

Re-imagining Social Holiness; Sustaining Hope

Obusitswe K. Tiroyabone¹

Introduction

President of the Methodist Conference; Secretary of the Methodist Conference; Members of the Connexional Executive; Conference Delegates; Distinguished Guests; Ladies and Gentlemen, all the people called Methodist, I greet you all this morning in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Amen. Let me begin by expressing my heartfelt gratitude to the Presiding Bishop for considering me from among her colleagues to stand before you and challenge conference through these studies to re-imagine social holiness, for the sustaining of hope and healing. For us the 20%², it means a lot.

Conference, I will be journeying with you over the next two days in these Bible Studies on a reading of Ezekiel 37 for Social Holiness. We will today look at the first part of the Conference theme: Re-imagining Social Holiness, and tomorrow we will look at the second part of the theme: Sustaining Hope and Healing. Our reading for these studies is Ezekiel 37:1-14:

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and the Lord brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. The Lord led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. The Lord said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” Then the Lord said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then the Lord said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophesy,

¹ The Rev. Obusitswe K. Tiroyabone is an ordained Methodist Presbyter, stationed in the Mbombela Circuit in the Limpopo Synod.

² 20% refers to young people in the context of The Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” I prophesied as the Lord commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then the Lord said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.”

Re-imagining

Our theme in this Conference is: Re-imagining Social Holiness; Sustaining Hope and Healing. To reimagine is to imagine again or to imagine anew. Re-imagining a concept or an idea is to look at the same idea or concept that has already existed and imagine it again from a fresh and contemporary perspective. The idea or concept already exists but is seemingly not effective because our approach to it has gone stale, therefore we must re-imagine it. To re-imagine a concept is to acknowledge that the concept is important, it is powerful, but it is not being applied effectively and thus needs re-imagination. Re-imagination is to re-interpret imaginatively. One may ask: what is the value of re-imagining? Why should we re-imagine? What will happen after we have re-imagined? We re-imagine because life evolves and as life evolves our epistemologies must evolve. As life evolves, our perspectives towards our doctrines must also evolve.

Social Holiness

We begin friends with a short refresher of the doctrine of Social Holiness. The reference to Social Holiness commonly mentioned in Methodist circles is from the writing of John Wesley in his *Works*: “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness” (1872: 321). But Wesley understood Social Holiness as much more than that. The full text of the reference to Wesley (1872:321) is:

The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social, no holiness, but social holiness. Faith working by love is the length and breadth and height of Christian perfection. This commandment we have from Christ, that he who loves God, loves his brother also, and that we manifest our love ‘by doing good unto all men’; especially to them that are of the household of faith”

It is important to note two things about Social Holiness: firstly, it is that the premise of Social Holiness begins with personal holiness. You cannot speak of social holiness without speaking about personal holiness. The position of social holiness is that holy people bring about social holiness because only transformed people are able to transform society (Kenge, 2007:37). It is through the practice of Christian perfection, our desire to live holy lives that Wesley teaches that we must walk like Christ and live like Christ. From Christian perfection, we then become interconnected with other members of the household of Christ and then are formed into an interconnected Social Holiness. This interconnectedness pushes us to act in social cohesive holiness. The second thing to note is that as we become more holy with each other, we are then pushed by faith working through love to come into contact with the world. Christian perfection is personal holiness, but Wesley cautions us that personal holiness is meaningless if it is not lived out in family or community (1872:321).

Social holiness is not social justice, but social holiness and social justice are intertwined. Social holiness is according to Wesley, a means of grace that pushes us to works of mercy. Social holiness is not political activism, but it is social activism. Social Holiness is an expression of love. Love is by nature outward and not inward (Kenge, 2007:39). Social Holiness is a link between personal sanctification and its expression is in a practical engagement of ministry towards the needy. Wesley believed that by reaching out to the poor and needy, Christianity would influence society. Wesley did not only believe that transformed people could transform society into repentance but believed that transformed people are called to challenge the evil of society. Social holiness called on the Methodist people to come into contact with the poor; to sit with the poor, to talk to the poor and to understand the plight of the poor. Once we understand the plight of the poor, we will be disturbed by the plight of the poor and be pushed to anger against the plight of the poor.

The bands of the Methodist people led movements in England against injustices. What led the Methodists to action was Wesley’s belief that the holiness of the heart had to translate to

Social Holiness (Jennings, 1990:102). For Wesley, if a Methodist was unwilling to come into contact with the poor; serve the poor; give to the poor; feel the plight of the poor; smell the stench of the poor, they were deemed unworthy of being called Methodist (Jennings, 1990:102). Wesley believed that God has a preferential option for the poor, that God would always stand for the poor and the marginalized (Jennings, 1990:103-104).

