

Methodism and Socio-political Action in Zimbabwe: 2000-2007

Is there no balm in Gilead?
Are there no doctors there?
Why, then, have my people not been healed? (Jeremiah 8:22)

The paper examines the performance of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe during the past eight years of intense dictatorship by the Robert Mugabe regime and proposes a new paradigm for forming a faith community that confronts dictatorship in Zimbabwe. It calls for a responsible theology of involvement by the ordinary Christians that begins with the nurturing and grounding of new members in a faith that sees the world as the arena of their new found faith in God and who consequently can stand and be victorious against oppression by the state.

The Reign of Chaos

The Day of the Lord—Sunday, February 13, 2000 will be forever carved in the memory of most Zimbabweans as a day that signaled the end of their experiment with political independence. It was the day when all pretext of democratic governance came collapsing like a deck of cards. Two days before, the Robert Mugabe regime had conducted a referendum on a new constitution that was government sponsored and drafted. The aim of the constitution was, among other things, to grab white farms from their owners and to extend the powers of the presidency. The expectation of the government was that the people were going to vote Yes to this proposed constitution. The government which had never lost an election since the granting of political independence in 1980 was sure of victory and they hoped to use this plebiscite as a litmus test of what was to happen few months down the line when the parliamentary elections scheduled for June the same year were to take place.

February 13, then was the day when voting ended and the counting of the ballot boxes took place. Nobody ever suspected that this marked the last day when freedom to choose will be banished from the land. Nobody knew that this evening marked the day when the dictatorship will move into full gear and crush opponents by all means

necessary. The final results of the crushing and humiliating defeat of the regime¹ were announced on Tuesday February 15 and what happened since then was the genesis of a nightmare that has gripped most Zimbabweans to the present day. Suffices to say from then on Zimbabwe began to slide into first class dictatorship. For the ordinary citizens this was the beginning of a nightmare with devastating consequences, for them, and for those who were yet to be born. From then on, many would eventually leave the motherland and become sojourners in foreign lands where they continue to live as immigrants and outlaws. Many more, from different tribes and races in Zimbabwe would also lose their lives trying to confront and to oppose the dictatorship.

The present socio-political scenario in Zimbabwe calls for new and bold ways of doing theology that have never been tested anywhere before. The situation is so complex because the regime has no system of madness, anything can happen at anytime. It is as if the law of the jungle is prevailing. Here I describe what we experience on a day to day basis. Most of the population is unemployed; a large percentage of the population is now living in the Diaspora. Those who remain spend most of the time searching for food, the shops are empty, the butcheries have no meat, petrol is scarce, and electricity and water come intermittently.

The theology proposed in this presentation is born out of the anvil of a socio-political context that is characterized by immense suffering, pain and hopelessness on the part of the ordinary citizens and oppression and fully fledged dictatorship perpetrated by the ruling elite. It is born out of a polarized context in desperately in need of justice, truth telling and healing. It is within such a background that I propose a theology that empowers ordinary citizens in general and ordinary Christians in particular to engage in the fight for a life that is lived in its fullness. That this theology should be Methodist in character is derived from my understanding of Methodism as a movement born out of the anvils of the upheavals of the 18th century and therefore argue here that such a movement provides the theological lens needed for a context that may not be similar but shares some characteristics of a revolution.

¹ The No Vote won by a margin of 54.7 % which was unprecedented in Zimbabwe's 20year history. For further details and breakdown of votes see, David Blair, *Degrees in Violence: Robert Mugabe and the Struggle for Power in Zimbabwe* (London: Continuum, 2003)

The Crushing of Dissenting Voices

The Zimbabwean experiment with self rule has been a disastrous project. This theology is born out of the realization that while other forms of resistance to the undemocratic forces has been crushed, yet the church as a mass organization remain with some space that can be used to forge a strong resistance movement against all forces that hinder life to be lived in its fullness. Why has the voice of the church not crushed? Why has the church been able to retain a space within the context of such irrational muzzling of all democratic voices? Why is the voice and presence of the church so harmless in a society that is run and dominated by a regime that is bent on destroying any movement that is critical of injustice? The sad story though is that the church has dismally failed to capitalize on this provision and instead has used its freedom to proclaim a theology that is heavenly oriented.

