



## *BLACK METHODIST CONSULTATION*

*[A formation within the Methodist Church of SA]*

### **CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS**

**26 FEBRUARY 2016**

**REV. M. MOLO**

**Theme: Leading with accountability and sacrifice: demand of the Kingdom.**

#### **Greetings**

The Bishop of the Grahamstown district, the Rev. Andile “Bhele” Mbetse, the BMC Connexional executive, whom I have the privilege to lead with under the stewardship of our General Secretary, Xhanti Mhlubulwana, leaders of our movement in the districts, esteemed guests and all present here today I greet you all in the wonderful name of our liberator, master and transformer Jesus Christ. I salute you with our declaration of commitment and hope; I MCSA!! Ilifa labazali bethu!! Leaf la batsoadi ba rona!! MCSA!!.

It is my singular honour and privilege to welcome, on behalf of all the BMC members in this our February meeting for 2016. It is the second February meeting in our term as this Executive. I am sure I speak on behalf of the executive when I say the good wishes and support we have received has been overwhelming. We are humbled by the support as much as we are aware of the enormity of the task that lies ahead. There is no doubting in our minds and hearts that your prayers has accompanied us along the way; your faith in our liberating God has given us a firm foundation and today we stand in front of you and declare “ To God be the glory great things he hath done”. Thank you very much for your commitment to the work of the BMC and God’s vision for his church and the peoples of our connexion.

This meeting is the second highest decision making gathering of our movement. It has the solemn task of taking forward the work of the BMC as mandated by the previous Consultation. The overwhelming members of this meeting are the leadership of the BMC in districts. This is important because the core of the work of the BMC is done in districts. With this in mind the conversation held here is awaited with special interest by both those who are members of the movement and the broader Methodist community. Our voice

together is one that potentially can shape for good or ill at least the conversation if not the decision of the broader church. I mention these so as to impress upon our minds the sacredness of this meeting. We dare not trivialize it by the poverty of our conversation and the lethargy of spirit. We are leaders that must take seriously the responsibility and trust bestowed upon us at this serious historical epoch in the life of the church and people.

We are leaders whose sacred task is not only to consolidate the gains that have been achieved in the last 41 years of our existence, inspired by that noble spirit of Black Consciousness, and nourished by vision and sacrifice made by luminaries like Ernest N. Baartman, Andrew Losaba, Khoza Mgojo, Mmutlanyane Mogoba, Nomampondo Madlala, Felicia Phologolo and many others; but to take the necessary steps and make the required sacrifices so that the MCSA is truly African and reflects the scars of those who have been scared by our past, the dreams and aspirations of our people and the creation of a church intolerant to exclusion, exploitation and affirming of the divinely inspired dignity of all people. This is our solemn task. Any other activity is peripheral to this. Our efforts and talents are a sacrifice to this noble cause. Our victory is not found in personal glory and public adulation but in the dignity of our people worshiping and serving God authentically and freely. Our success is not found in individual or even collective exceptionalism that is the breeding ground for narcissism and parochial identities but in the openness of spirit and heart of our people that embraces themselves as they are open to the others who might appear different than them. Our greatness is not found in being elevated and celebrated as the messiah's but in serving our people so that they discover their true worth and potential as they imagine a different future and embrace their own sense of agency under God, acting with courage consistently to create a different and an all embracing future in common service to one another. Simply put we are here as servants of our people, not as their masters in pursuit of that great vision of a truly authentic African Church contributing to a common human endeavour for a world reflecting the values of the kingdom of God. This is what Allan Boesak calls "The Buntufication" of the world and all the relationship that hold the world together.

### **Our times need deep discerning**

We do not meet here in a vacuum. Indeed any cursory look at history will remind us that we are meeting in a place, a district and a province of great battles for dignity in the face

of brutality, exploitation, wounding of soul, dispossession, alienation and oppression. These battles for dignity and worth From Makana to Biko to Godolosi served as an inspiration for future generations to take the struggle forward. It is here in the echoes of these mountains and the songs of the birds that the names JC Mvusi, Simon Gqubule sound from the Methodist hearts into the ecumenical choirs that joins the human symphony in honour of a God of love and Justice and declare “Abantsundu Nabamhlophe mababulele Kunye! Mabavakalise bonke baculele inkosi”.

