

Methodist Church of Southern Africa

Conference 2018

Mozambique, Maputo

Theme: Shaping Tomorrow, Today

## Introduction

Let me take this time to acknowledge the Presiding Bishop, Rev. Z. Siwa, the General Secretary of the Connexion, Rev. C. Morgan, President of the Lay leaders, Mr Nkosi, members of the Connexional Executive, delegates of conference, distinguished guest, and all people of God present. Allow me to greet you all in the name of my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Amen.

It is an honour and a privilege to stand before you today to share a few thoughts on the conference theme in the form of a Bible Study. A theme, which I believe, places us as a church on an exciting terrain of reimagining our time together with all generations passed, those present and those to come. A space of high energy, creativity and healthy imagination- dare I say, a space that calls for a critical search for a new trajectory of doing and being Church. In this case, the use of the word Church is referring to both the lived experience of being part of a community of faith- that is the body of Christ- but also living out our faith in community being the hands and feet of God in the world. Thus being active participants in God's mission. This I believe is at the core of what it means to be a transforming discipleship movement; one we have been exploring for the last 3 years or so.

Allow me to also acknowledge how the conference themes have called us as the Connexion to reflect on those who have not always formed the dominant discourse in the Church in the past, namely; Women, Creation, Youth and Children. Focusing on those who have been neglected or excluded by the dominant discourse in its framing of what it means to be Church. These are voices either which have been left unheard or who have otherwise been represented and may I say, sometimes highly misrepresented. Thus leading to

an incomplete imagination of what it means to be the body of Christ as some parts of the body have not been active agents in the functioning of this body. Thus calling us to refocus on *doing theology from the margins*. This being a space, though unfamiliar to many, which proposes fertile ground for discovery and indeed even shaping for the sake of reformulating and reconfiguring what it means to be a transforming discipleship movement that exists in the ever changing times of our Connexion.

### **Reflection on the theme: Shaping tomorrow, today.**

Let us read from Acts 20: 7-12

***<sup>7</sup> On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. <sup>8</sup> There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. <sup>9</sup> A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. <sup>10</sup> But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." <sup>11</sup> Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. <sup>12</sup> Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.***

Firstly, I was intrigued by the choice and phrasing of the theme. Firstly, I was challenged by the concept of shaping. Shaping in the Cambridge dictionary is defined, "to decide or influence the form of something, especially a belief or idea or someone's character"<sup>1</sup>. Implied in the definition is the presence of development and improvement and the element of decision.

I further came across the psychological understanding of shaping as a learning process through which character and behaviour is reinforced through successive approximations which are used to form the one trained towards the target behaviour. This theory was first introduced by B. F Skinner<sup>2</sup> with animals

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<sup>1</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>

<sup>2</sup> Explored in Peterson, G. B. 2004. A day of great illumination: B. F Skinner's discovery of shaping. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behaviour*, 82: 317-28.

and extended to humans and other species. These approximations are used in order to elicit a response which signals a progressive improvement of behaviour that is envisaged by the trainer. Therefore, in humans, the best form of shaping would be for training an athlete for a race. Those who run marathons, go through trials which are not only meant to test their current strength but to prepare them for a race which has its own outcomes which cannot be pre-determined but can be prepared for. But trainers have also conceded that sometimes, shaping fails. In a research by Shettleworth titled *Cognition, Evolution and behaviour*, the failure was attributed to the trained subject's (in the case of this research it was a racoon) limitation of the cognitive capacity to imagine the possibility of carrying through the trial at hand and thus resulted in resorting to basic behaviour common to its species (Shettleworth, 2010).

Interesting points I seek to make based on this theory of shaping. Firstly, when you shape there is a target to which one is working towards which is not yet attained (which in our Christian language we can call a vision). Secondly, there is a need for decisive, appropriate responses towards the actions taken in the training that collectively lead to the desired and envisioned state. Thirdly, frustration and defaulting to the norm are a natural, yet limiting of potential, responses to perceived failure and the need to do the tried and tested limits what could be bettered.