The Ecumenical Route

The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe like other mainline churches has stressed that it will not offer any public official statement concerning “political situation” in the country.² According the presiding bishop of the Methodist Church what is going on is not a justice issue but “just a political one,” and to criticize the trampling of human rights and the rampart oppression is synonymous with criticizing the government.³ As a solution the church decided to only speak “out when necessary” through the Zimbabwe Council of Churches. The consequence of this stance has been a conspicuous silence by the ZCC on the current crisis in Zimbabwe save its participation in a government

² The last official engagement of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe with justice issues happened at the 1998 Conference after the first foundation to the Zimbabwean crisis was laid when the government disbursed millions of unbudgeted funds to the War Veterans Association leading to the collapse of the Zimbabwean dollar. The Methodist Conference spent some time reflecting on the implications of these payouts to the economic wellbeing of the country from an economic justice perspective. The proceedings in this conference are not only startling but show church that is not only informed but concerned and engaged with the world: “...The unfair distribution of resources should be an issue for concern in Zimbabwe...As a church, *we certainly cannot afford to stand aloof and be passive onlookers...*As a Methodist church, we are an affected institution since the economy is not above our heads but a part and parcel of our lives... The state of the country must be the focus of our ministry... We are *called upon to make resolutions about the directions we should take as a Church.* (Conference Minutes 1998, p.11-12)

³ Bishop Simbarashe Sithole during a Question and Answer Session at the Harare East Synod of the Methodist Church, 11-13 April , 2007 Rest Haven, Harare. The paradox is that the very theme of the Synod was “Called to Serve” which it can be interpreted means serving the Church *not the world* for Methodists!

sponsored Church initiative on the Zimbabwe⁴ We Want document. Besides that document only the Roman Catholic Church has come out clearly and has spoken prophetically on the situation prevailing in the country.⁵

The Church's Response to the Zimbabwean Crisis

The silence of the Methodist Church has been so deafening and so systematic that even those who try to speak out at conferences and synods have their voices muzzled by the leadership or at worst they have been conveniently pushed to serve in the sectors⁶. The regime has been successful in silencing the church leadership judging from the responses one gets whenever issues of injustice and oppression are tackled. Even the pastors who stand out speaking are marginalized by the leadership as will be demonstrated through the experiences of two ministers who dared and got involved in the struggle for human rights and justice.

The Sacrifice of Methodist Ministers

There are some lone voices that have confronted this dictatorship without the blessing or moral support from the church. Courageous pastors like the Rev. Graham Shaw, minister at Hillside Methodist Church from 1994-2003 put their lives on the line and fought the regime head on. Graham a missionary to Zimbabwe was born and raised in Zimbabwe but migrated to the United Kingdom to avoid conscription to the Rhodesian forces that were fighting against majority rule. He returned back after his studies and was subsequently stationed in Harare where he distinguished himself as a good administrator and ecumenists. He was a superintendent for Trinity circuit during the time of transition when more middle class Africans were moving into former white neighborhoods and churches. Graham was able to handle this transition well and was posted to Bulawayo to

⁴ The Zimbabwe We Want document though a noble project was compromised by the process in which it was compiled and the accusation of it being State tempered. Before crafting the document the Bishops had an audience with the president who lectured them on what needed to be done to turn the crisis around.

⁵ For the robust Roman Catholic Church's response to the crisis see God Hears the Cry of the Oppressed pastoral letter by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop's Conference, issued and read out in Catholic churches on Holy Thursday, 5, April 2007.

⁶ Serving the sectors is a convenient route for the church to deal with a thorn in the flesh since the minister then is semi-independent and his/ her views are no longer of the church's views.

where he became the superintendent for about 8 years. It is during this period of the tour of duty in Bulawayo that the regime began persecuting people and stripping those with double citizenship their rights to vote and to hold dual citizenship. The farmers were also persecuted at this time and Graham Shaw found a voice to speak out against the regime. He distinguished himself as a champion of the voiceless and oppressed.

Graham Shaw spearheaded the Bulawayo chapter of Zimbabwe National Pastor's Conference and together with other pastors from across denominational divides in Bulawayo worked so tirelessly to mount resistance against the removal of the poor people and the demolition of their homes by the regime during Operation Murambatsvina in 2005. Operation Murambatsvina was condemned as a violation of human rights and a crime against humanity by many international organizations.

Graham's fight against the regime was to come to an abrupt end when the bishop of the Methodist church decided to move him against his will out of Bulawayo to Harare. But Graham chose to remain and struggle among the people of Bulawayo than to go and just concern himself with heavenly matters as the rest of the other Methodist ministers were and are still doing. He took the less popular step and stepped down from circuit ministry and later moved back to the United Kingdom where he continues to serve God and humanity.