We also do know that we are a people who have lived through many a dawn and sometimes have squandered the opportunities that new dawn presents to us. We entered the 20 century with the prophetic words of Pixeley Isa ka Seme who on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1906 declared “The brighter day is rising upon Africa. Already I seem to see her chains dissolved, her desert plains red with harvest, her Abyssinia and Zululand the seats of science and religion, reflecting the glory of the rising sun from the spires of their churches and universities.....and all her sons employed in advancing peace-greater and more abiding than the spoils of war”. This kind of vision permeated through Africa, guiding us through all the missteps along the way. It found its rebirth towards the end the 20 century with the defeat of Apartheid in our own country and the new hope that was the breeding ground for what came to be known as the African renaissance. This culminated in a bold declaration that the 21 century will be remembered as the African century. These are the dreams that accompany us to this current moment of our existence.

Our journey as a church is also one full of new dawns and midday sunsets. From our birth as the Methodist family we struggled with bigotry and oppression in the house of Christ. In that struggle we lost many a brother and a sister, Mangena Mokone being prime example. With high hopes and expectations we heralded the 1958 statement that “we are one and undivided” as a fundamental step towards a non racial church. The election of Seth Mokitimi as the first Black president of the MCSA made us believe that the church has changed. The Obedience 81 yet again papered over the real pain and hurt that was visited upon Black people in the MCSA. We created a half measure to placate our conscience and lack of courage and said we are moving away from racial circuits and created the geographic circuits without any accountability measure for real and substantive transformation. We committed ourselves to a process of renewal that we called the Journey to a New Land and allowed it to shape our future direction. As we were

consolidating this journey we approached the end of the last millennium with the hope of new possibilities and we established the Millennium Mission Campaign. In the coming of the new Millennium we declared our Vision as “A Christ healed Africa: For the healing of Nations”. From the year 1996 it was clear at least in terms of pigmentation the church will be in black hands. Yet history might look back at this time and record it as a time of great potential for transformation which turned into a time of grain pain for the church in general and the Black church in particular.

I remind ourselves of this journey with the hope that it might help us understand the prevailing mood in our church and society. There is no doubt in my mind that there is a deep sense of dissatisfaction in the common psyche of our people in society and in the church.

There is an emerging belief that the new dawns of the past are not creating anything fundamentally new and perhaps are even used to sustain the old patterns and forcing Black people to be satisfied with the crumbs and an accommodation of one or two as a justification of the status quo. The Rhodes Must fall campaign literally mutated in front of our eyes to the Fees Must Fall Campaign, to end outsourcing, to currently accommodation struggles, Afrikaans Must fall and the violence that we now see in our Universities whether Cape Town University, Free State University or North West University and who knows which one tomorrow.

Institutions of state and governance for Public good are being undermined and intimidated virtually in front of our eyes and we are only left to show our disgust on radio stations, Twitter and private parties with the hope that someone else will do the fighting on our behalf whilst we admire them from afar whilst wait for the victory parade on the back of their suffering and sacrifice.

It is very sad and unfortunate to find our Parliament which supposed be the bedrock of our democracy and hold on our behalf, the executive accountable, to have abdicated its responsibility and sacrificed its integrity to the point that we now are depending on the Constitutional Court to be the final arbiter on public accountability. This is the kind of culture that breeds personality cult and demagoguery.

Corruption is not only cancerous and endemic it is also pervasive and reaches every part of our society; even our own church is not immune to it. Indeed its cost is huge in the billions of Rands at the expense of the poor; yet for me its greatest cost is how it corrodes our moral values and eats at our common soul as a people. For the sake of our common future there needs to be tidal wave to push back the marching feet of the corrupt.

Linked to this is the abuse of power in our societies that reaches its zenith in power mongers like Kurinziza and Musseveni. People like these are willing to abuse their office, use political patronage and change the constitutions in order to prolong their stay in power; even vilifying and arresting those who dare stand against them. They do this even at a risk if a civil war exploiting ethnic identities and crude natives. These so called leaders see themselves as more important than the people in their countries. This cannot be true. The people are always more important than the leaders.

There is a growing sense of cynicism with any form of leadership in our society. In the main people see leaders as self-serving and indifferent to the plight and needs of the people especially the weak and vulnerable. This is further exacerbated by the culture of relativism and deconstructionism, where claims of absolute truths are constantly deconstructed and exposed as instruments in the hands of the powerful few.