Therefore, based on these definitions, essential qualities in shaping are decisiveness, the will to change from the current state to what might be, and the imagination rich enough to see what might become of the current form in future. Moreover, shaping is not a time bound activity but rather one that seeks to improve the essence of one's being beyond the measured time. Is this not what we believe our faith to be about? That which gives substance to "things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11: 1). Therefore, shaping is not an activity left only for the youth but one that our faith in Christ and our desire to be Christ-like calls us to continuously move beyond defined stages of growth. Shaping also happens as we are called to be those who help realise the Kingdom of God in the here and now and at the heart of our calling to be disciples is to be those who create the alternative

community that is upheld by God's kingdom principle remembering Jesus' assertion about who we ought to be, "I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth." John 17: 14-19.<sup>3</sup>

### **Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow**

On investigating the concepts such as yesterday, today and tomorrow; I landed in the tricky yet interesting field of temporality- the philosophy of time and relativity of time. For our time together, I will not be able to go in depth in this theory but one can attempt to read through the work of Martin Heidegger, 1962 *Being and Time*, which gave birth to many writers interrogating the understanding of time and gave birth to engagements which attempted to interrogate and better understand the concept of time and its relationship with human beings.

On understanding the concept of time, two Greek words have been used to define time, namely Chronos and Kairos<sup>4</sup>. In Greek mythology, both are gods, with Chronos being the superior God of absolute time; and Kairos being the younger son of Zeus and being known as the god of the "right time." H. C Hahn, in summarising the distinction made by the Greeks on the concept of time points out; "The presence of the two etymological groups, associated respectively with chronos and kairos for the concept of time, suggests that the Greeks distinguished individual periods or points of time which can be affected by human decisions (kairos) from the stream of time, whose progress is independent of any possible human influence (chronos)" (Hahn, 1776: 834 cited in Gault, 1995:162)<sup>5</sup>. Therefore in chronological time, humanity is

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<sup>3</sup> This duality of time and existence will be further illuminated in the next section of time and temporality.

<sup>4</sup> There are many other philosophies of time which can be explored through the proposed trajectory of thought on the theme; but for the sake of time, our exploration is limited to the Greek mythological understanding of time.

<sup>5</sup> Gault, R. 1995. "In and Out of Time." *Environmental Values*, Vol4: 2. Pg149-166. Accessed on <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30301462>.

passive, at best reactive to events while kairological time requires a response from humanity and presents opportunities to act more proactively.

In chronological time, there is a sense of the linear progression of time between past, present and future which is a more quantitative concept of time. This sense of time, Richard Gault highlights it emerged with the rise of science and modernity and has become a familiar time that one rarely questions (1995:149). Furthermore, he highlights that though technology can tell us the time, it cannot tell us what time is or time's peculiar character. And a Philosopher, Martin Heidegger in his work titled *Being and Time* points out "time cannot be found anywhere in the watch that indicates time, neither on the dial nor in the mechanism, nor can it be found in modern technological chronometers. The assertion forces itself upon us: the more technological- the more exact and informative- the chronometer, the less occasion to give thought first of all to time's peculiar character" (Heidegger, 1972: 11). And by extension, there seems to be no space for one to interrogate their own existence, purpose and participation within this time.

Felix 'O Murchadha, in his analysis of the concept of Kairos and Chronos in Heidegger, points out that in classical philosophical understandings of time, it was asserted that time has power over those who stand within it and this power is of passing and decay. But 'O Murchadha points out, that for something to pass, it must first emerge. Therefore, within time there exists the power to emerge (2013:13). Moreover, along with Immanuel Kant, one needs to understand that humans are not to be understood as merely entities in time but humanity herself as temporal<sup>6</sup>. This is so because what emerges does so through human agency and does not belong to the cycles of nature but arises as something new within the authentic presence and participation of humanity ('O Murchadha, 2013:14). This time therefore, is experienced time in human practice. And in this form of time, we do not simply progress towards the future, but we experience the coming towards us of the future and in this sense the future has power over us.