Another sterling example of an unsung hero who was to abruptly leave fighting the regime from within the church was Bishop Levee Kadenge. Kadenge a former lecturer at the United Theological College where Methodist ministers are trained decided to confront the regime when it became clear that the abuses against the ordinary citizens were getting extreme. He participated in the formation of the Christians Alliance, an ecumenical body of church leaders and Christians who were disillusioned with the weak protest and the cozy relationship between the regime and the mainline church leaders.

These Christians decided to form an organization that was to oppose and confront the regime. Kadenge was elected leader of the Alliance. The government was shaken by the effectiveness of the Alliance when the alliance scored a major breakthrough in the Zimbabwean political landscape by sponsoring a conference that brought together all the opposition forces in Zimbabwe under the banner of a "Save

Zimbabwe” National Convention⁷. These politicians and civil organizations who had never worked together before came face to face and agreed to work together to end the dictatorship. The regime countered this major success by sponsoring its own initiative through the mainline churches and the regime intelligence played a major role in the drafting of the document that came out as it later emerged.⁸ For Kadenge, the honeymoon was to be over quickly as the church leadership became more uncomfortable with his stance and high social standing in an organization that is perceived to be against the government. He was conveniently edged out of full time ministry within the church and given the permission to serve the sectors—a euphemism for engaging in politics outside the church!⁹

The question that comes to the fore in this discussion is what exactly was the preoccupation for the rest of the Methodists communities country-wide during this intensification of human rights abuses and the declining life expectancy rate? What was the central theme running through the Methodist meetings and what was the prayer focus during and after the bloody elections that took place leaving hundreds displaced from their homes and some maimed for ever? What was the fixation of Methodists leaders during and after Operation Murambatsvina that left hundreds of thousands displaced from their homes? What was the obsession of Methodists during the time when farmers were violently chased from their farms leading to the collapse of the agricultural industry?

What was the preoccupation of the Methodist community during and after the beatings of the opposition leaders and the thrashing of judges in public for the sin of demanding an audience with the minister responsible for law and justice? What was the message from the presiding bishops to the community of Methodists and to the world at large concerning the crisis at hand? One can go on through the litany of the acts of injustice perpetrated by the regime against defenseless and innocent citizens of the country of their birth but we now have to turn to the response of the Methodist community to this crisis of such magnitudes.

⁷ For further details see *Christian Alliance Voice: Christian Alliance Newsletter*, Issue 2 august 2006.

⁸ See footnote 4 above.

⁹ The 2005 Conference proceedings reveal a stormy Ministerial session where Bishop Kadenge is asked to clarify what his role is in this Christian Alliance. Instead of celebrating his elevation to the leadership of the organization the Church was showing signs of discomfort with such a high visibility of its own clergy member among the enemies of the State.

The Methodists have a geographical extensive net work of churches that cover all parts of the country. This translates to the fact that it is more representative of all the tribes and races of the country and its membership is drawn from across the political divide. This in turn means that there is a high degree that during the crackdown on ordinary citizens and on members suspected or even belonging to the opposition political parties many within the Methodist family country-wide are directly affected.

Toilets, Tithes and Benches

Interestingly, the focus of the Methodist community was not on the life and death issues facing the ordinary Christians and the ordinary citizens of the country. Methodists conveniently shifted their focus from socio-political issues to internal, denominational, and administrative issues.¹⁰ Judging from the Handbook¹¹—an annual official book that among other is the prayer manual of the denomination—the official and documented response of the church is a shame and a cause for great concern. The prayer manual is an opportunity for all the Methodist circuits to compile in a prayer format what they consider as a community of faith to be their achievements and their concerns for the following year. A perusal at the prayer manual shows that within the last eight years of the country's economic decline and intensification of repression and human rights abuses very little attention was paid by the church to the crisis. The prayer manual instead reveals a disturbing scenario and a denial of the Gospel of Jesus Christ at its worst. Christ who came to be the liberator of the captives and who announced good news to the poor and freedom to those oppressed is denied. That revolutionary and powerful Christ is impotent within the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe.