Our church is still beset with racism that finds its expression in different ways and times. I watched with interest the conversation that was evoked by our 40<sup>th</sup> July Consultation held in Johannesburg. I had no interest in engaging the debate that I believe sought to blackmail the BMC members into a self justifying position that needs to justify to others why we find it necessary to exist. I saw it with all its disguise as a challenge to our right to assert and express our wounds that left soul scars in terms that make sense to us and affirm our dignity. I refuse for the BMC to be held responsible, even by insinuation, for what is called “white exodus” in the MCSA. We have never been racist, we will never be racist, and we just refuse to participate in conversations that have no serious intention to deal with transformation; We will not converse in constructs that are imposed on us by those who still have power of language, metaphor, resource and access to platforms of conversation. We owe our existence to self love that allows us to see our dignity and worth not as a comparison to others but as one as inherently dignified as the other. I was very happy to notice that there are other white Methodists who do not buy the narrative

that the BMC is an inherent threat to white people, these are serious partners for conversation on transformation that we cannot close our ears to. The BMC is not a threat to white people it's a threat to white supremacy and all forms of bigotry. It is a friend to all people who want to accept the realities and consequences of our past and accept that Black people can and will contribute significantly to the shaping of how the church, our nation and the world will be. We cannot be held ransom by the fear of others who somehow convince themselves that our affirmation of our dignity means we say they do not have a place anymore in the MCSA. Let us be clear they do have a place but it will never be again a place of privilege, dominance and power. It will be a place of communion with love, respect and honour for all. There is no doubt in my mind there are some still in the MCSA who are not convinced of the bona fide of those who are black and currently lead the church. There seems to be a nostalgic longing for a church where white was right and if Blacks were uncomfortable they had white messiah's who will speak on their behalf with the Penny Sparrows of this world; because they know black people and they also know not only the system but the language that is necessary to deal with those Penny Sparrows. Blacks must be patient and grateful for the small and necessary advances brought to them by their white Messiah's. That Church is long gone and is not coming back.

It is my firm belief that the Black Church has to confront its own demons of homophobia and patriarchy in an honest, liberative and transformative way so as to be in the forefront of the fight against any form of bigotry and exclusion in the MCSA. The church we call our inheritance cannot have some of its children feeling like orphans in its household. We know what it is to be on the outside whilst others decide whether you are worthy to be welcomed inside.

The scourge of ethnicity and sexism still persist and I trust that the work assigned to the committees on these matters will continue to create strategies and concrete plans combat these with courage and discipline.

There is a growing instability in the life of our church. Conflicts are increasing, we hear stories of circuits that finish a year without having a single completed quarterly meeting; some circuits do not even have audited financial statements; we note that our stationing in a very disturbing number takes place beyond Conference in some instances going into

December, (let it be clear that it is the number that is more concerning rather than simply the fact that it does take place); there is a growing number of ministers who find it necessary and fit to defy the church as long as they can and arbitration as a resolving of matters gaining momentum towards becoming the norm rather than the exception. There seems to be a growing deficit of trust between those who are led in the church and those we campaign for and elect. I raise the last point with an acute awareness that the leadership as we have it is predominantly black yet to a great extent the deficit of trust is within the black community. I do get worried when I see the deep spiritual lethargy in our people, especially the clergy. I see myself being trapped as a minister into patterns of ministry that are more survival rather than faith taking risk oriented. I have been also alert as to the reality that in some places in the Connexion there is a notion that creates a fundamentally antagonistic posture between the laity and the clergy. Visioning together becomes a luxury and an exception. There is a lack of ecumenism in our church despite the MCSA being at the fore front of the leadership of the ecumenical movement. (I have been encouraged though by the recently held meeting of the ecumenical secretaries under the leadership of Rev. M Losaba and Bishop M. Forster).

My dear friends no church can thrive in this environment, the Black church in particular has to look at itself in the mirror, repent and confess to God and each other and rise up and work at our relationships and vision; the world is waiting: the harvest is plenty the workers are few.

Within the BMC we still need to give serious attention to the District structure and life. We spent a lot of time in the last three meetings on these matters and the last special meeting in Bloemfontein in November 2016. There are committees established and the template will be presented and made part of the normal reporting and accountability structures of the BMC. We have a historical responsibility passed on to us by our forebears. The future stability and relevance of the MCSA depends on the hard work and sacrifices we are willing to make right now.

Our Theme: leading with accountability and sacrifice: the demands of the kingdom.



