to plant a seed of liberation and he says “tell my people that my blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom, Aluta continua.” Remember that when Albert Einstein was still a child he could not speak fluently and his teachers thought he was slow and stupid and he even got expelled at school, but because he was standing at the right position, he did not see closed school walls, he saw an opportunity to break the walls of prejudice and changed the way we see look at science. You cannot create a youth and children centred church if you are not standing on the right position!

The wall surrounding Jericho was some 25 feet high and 20 feet thick. On top of that they had soldiers all over the wall, inside and outside protecting the city. This wall that Joshua is standing in front of is not only 25 feet high; it is not only 20 feet thick, it also has people protecting it inside and outside. The city is shut up inside and outside to keep them outside! Mr. Coordinator, for us as the youth of the church to create a youth and centred church we have got to break this huge wall. This wall was built centuries before we were born, our grandparents and great-grandparents found this wall and left it. And now we are standing in front of this wall. This wall that is in front of us has a mouth Mr. Coordinator, this wall sometimes says to us: before you were born, I was already a full member of this church! This wall sometimes says to us *lcawa yokhokho bethu le*, as if we have no space in the church! This wall has got to be broken. But it is a strong wall, it was built long ago, the people who built this wall that seeks to suppress the youth in the church died even before we were born. But the people protecting the wall are still alive. The wall is under the protection of *amagoza*, it is under the protection of leaders, it is under the protection of “the veterans of the church” and dare I say it is under the protection of ministers of the church. This wall will not fall if we remain standing on the wrong position.

And God says to Joshua: I have given you the city of Jericho with all its people and soldiers. It is all yours, all you have to do is re-vision, re-imagine and re-configure your position. Now, Joshua the Bible tells us is the son of Nun in the tribe of Ephraim. He was first called *Hoshea* which means “saviour” of “salvation”. Then Moses changed his name by adding the prefix of *Jahweh* to *Yehoshua* meaning “salvation of Yahweh”. Joshua is from the tribe of Ephraim. Ephraim was the son of Joseph. The twelve tribes of Israel are named after the twelve sons of Jacob. Joshua is from the tribe of Ephraim and Ephraim is from the house of Joseph. The same Joseph who was called a dreamer by his brothers. According to seniority, Joseph is the last born of his father. In other words in terms of seniority the tribe of Ephraim is the least amongst all the tribes. When Moses sends the twelve spies to scout the land of Canaan, Joshua is amongst the spies representing the tribe of Ephraim. He is just a spy amongst other spies. The members of Moses’ executive do not include Joshua, he is just a spy. The executive members are Aron and Miriam. Yet when you read about the death of Moses, Miriam has already died and now the second in command is Aron. But when Moses dies, God does not appoint Moses’ second in command, God ignores the obvious candidate and chooses a spy to take over the baton!

When grace locates you, grace picks you up from the multitudes and lifts you out of them and positions you to greatness. When you are standing at the right position and when it is your time,

it is your time! It doesn't matter how long you have been in the background; it doesn't matter if you were not in Moses' executive, when it is your time, it is your time! It doesn't matter if you were just a spy; it doesn't matter if you are from the least tribe; it doesn't matter if your father is not an ANC heavyweight, when it is your time, it is your time!

When it is your time, and you are standing in the right position God says to you: "Look, I have set an open door in front of you that nobody can close!" When it is your time, there is no wall that can keep you! Donald Trump says he is going to build a wall that will keep the Mexican within their borders and he says "nobody builds walls better than I do". If you are standing the right position, even Donald Trump's wall cannot keep you away!

Joshua remained in the periphery his entire life. He was from just a small tribe, he was nothing and no one thought about promoting him, but his time was coming. Even when Miriam died he was not promoted. Walter Brueggemann in his book "Disruptive Grace"<sup>6</sup> argues that the grace of God is disruptive. It cannot be grace if it does not disrupt our space move our position. Brueggemann argues that the grace of God comes locates God's people; finds God's people in positions where they are not supposed to be; this grace finds the people of God content in the positions they are not supposed to be content it. And then this disruptive grace disrupts the situation, it interrupts the situation that has become normal. In other words when remain positioned in the periphery, content with the position the church has placed us in, clustered down by the walls of the church, the grace of God comes and disrupts the situation; it disturbs the walls of Jericho, it breaks down the walls of hatred, it breaks down the walls of homophobia. This grace Brueggemann argues, follows us wherever we go, it disturbs the little walls that people build around; it disrupts the little walls we build around ourselves. *Lo musa uyiscefe, uyasilandela*. Even when we hide behind the fact that we are from poor backgrounds, *lo musa uyakulandela!* And it disrupts the situations; it breaks the walls; it destroys the wall; it dismantles the wall!

### **Going around in circles**

*<sup>8</sup> As Joshua had commanded the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the LORD went forward, blowing the trumpets, with the ark of the covenant of the LORD following them. <sup>9</sup> And the armed men went before the priests who blew the trumpets; the rear guard came after the ark, while the trumpets blew continually. <sup>10</sup> To the people Joshua gave this command: "You shall not shout or let your voice be heard, nor shall you utter a word, until the day I tell you to shout. Then you shall shout." <sup>11</sup> So the ark of the LORD went around the city, circling it once; and they came into the camp, and spent the night in the camp. <sup>15</sup> On the seventh day they rose early, at dawn, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times. It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. <sup>16</sup> And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city.*

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann Walter. 2011. *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture and the Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press

And God says to Joshua you shall go around the city for six days only once a day. God instructs Joshua and the people to engage in what scholars call holy war. God gives them an instruction to be ridiculous, to behave like stupid people. God tells Joshua and the people to go around in circles. So they encamp near Jericho. They wake up in the morning, they form a procession; the priests walk in front; the whole of Israel follows and they go around the city only once and then they go back to the camp. They wake up the following morning, they get on the procession again and they go around the city once for that day and they go back to the camp. So they wake up the third day and they do the same thing: they get on the procession and go around the city once on that day and they go back to the camp. What you see depends on where you are standing. When looking over their windows the people of Jericho see a mad nation of Israelites. When the Israelites look at the wall of Jericho they see land that will soon belong to them. God instructed them to be silent for the six days. They go around in circles and they are quiet.

They went round and round like ridiculous and outrageous people. But on the seventh day as the Lord had commanded having been quiet for six days, on the seventh day when Joshua said "Make a shout!" The whole procession made a shout and walls of Jericho fell down. The walls of Jericho will not fall down if you remain in the periphery, a youth a children centred church will not be created if we don't stand on the right position. And so I leave you with a thought by Marianne Williamson:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.