While the country was going through its worst phase as far as justice, peace and human rights are concerned the Methodist church in Zimbabwe was busy concentrating on praying for the completion of the building of toilets and the intensification of collecting funds through tithe payments. Some circuits and local churches were more

¹⁰ An analysis of the proceedings of the Methodist Conferences from the year 2000 to year 2006 reveals a similar pattern of official disengagement from socio-political and economic issues even though the ordinary membership of the church is directly affected and deeply wounded by the crisis.

¹¹ The Handbook is some kind of bragging book where individual ministers record what they consider their achievements for the past year in the circuit in the form of : we thank God for” prayer and also record the focus for the coming year/s in the form of “we pray for” prayer request.

preoccupied with the purchase of benches so they can sit comfortably and worship a Christ who is so spiritualized that he is of little use in a context that is in turmoil.

An analysis of the prayers offered from 2000 to 2007 supports the above conclusion. The year 2000 was the bloodiest in political campaigning. It is during this year that the regime unleashed a reign of terror to all who were suspected to be supporting the opposition. At this time there were five administrative districts of the Methodist church with a total of 49 circuits with a total number of 1535 churches/preaching points.

During this very year of the worst elections, the Prayer manual reveal that not even a single circuit both in rural and in urban setups, out of the 49 raise any prayer concerns about the evil and repression engulfing the entire country. None are thankful for God's protection during the most difficult times of the country's history and none record a prayer request for change politically and economically.

Only in the following year, 2001, do we begin to have a single circuit Kwekwe recording a prayer of thanks: "...We thank God for the prevailing peace and the spirit of renewed fellowship among Christians after the June Parliamentary Elections."¹²

By 2002 a new development begins to emerge during the height of the farm invasions. Karoi circuit situated in the district where most farmers suffered most breaks the silence and intones: "We pray for peace, tolerance, and willingness to forgive one another."¹³ Chinhoyi Circuit in the neighboring district records: "We pray for peace during the coming presidential elections."¹⁴

By 2003 the Zimbabwe crisis was deepening and more circuits were beginning to voice their concern as shown by the prayer concerns. The crisis was now hurting even the direct financial operations of the church.

Kadoma circuit was back again this time "thanking God for giving us hope during trying times of political turmoil and the severe food shortages."¹⁵ This is the most distinct naming of the problem that has occurred so far.

¹² Kwekwe town had experienced one of the worst election disturbances with the house of the opposition candidate petrol bombed.....

¹³ Methodist Church in Zimbabwe: Handbook 2006

¹⁴ Ibid., 20003

¹⁵ Ibid.,

Kwenda circuit that is home to one of the Methodist High schools in Mashonaland East province, “Thank God for enabling us to work through the difficult times of drought and economic hardship.”¹⁶ Predictably though there is no slight mention of the political impasse gripping the country.

Great Zimbabwe circuit situated in Masvingo province where the church membership is drawn from the Karanga speaking people finally breaks their silence and offer a thanksgiving prayer for “for the gift of life and the support [God] gave us in the economic and political difficulties.”¹⁷

Chihota a rural circuit on the Mashonaland East province surprisingly prays for “assistance for the hungry widows, poor, and orphans and the fair distribution of food.”¹⁸

By 2004 Karoi circuit was back on record again this time with a hard hitting prayer. “We pray for those who have been driven from their homes and deprived of their property, those who are hungry and for the rains...”¹⁹

Again because Karoi was among the most affected by the farm invasions their patience was running out with the system.

Gwayi circuit located in one of the economically depressed farming areas of Matebeleland province whose membership is predominantly Ndebele and votes for the opposition thanked God for “his wonderful mercies that he continued to care and guide us in the difficult economic situation.”²⁰ This same thanksgiving prayer repeated again the following year.

Bulawayo A. circuit situated in the second largest city of Zimbabwe, among the Ndebele ethnic group that is an opposition politics stronghold for the first time pray for “God’s intervention in our country’s economic hardship.”²¹

Gweru circuit which covers the urban part of the third largest city in the country located in the Midlands province and draws its membership from both Ndebele and Karanga

¹⁶ Ibid.,

¹⁷ Ibid.,

¹⁸ Food was being sources by NGOs and distributed by the government to the villagers and many times it was used as a political tool to punish those suspected to belong to the opposition.