Re-imagining Social Holiness

In Social Holiness, Wesley called on the people called Methodist to minister to those people he called the “outcasts of men” on five levels (Field, 2015:186):

1. Those who were excluded from society on economic grounds – the poor
2. Those who were excluded from society on social grounds – the underclasses
3. Those who were excluded from society on health grounds – the sick
4. Those who were excluded from society on legal grounds – convicted prisoners
5. Those who were excluded from society on nationalist grounds – prisoners of war

For the purpose of our theme, allow me to focus on the first three: the poor, the underclasses and the sick. I am proposing to Conference that we re-imagine Social Holiness to address these three forms of marginalization. These forms of marginalization form the basis of a people crying out for justice in our time. Jurgen Moltman argues (2012:460):

For the helpless and humiliated victims of injustice and violence, the cry for justice is the cry for God. Even the silence of the weary and heavy-laden is an expression of the cry for God and God’s justice. For it is not the physical poverty, the hunger and thirst, which the unemployed and homeless suffer; it is even more the humiliations and disparagements. Their self-respect and self-esteem are degraded and turn into self-contempt and a feeling of being lost. Today, the brutal fact of being without redress at the mercy of injustice and violence through persons and institutions is an experience for the majority of the human race.

The Alternative Community

Wesley did not only engage with the poor for purposes of charity, but he confronted the structures that caused the poor to be poor. Social Holiness is a ministry of confrontation. When we re-imagine social holiness, we must re-imagine it as Wesley intended it to be: an alternative view. Methodism was conceptualized as an alternative community, a

counterculture to the status quo. It was intended to be an alternative community with an alternative consciousness. It is an identity that is counter to the royal consciousness and community and, therefore, created and sustained by prophetic imagination. We need an alternative that goes beyond dignity and justice to heal the marred identity of those who have been marginalised. These situations and systems that are intentionally designed to cause the poor to fail should naturally evoke an emotion of anger within us.

When Wesley conceptualized Social Holiness, it was because he realized that the Church of his time had become far removed from society. He realized that Anglicanism was too attached to empire and removed from the masses who were the poor. Social Holiness became a consciousness that sought to depart from the center to the margins and as the Methodist people did that, they engaged with the margins and sought to transform the margins.

Wesley believed that God rose the Methodist people to spread Scriptural Holiness throughout the land. As economic expansionism occupied England, God rose the Methodist people to counter the idea that profit was more important than people. History is littered with examples of governments and big business climbing up to the top on the backs of the ordinary people. As big business colludes with empire, they step on the backs of the ordinary people on the margins to reach greater heights. Presiding Bishop, the backs of the ordinary people are broken! They are not broken because of the toil and labour for their pockets, they are broken because big business and empire have colluded to step on their shoulders as they seek to amass profits and accelerated GDP growth! As big business and empire climb on the backs of the poor, the underclass, the sick and the marginalized, God raises the Methodist people to re-imagine Social Holiness and break the silence!

Social Holiness was the driving force of a Methodist movement that lived as a subversive movement, a movement of the underground. As empire became more and more removed from the people, as church became more removed from the people, the Methodist movement went closer to the people. And so, there was a two-way traffic in 18th century England. As Anglicanism was moving closer to empire into the center, Methodism was moving out to the margins closer to the people. As Anglicanism spoke of vertical orderly structure, Methodism spoke of horizontal egalitarianism. As Anglicanism complicated the language of the church, Methodism sought to simplify the language. As Anglicanism domesticated the Jesus of Palestine into the Jesus of empire, Methodism sought to liberate the Jesus of Palestine into a

redeeming all-saving Jesus. As Anglicanism became more and more a religion of the elite, Methodism became a religion of the ordinary people, with John Wesley assuming the position of a plain man for plain people. As Anglicanism spoke of Deacon; Priest and Bishop as the threefold order of ministry, Methodism spoke of deacons, presbyters and lay leaders in the priesthood of all believers. Thus, Social Holiness became a ministry of discomfort. It became a ministry of standing alongside the poor. The Methodists believe that God wants us on the side of the poor. God wants us on the margins, with the underclass and outcasts of people.

We read in the gospels that Jesus's focus was directed first to the poor and the outcasts – the victims of injustice and violence, not the perpetrators. His message brought the kingdom of God to the poor, not the rich; his healing commitment was to the sick, not the healthy; his friendship embraced the outcasts; we see him among the lost, not the 'good people' (Moltman, 2012:464-465). Jesus' gospel roused the humiliated, letting them stand upright in faith, so he brought the healing power of the divine Spirit to the sick and divine justice to those without rights, and raised the victims of violence (Moltman:2012 465).

As Methodism continued to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land, the Methodist people went into the homes of the poor; they smelt the smell of poverty; they walked in the mud that the poor lived in. The injustices of the world reminded them that centuries ago St. Augustine spoke that Hope has two beautiful daughters: their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are and courage to see that they do not remain the same. And so, the Methodist movement could not stand the injustices that prevailed in the land. They became like Paul and Silas, who in Acts 17 Luke tells us that with the preaching of the gospel of Christ, they were turning the world upside down. They were disrupting the status quo!

Alas! Presiding Bishop, we are called at this conference to re-imagine Social Holiness because the fear that Wesley had seems to be coming into reality: I have no fear that the people called Methodist should ever cease to exist, but I fear that they will exist only as dead sect, having the form of religion, but not its effect. I ask Conference: are we not becoming an elitist church? We need to re-imagine Social Holiness because the Methodist movement is fast being removed from the masses of the people.