It is with this context in mind that our theme for this weekend is instructive. The issue of leadership will always be sharply raised here because we are a gathering of leaders. This theme is meant to provoke us and make us consistently uncomfortable or “maladjusted” as Martin Luther King would say to the current and dominating notions and practise of leadership. It is Eddie S. Glaude JR, in his book Democracy in Black, who correctly observes; “The idea that you can have Black leaders representing the interests of Black people but who are not accountable to black constituencies kills black democratic life. Black people end up outsourcing their democratic responsibilities to people deemed caretakers of their interests and stewards of their futures. Black people are reduced to an undifferentiated mass in need of representation by a particular black political class, whether elected or self-appointed. This approach obscures the need for critical debate among Black people. It also undermines mechanisms of accountability.....all we need to do is ...vote”.

I have quoted this at length as I believe that this gives us a lenses through which we need to engage leadership in general and Black leadership, in particular for our times. The image of an unaccountable, all knowing messiah for the people is no more helpful nor is it liberative. I have no intention to do a serious hermeneutical study of the text Nehemiah 5 to except to highlight the following:

Even the most cursory reading of that text tells us that leadership is always located in a particular time and the nobility of the task in front of a generation. The rebuilding of the wall has always been about a greater task: the reconstruction and development of the nation. The cries of the weak and vulnerable create a disturbance to the conscience of the leader and ultimately the nation. The measurement of any leadership is not how well they manage a project but how fundamentally they transform their communities for the sake of the marginalised. This calls for courage that the governor displays and confronts the powerful with the cries of the weak and enlist a response and a commitment to change.

It also places the governor at a very precarious position which he embraces with humility and discipline. He does a public accountability gesture. He stands in front of the community and account for his own actions and choices. He can only lead with integrity when he stands in front of the people to say this is what I have done, this is how I have done it with these resources. Great leaders know that accountability to the people is not a



sign of weakness but an indicator of greatness born in service to the people and the kingdom of God. The accountability we talk about here is much deeper than administrative accountability. It is one that is deeply rooted in serving God's people in the values of the kingdom of God. It is accountability not only for Rands or activity but for the higher vision that God has placed in us as a people. The ultimate point of accountability is God who is the lover of justice and the defender of the weak and vulnerable.

The last thing I want to elevate in this scripture and thus for our scripture is the need for sacrificial leadership. In a world where leaders seek to take from the people, using the resources that are meant for the people for their own personal enrichment the governor declares "Neither I nor my Brothers ate the food..." he continues "out of reverence for God I did not act like that" as if to make the point clearer "instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall.....we did not acquire any land". Although within his legal rights that come not from his needs but the powerful position he declared "I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people". Great leadership is accompanied by sacrifice in moments of hardship in the quest to serve a higher purpose. There is no hiding behind legality and power but a realisation that staring from the leader sacrifice is necessary in the service of a greater good.

I have no doubt in my mind leadership with accountability and sacrifice is the demand of the Kingdom of God. Listen to the Governor as he concludes the chapter "Remember me with favour, my God, for all that I have done for these people". This is not only about the here and now it is about the ultimate purpose of God. Accountability and sacrifice are leadership demands for our time, for the BMC, for the MCSA, for our people because it is a demand of the kingdom of God.

## **Conclusion**

As we meet here this weekend as the leadership of the BMC, a noble movement of our people, may the cries of the weak and vulnerable stir our souls so as to move us and stand in front of the nation and allow their voices to wake up a church that is complicit to a nation that is becoming increasingly indifferent to the pain of the excluded. May that stirring evoke in us a courage to confront the evil in our society and unnerve the powerful; calling them to repentance and acts of justice to fundamentally transform our world towards justice and solidarity in the kingdom of God.

If we are to lead our people with integrity and reverence to their dreams and hopes we have to muster the courage to allow ourselves to be held accountable in their face and in the face of God. We cannot claim to be leaders of our people yet refuse to be accountable. Ultimately we are accountable to God not only with the resources but the Kingdom of God.

We can only lead with credibility when we are sensible to the plight of the people, refusing to exploit them even if it might be legally permitted, devoting ourselves to the cause that transform their lives fundamentally and making sacrifices that advances their dreams in God's dream for them. When we do this we fulfil the leadership demands of the Kingdom of God.

Let every BMC leader reflect accountability and sacrifice for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Let this be our gift to the broader church and society. Let every village, township, suburb know a BMC member and leader not simply by occupying positions of power but by creating new models of power know by serving with accountability and sacrifice. God demands this of us. Our people deserve nothing less.