¹⁹ Opcit., 2004

²⁰ Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, Handbook 2004

²¹ Methodist Church in Zimbabwe: Handbook, 2004

ethnic groups with all its parliamentary seats won by the opposition only prays for “resilience of the church during these trying times.”²²

Even those in far part of the country, in Siabuwa circuit right near the boarder with Zambia where most members of the church are from the minority Tonga ethnic group is one of the most economically depressed areas in the whole country thank God “for the care that He gives us during and after the elections, and the troubles [*sic*] of hunger we are facing.”²³

So far no prayers concerns are coming out of Harare the capital that has the highest concentration of Methodist in any one city. It is only in 2005 with the impending parliamentary elections that we begin to hear Mufakose circuit pleading with God for “peaceful March 2005 General elections.”²⁴ Besides Mufakose the whole of Harare, boasting of two Methodist administrative districts and home of the Connexional office with Connexional staff and bishops serving in various circuits scattered across the breath of the capital city is deafeningly silent about the whole social, economical and political meltdown gripping the country.

Only one out of a total of 19 circuits in the two Harare districts with a record number of 222 churches and preaching points voiced any concern regarding the social and political situation dogging the country as a whole. Even though the city of Harare itself is going through a major water and electricity crisis and is administered by a government appointed commission in order to thwart the people voted council which was led and dominated by the opposition, the church remained mum.

Still with fear of the impending elections scheduled for March 2005 gripping most parts of the country we hear Buhera circuit in rural Mashonaland East, the home area of the leader of the main opposition party where some gruesome political murders took place during the 2002 elections are for the first time voicing gratitude for surviving yet another turbulent election campaign time and as if heaving a sigh of relief they thank God

²² Ibid.,

²³ Ibid.,

²⁴ Opcit

“for the spirit of working together enabling us to pass through the time of political disturbances.”²⁵

Kadoma is back again in the lime light this time not thanking God but explicitly pleading for “God’s intervention in social, political and health situation in the community.”²⁶ These findings are just a tip of the ice berg as they just point us to what preoccupied the church during just five years of the crisis. It does not tell us how the church will behave in the future or what the long term consequences are, but one thing is clear judging from the voting trends of the ordinary citizens especially in circuits situated within the opposition strongholds—the church is not at all in sync with the socio-political aspirations of the community it is serving.

By 2006 the Methodist church had increased the number of its administrative districts from 5 that were there in year 2000 into 9 thus increasing the number of full time bishops in charge of the geographical areas now virtually covering all the corners of Zimbabwe. These nine bishops sat at the powerful Bishop’s Council, advising the bishop about the welfare of the church, and are automatic members of the only statutory committee in the church, the Standing Committee that has grown so powerfully over the years to usurp even the work of annual Conference.

Judging from the minutes of both the Bishops Council and the Standing Committee, it is evident that the socio-economic situation prevailing in the country is not a serious cause for concern. With powerful administrative bishops plus a presiding bishop, one would have hoped for a more robust and engaged response on the issues affecting the general membership of the church. With more voices and eyes on the ground one would have hoped that the church was going to shake the foundations and make a huge difference as far as the aspect of socio-political involvement was concerned, but alas the same preoccupation evident in the circuit prayers characterized the preoccupation of the district leaders as well.

²⁵ One is left with question marks concerning the period being referred to because the 2005 Handbook came out before the 2005 March Parliamentary elections. Could it be that the circuit is referring to the disturbances during the campaign period before the elections?

²⁶ Handbook, 2005

It is in this particular year, 2006 that for the first time we hear a prayer from the eastern province of the country, Manicaland, in which Mutare circuit gives a prayer of thanks for “the divine enablement and guidance throughout the economic challenges.”²⁷ Chihota circuit nearby also offers a thanksgiving prayer to God for “seeing us through the year during the harsh economic conditions.”²⁸ Chikangwe circuit joins the bandwagon by offering a thanksgiving prayer and thanking God “for sustaining us through the past year amidst *serious economic hardships*.”²⁹[emphasis mine]

The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe has a circuit across the border in Zambia and for the first time in 2006 they also offer a thanksgiving prayer to God for “the love, protection and guidance he has shown us even as we face economic hardships.”³⁰ This obsession with thanksgiving prayers for the “economic situation” can be interpreted in two ways. First these prayers are a convenient way of facing the crisis without mentioning the dirty word “politics” which the Methodists leaders have done all they could to avoid. It is less harmful to talk of the crisis engulfing the nation as purely an economic one—which is a government propaganda line that lays the root of the crisis to perceived enemies of the State and to sanctions imposed by some Western countries on the regime for violating human rights.