There is a popular joke on black twitter that Methodist people think that they go to church at Woolworths. The Methodist people on black twitter spaces respond: Yes! We are a Woolies church. This is because we are becoming an elitist church that celebrates glamour and glory whilst the poor continue to fall deeper into poverty. We need to re-imagine Social Holiness because we possess the form of religion, but not its effect.

Re-imagining Social Holiness

Conference, we need to re-imagine Social Holiness because like the church in Laodicea we are neither hot nor cold, we are lukewarm. We are lukewarm because when the poor cry out in Estina, we choose to pray for the perpetrator of their plight because he is our member. We are lukewarm because we see the signs of empire climbing up the ladder and stepping on poor people as it does so, and we keep quiet about it. We are lukewarm because we see people amassing power built on the back of poor people and yet we remain silent. We are lukewarm because there is no Methodist movement standing up against empire when the people cry in Cabo del Gado; in eSwatini, in eThekweni, they are in need of Hope and Healing. Richard Horsley warns that if we do not take a position against empire, we run the risk of creating ourselves as an alternative empire. In her post-colonial work, Musa Dube argues that those re-interpreting the scriptures must decide on whose side they are on as they decolonize the text. Are we on the side of the poor or on the side of empire?

We need to re-imagine Social Holiness because Southern Africa is crying. She is crying for justice. She lacks Hope and Healing, and she cries perpetually with the question Jeremiah poses: Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? This cry Allan Boesak (2017: 34-35) argues:

Is a cry of grief for the situation in which the people find themselves, and the cry is the announcement that the situation can no longer be tolerated. The cry is raised as critique against the empire and its workings of oppression. Just as in the exodus story, the history of liberation begins with a “cry” and “groaning” of the people of Israel, reminding God of God’s covenant, this cry calls upon God to remember the covenant and to know the people’s condition.

The cry is necessary because the nature of empire is to suck life out the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised. Empire presses; empire forces; empire coerces and pressures (Boesak,

2017: 35). Conference, we must re-imagine Social Holiness because the underclasses are crying for justice. The people are crying for social justice and they look to the church with the anticipation with which Zedekiah looked at Jeremiah, asking him: Is there no word that comes from Yahweh? A word of Social Holiness is what the people long for.

To re-imagine Social Holiness is to speak truth to power and to tell empire that there is a valley of bones in the land and the bones are dry. To re-imagine Social Holiness is to stop living comfortably with power, prestige and comfort, failing to hear the voices of the poor and marginalized. To re-imagine Social Holiness is to confront an unjust system that places profits before people. To re-imagine Social Holiness is to prophesy in a time of crisis and to declare boldly that the beast that is empire will ultimately be defeated. To re-imagine Social Holiness is to confront empire with the truth that it is not God's will that the unemployment rate of the country exceeds half of the employable population. To re-imagine Social Holiness is to move away from a gospel that neither afflicts the comfortable, nor comforts the afflicted.³ To re-imagine Social Holiness is to re-vision a world full of justice.

That justice, which has always been our hope, even if it is hope against hope, is not the justice that so many (empire) pretend will trickle down in reluctant drips from miserly clouds in a time of drought. We are speaking of the justice that rolls down like waters and the righteousness that surges like a mighty stream. It is rooted in the biblical prophetic tradition where justice, hope and judgement are not separated (Boesak, 2017:37).

This is a justice that prompts God to lay God's hand upon the prophet Ezekiel and transports him through the Holy Spirit from the River Chebar to a valley of dry bones...

³ Ivan Abrahams. 17 May 2016. United Methodist Church General Conference.

WORKS CONSULTED

Block, Peter; Brueggemann, Walter; McKnight, John. 2016. *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture*. New Jearsey: John Wiley & Sons

Boesak, Allan Aubrey. 2017. *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters: Prophetic Critique on Empire; Resistance, Justice, and the Power of the Hopeful Sizwe – a Transatlantic Conversation*. Eugene: Cascade Books

Field, David N. “Holiness, Social Justice and the Mission of the Church: John Wesley’s Insights in Contemporary Context” in *Holiness the Journal of Wesley House Cambridge* Volume I (2015) Issue 2 (Holiness and Mission): pp. 177-198

Jennings (Jnr.), Theodore W. 1990. *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Economic Evangelicals*. Nashville: Abingdon Press

Kenge, Lubunga Esther. 2007. *The Doctrine of Social Holiness in the Free Methodist Church, DRC: Implications for the HIV and AIDS Epidemic* (Masters Dissertation) Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal

Mkhonta, Dumisile Lungile. 2016. *Social Holiness as Agency? Reactivating the Mission Imperative: “Human Empowerment and Economic Development” in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA)* (Masters Dissertation) Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal

Moltman, Jurgen. 1965. *Theology of Hope*. New York: Harper and Row

Moltman, Jurgen. 2012. *Ethics of Hope*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press

Wearmouth, Robert F. 1947. *Methodism and the Working Class Movements of England: 1800 – 1850*. London: Epworth Press

Wesley, John. 1872. *The Works of John Wesley: Volume VI. Sermons on Several Occasions.*
Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House