This understanding of time differs from the linear measured time -the *Chronos* time. The kind of time described by 'O Murchadha is one that he calls *kairos*

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<sup>6</sup> In other words, not only existing within time but having a relationship with time.

time. In exploring this understanding of kairological time, Heidegger uses the term to interpret St. Paul's understanding of the second coming of Christ. For St. Paul, the second coming of Christ cannot be calculated, one only knows that it will happen suddenly like a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Therefore, what is important is not to know the exact point in time (measured, predictable chronological time) but rather to be prepared for its coming. Such preparedness calls for a heightened level of alertness and attentiveness to the experience of time. Gault points out that this "is a time of opportunities" (1995:156) and only with the eyes of faith can it be encountered. In this sense of time, *kairos*<sup>7</sup> though it is not contained in the future, it is the moment between past and future and it is a dimension of decision. In this dimension, the moment demands decision to act in a manner appropriate to the moment with the intention to bring about a new beginning. It is a moment of decision, where the standards of the past are no longer in force. There is a sense of clear discontinuity of the cyclical progression of time, but an allowance where the calling into question of the past arises. For it is in the interrogation of the past, as experienced and not only as measured, that the future would be able to emerge as the future rather than simply the re-creation of the old at a different time ('O Murchadha, 2013:15).

In this sense of time, the future does not become a destination of time passing, but rather a horizon of the exploration of new possibilities. And this exploration happens in the now moment; the kairological<sup>8</sup> time of decision and that time I believe is what characterises how we are to view and shape today. Seeing today not only as a present state of time, but a now moment that requires alertness, action and decision not for the sake of mastering the future but rather in the pursuit of discovery of what it means to be presently active while attaining certain glimpses of the future but also experiencing the widening of the future horizon. But this still happens within the measured time, thus signalling that kairological time can be experienced at once as 'chaotic' yet ordering at the same time while bringing forth new possibilities ('O Murchadha, 2013:14, 23).

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<sup>7</sup> This use of the word *kairos* assumes an interlacing of the Greek and Christian roots of the word; where in the Greek it is understood in terms of the opportune time and in Christian terms it is understood in terms of decision.

<sup>8</sup> A term adopted from Richard Gault's work, *In and out of time* (1995).

Therefore, though we are materially closed in by the boundaries of chronological time, kairological time points us to the possibility of stepping in and out of the everyday in order to discover something new. Thus seeing the present, today, as transitional in character and embodying the temporal dimension of decision when speaking kairological time. Furthermore, the present action, to be kairological, needs to resist the power of what has been and the linear progression towards what is and it is through this resistance that there can be a restructuring and it is in the de-structuring that shaping happens and leads to discernment of the emergence of the new. Allan Boesak<sup>9</sup> highlights that the Kairological time is a time of revealing falsehoods which the status quo cannot exist without, but which blind and disable the people. Furthermore, the new cannot emerge without seeing, discerning and acting for the moment simply passes us by. Therefore, if we are to shape, Allan Boesak proposes a model of shaping which he calls the formulation of kairological consciousness; which I will deal with in detail tomorrow.

Therefore, if we are to shape tomorrow, today we are invited to reawaken our own Christian concepts of formation and of living in the Kairos.

### **What about today requires shaping?**

The narrative of Eutychus points us to why shaping is necessary and urgent for us as Church.

And as we read the narrative by Eutychus, we come across the description of time in the unfolding of the events:

**7. *On the first day of the week***, marking a specific time in the chronological week, and signalling this may have been a routine for those meeting and formalised day of meeting for Christians and that being Sunday (F.F Bruce, 1988:268). We are further told that he stayed the whole night with the purpose to break bread, which in Acts 2 :42 denotes a shared meal but Bruce points out that “the enacted memory of the last supper may well have been part of it” (1988:268). Commentators point out that churches those times were not regulated by clock, therefore the time spent together seems to transcend then our linear measured time. We are told that Eutychus falls into deep sleep

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<sup>9</sup> A. Boesak, 2015. Kairos, Chrisis and Global Apartheid. New york: Palgrave MacMillan.



in the midst of Paul's talked on and on. This signals us to the first need of shaping. There is a great sense that the dominant discourse does not seem to be an all-inclusive discourse. Yet, it is a reproduction of what has been done and said over and over again and there seems to be no decisive action in the midst of rhetoric. There is a great sense of disgruntlement in the church and society regarding the lack of proactive action and decisiveness on issues that pertain to youth, women and children. This rhetoric seems to be shifting one from alertness to slumber because of its linear nature and focus.