The second interpretation is slightly different from the above although sharing some of its attributes. These prayers must be seen in light of the deepening crisis that was now affecting mostly the poor to the extent that it was becoming increasingly difficult even for the ministers to raise their salaries from their congregations.³¹ Since most circuits are by this time having a hard time raising enough to cover their budget, every passing year with books still in black is a cause for celebration. In other words, when they are giving thanks, they are not thanking God for the sake of the people out there who have gone through so much, but for the sole purpose of surviving yet another tough year

²⁷ Ibid., 2006

²⁸ Ibid., 2006

²⁹ Ibid.,

³⁰ One can surmise that the prayer reflects the Superintendent’s concerns for what is going on back home Zimbabwe since in Zambia the economic situation is far greener than across the border.

³¹ It was in the 2006 Conference that a new centralized method of remunerating ministers was adopted by Conference to take care of the uneven stipends that ministers were getting especially those in rural circuits hard hit by drought and the economic decline.

of raising levies for the district and the Connexional office. The thanksgiving prayers in this regard are selfishly done—they have very little or nothing at all to do with the social and economic crisis hitting the poor out there but everything to do with keeping the circuit alive.

The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe began the year 2007 with double the number of circuits it had in the year 2000 when the country's political crisis began to crystallize. From a mere 49 Circuits in 2000 now there were 101, with a total of 1616 local churches/preaching points. What is telling about these innocent statistics is that while dictatorship was on full throttle, the church was growing and more personnel was being deployed around the whole country. The negative aspect of this growth is that even with such an increase in the number of circuits and preaching places, and the number of personnel on the ground very few critical voices are heard from the Methodist clergy concerning the struggle for life.

Out of a total of these 101 circuits only 7 record prayers that show concern beyond the preoccupation with administrative and tithing issues. Only two begin really to come out and name the crisis bedeviling the country as a matter of life and death. One can tell from the prayers that these circuits were experiencing a high death rate from within their flock and the ministers were beginning to feel the pinch as they spent more days at the cemeteries than they spent at the hospital welcoming new babies to the world.

Ndolwane circuit, situated right at the border with Botswana, breaks the silence and prays for “our circuit to remain focused on Jesus irregardless of the high death rate, economic hardship and social instability.”³² The tone of these prayers is a telling tale of the ravaging scourge of Aids and hunger claiming people in this arid region of the country. It is a prayer of desperation, a prayer of a people who do not know what the future holds and who are at the edges of despair as they seek to keep faith and focus.

Silobela circuit offers a longer than usual prayer, a prayer that is also marked by some lamentation as they also face the prevalence of death and hardship in their doorsteps. Although it is a thanksgiving prayer, it is characterized by the foreboding sense of depression. They thank God for “His guidance, care, and concern which has led us (through) the year, in spite of the very harsh economic conditions in the country to

³² Handbook 2007

which members of the church are not [exception(*sic*)] (exempted) and *the general chorus of death which has become the order of the day.*”³³(emphasis mine)

Mhondoro Circuit on the other hand prays for “peace, love, and harmony in church as well as the whole country.”³⁴ The other three circuits also offer the kind of prayers similar to those offered by people who have just escaped from hell! They look back at the past year and Siyaphambili Circuit in Bulawayo gives thanks to God for “seeing us through such tough times, economically and spiritually.”³⁵ Chihota Circuit in turn gives thanks to God for “seeing us through an economically difficult 2006.”³⁶ Masvingo South circuit also heaves a sigh of relief as they “Thank God Almighty for allowing us through the past year 2006. Things were tough economically and socially.”³⁷

Finally, Highlands Circuit in the city of Mutare break ranks with the rest of the Methodist community and tackles the taboo subject that has not featured before in these prayers, yet it is the number one killer disease of so many Christians. They come face to face with God and their own human frailty and give thanks to God for enabling them to be “... able to pay school fees for orphans in our circuit, ...for effective leadership development of HIV/AIDS programs.”³⁸ What a refreshing prayer in the midst of a dry wilderness!

Searching for a New Paradigm

Now that it is evident that the official church leadership has not been prophetic enough regarding the crisis in Zimbabwe new ways of being Christian should be explored. A theology of involvement that prioritizes critical involvement of ordinary Christians over and above the official leaders is preferred. Several approaches can be utilized in an effort to help ordinary Christians engage the socio-economic and political context in which their faith is lived and exercised. Proposed here are just two routes that can help the church recover its prophetic role and in turn empower ordinary Christians to live victoriously against any repressive system. The first route is to make a distinction between the concept of politics and that of justice. Whereas many African Christians are

³³ Ibid.,

³⁴ Ibid.,

³⁵ Ibid.,

³⁶ Ibid.,

³⁷ Ibid.,

³⁸ Ibid.,

not comfortable with engaging in politics, it would be of tremendous help to articulate the biblical concept of justice as part and parcel of a Christian obligation. God's requirement that all live justly and walk humbly before the Lord must be emphasized as a central teaching in the lives of ordinary Christians. Justice is not politics but is a central concept in the life of the Christian. .

The second route must be a re-interpretation and a recovery in a contextualized form of the core Christian doctrines. The lack of sociopolitical involvement can be better understood through the lack of some strong and vibrant understanding of the basic Christian doctrines.³⁹ At present the liturgies together with the major doctrines of the Church are not articulated in such a way that they can challenge and empower the ordinary Christian to employ them to confront, engage, resist and face the injustice in society.⁴⁰ Most of the doctrines are crafted in such a way that they prepare the Christian to get ready to go to heaven someday when they die. Moreover, these doctrines are not explicit enough on how the Christians should engage the world and its evil forces, especially the type dominant in Zimbabwe that is not spiritual but tend to have a socio-economic and political character.

Several examples can be cited here of powerful church doctrines that if translated to every day experiences of the people can become an incentive in making the reign of God a reality on earth. An anchoring of these church doctrines in the everyday lives of people has a huge potential of empowering ordinary Christians to see the connection between faith and the rough life outside the church. More so, the doctrines can help the church to see a strong connection between the inseparability of the will of God in heaven and what takes place daily on earth.

But even before the doctrines are re-interpreted and taught to the Christian community, an emphasis must be laid to all new members joining the Christian community

³⁹ No work has been done yet in Zimbabwe to contextualize the major Christian doctrine, thus leaving locked in sterile non African trappings.

⁴⁰ A casual look at the Services of Baptism/ Confirmation and Reception into Full Membership reveals a preoccupation with the questions of one becoming a Christian so as *to serve God within the church*. There is nothing in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe current liturgies that brings the theology of service to the world close to the ordinary Christians, in a similar level that the United Methodist Church liturgy does on Baptism where it is explicitly required that those who want to become of the Christian faith vow to “renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, *reject the evil powers of this world, ... accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves*. (The United Methodist Hymnal, The United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville: Tennessee, 2001.)

that the arena of their new found faith is the world not Heaven! This means that God's love for heaven is as intense as God's love for the earth as the Gospel of John tells it so clearly that God so loved the *world*, not the heavens! If then, as Jesus taught his disciples to pray for God's will to be implemented on earth (Mathew 6:10) exactly the same way it is in heaven, then it also means that God's concern for the earth is too deep to be ignored by Christians while they are here on earth.

What is clear from the prayer of Jesus is that God's concern is very much on earth where the socio-economic madness is taking place. God is concerned about what the people eat here and how they are governed here. God is very much concerned about what they buy and how much it cost. God is even concerned about the rights and dignity of all human beings—those from the ruling party as much as God is concerned about the lives of those who are in the opposition parties. God's concern according to the prayer is that both those who govern and the governed must make sure that God's will happens every day the same way it happens in heaven.

If then, the will of God is thwarted in this life then it can be concluded that those who are doing are fighting God. If God's will is prevented from taking place in the lives of people by those who have power over them then those powers—be have a case to answer before God. They have to account for why they failed God in failing to create and cultivate an environment where God's will happens on earth as it happens in heaven.

The overriding concern of this paper is to show that the church in Zimbabwe seems not to understand that the preoccupation of God is not with heaven but with the earth where God's will is yet to materialize. If God's will must happen on earth as it is already happening in heaven it means therefore that heaven is already perfect in terms of God's will, but the homework remains to be done here on earth. With this in mind one would have thought the church in Zimbabwe in general and the Methodists in particular will spend most of its energy preparing the Christians to bring about that reign of God here on earth than it spends on toilets and tithes.

The sad reality though is that the church is busy preparing ordinary Christians for departure for heaven. Many of the Christians are not or are very little concerned with the will of God happening here. They just want the religion that will make them feel good about heaven—even though their earthly performance is dismal! It is easy to tell the

focus and preoccupation of the ordinary Christians in Zimbabwe. Beyond the scholarly analysis of the Handbook it is not hard to tell what the preoccupation of the Zimbabwean church is. One has to just see the posters and hear the most topical sermons in the church to learn where the church's heart is.