The meeting is at the heart of a location I believe signals to the act of shaping and training; the home and the church in one. Cheryl Sanders<sup>10</sup> highlights that the spiritual formation of young people is the core business of the family and the church becoming the extension of that family (1997:72). And in the shaping, there is need to restructure how we do Church in a way that is more inclusive.

It is important to note though, that we are not only situated in chronological time, but we also stand in the middle of kairological time in the text. We are told the purpose of the meeting was to break bread, signalling to the sacrament of Holy Communion. 'O Murchadha highlights that sacraments have kairological characteristics in so far as through Communion, the past, present and future of the living Christ come together and bring forth the emergence of God's embodied presence in humanity through the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, as they meet, they are in their present state, embracing the gift of God's eternal presence through the breaking of bread where the eternal transcends the bounds of time and thus allowing humanity glimpses of the 'heavenly banquet.'

In the midst of that, the table is almost not complete, one of the members of the banquet falls asleep and falls from the window and dies. The present, as it stands, seems to be missing opportunities of bringing through the breaking through of the Kingdom of God by being preoccupied with everything except what brings us together which is the presence of Christ and realising that presence in the world. I imagine, if this was a discussion as is suggested in the

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<sup>10</sup> Sanders, C. J. 1997. *Ministry at the Margins: The Prophetic Mission of Women Youth and the Poor*. Illinois: InterVarsity Press.



text, that because he may have limited knowledge on the subject matter, his silence may have went unnoticed and even his sleeping non-disturbing to the church. How we are happy to speak of youth in Chronological terms and are happy that they remain in their corner as long as they are not disturbing us they are fine. Until such a time that they are chronologically advanced can they then participate, while we wait for them to grow, they fall asleep and die in our presence.

The Presiding Bishop in his address highlights the statistics of what our today looks like. With the bulk of our population being youth, the realities do not seem to give much hope for a time where young people will be full participants in their own development and improvement of their livelihood. A study by the South African Anxiety and Depression Group (SADAG) revealed the statistics showing that 9% of all deaths among teenagers are due to suicide in South Africa alone. Further studies found that the group between the ages of 10-19 are high risk for suicide, while 38, 3% of teens felt so hopeless that they sought help or counselling, while 31, 5% have attempted suicide and needed medical treatment.<sup>11</sup> The recent killings of young women and children, human trafficking are to name but a few the realities of our time that signal to the need for us to shape and relook at our current state of doing things and to self-critic for the sake of reimagining our vision of becoming a Christ healed Africa for the healing of nations. This calls for a radical shift in our we relate to time and how we participate in time for the sake of tomorrow.

### **Today as the kairological time of decision and action**

Though we may be hemmed in by the reality if the past and the future, Gault proposes that in Kairological time, the present can be seen as our “privileged sanctuary” (1995:152). In Kairological time, the future comes towards us with events and opportunities emerging from a future source. From this source, the present is not a fully formed present, but one that is presented with both opportunities and challenges. It is the human response to the possibilities and challenges which emerge that the present is formed and preparation for future emergence of the new is practiced. Therefore, the present is not merely a given, as a result of time but rather a capital point within which to build on for

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<sup>11</sup> Reported in a news article on News24, titled *Suicide on the rise among youth*. 28/02/2018

the widening of our view of the tomorrow's horizon. But in this capital point of preparation, there exists the wisdom of the past within which lessons can be gleaned on. It is in the past that we can find paradigms of preparedness informing how we shape our action for our decision in the present, affects the scope of tomorrow's horizon.

Due to chronological time limitations, the full presentation could not be shared, but thanks to the kairological time of media, this Bible study will be able to extend its own presentation time and hopefully new thoughts will emerge from these small seeds thrown.

Let us together imagine, what it means to be located in the kairological time and space, the opportune time for the Methodist Church and Southern Africa collectively reimagine the future and ride on the pinions of the healthy imagination of youth and children.