Besides the prayers recorded in the Handbook it is a concern that the topics that feature most in crusades, revival meetings and all night prayer meetings where hundreds and sometimes even thousands of people gather have more to do with tithing, fasting, prayer, giving, the Holy Spirit, healing and speaking in tongues. Rarely does one find topics that address the African crisis issues such as Aids, Justice, Forgiveness, Tribalism, Economic Justice, Rape, Poverty, Human Rights and Political Violence, Hunger, Immigration, Life in the Diaspora, etc.

Had the ordinary Christians understood the moral obligation of preparing the community of faith to be partners with God in making sure God's will begins to happen in every village and every city in Zimbabwe then the country will not be in such a deep crisis. Even the topics that preoccupy them will be quite different from those mentioned above. Even the definition of sin will be different from the one that dominate the Zimbabwean religious landscape. Unfortunately, many Christians in Zimbabwe are still content with the knowledge that soon they will be singing with angels in *heaven* and doing God's will in *heaven* even though they have not engaged socially and politically.

The question then is how can this will of God can be known and done on earth. For Christians the person and life of Jesus as attested in the Scriptures reveal the will of God on earth just as God has it happening in heaven. Who Jesus is and what He does teaches us what God wants for all humankind. In other words our purpose on earth is revealed and fulfilled in Jesus' short but pregnant life *on earth* among us. The doctrine of Christ is therefore one of the most basic doctrines that the Church would teach ordinary Christians so that they can find some connections with their own lives. What the church teach about Christ must not be a spiritualized version of Christ, but teach the life and person of Christ who suffered with the poor, who ate with sinners, who lifted up the lowly, who cared about those who were hungry and not just prayed for them but gave them real bread and also healed the sick. Such a Christ is the one who attended funerals and also asked tough questions about why people had to go through so much in life.

One of these doctrines that if properly taught to ordinary Christians can empower them to transform their communities for God's rein is the doctrine of humanity. Once we understand who human beings are and the implications of this doctrine to social and political conditions, then a major break through can be found in the way those with power exercise it on those who have less.

The fact that we are created in the image of God and yet we are also products of our social and political environments can be a catalyst in helping Christians to learn that they have a critical role to play in shaping their political contexts. Christianity in Zimbabwe is at the present time struggling with the implications of such an understanding that place human beings at the center stage of changing their own political environments. The Christians are yet to understand that for positive change to occur in Zimbabwe; them as human beings have to take a center stage—the Christians have to be part and parcel of the change that they pray for. Without them participating actively in the socio-political and economic revolution then God will not just bring about that church they long for just as God will not bring them to the heaven they long for without them played a critical role in working with God for that heaven. What this means is that the grace of God that brings transformation in their lives and in their communities is not a cheap grace. Instead it is a grace that demands some sacrifices on the part of those who want to see God's will happening here on earth as it is happening in heaven.

The other doctrine that has a potential of bridging the gap between faith and daily life for ordinary Christians is the doctrine of the reign of God (kingdom of God). It is this doctrine that Christians can employ as the model for our resistance and critique to any ideology and powers that be. With some critical understanding of this doctrine then it becomes clear that when Christians criticize any ideology it is not because they are trying to be politicians but because they are informed by their Christian understanding of God's reign which is predicated on love and forgiveness. The Christians are to be always suspicious of any powers be on the basis of their understanding God's intention for governance and leadership. God has modeled through the teaching of the prophets and kings and through Christ's life and teaching how those who govern others should do it. Any departure from God's plan for human governance is then contrary to the will of God for all human kind. What is especially clear from Christ's teaching is that power should

be exercised for serving others not for domination and self aggrandizement. The doctrine all speaks to those Christians who are in influential positions in Zimbabwe and clearly challenges them to govern God's people not as masters driving slaves at the plantations but as fellow servants of God entrusted by God to shepherd God's people.

The depth of our common people's pain and suffering shows that the socio-political and economic situation has reached critical levels and requires each and every citizen with a conscience to act decisively in bringing about change. The churches are therefore called upon by their very reason of existence to act as critical voices of all who are oppressed, marginalized and are brutalized by a system that cares only for the few who are well connected with the ruling class. The present levels of such immoral economic decline can not be sustained long without the people losing patience with the system that destroy their lives.

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