

# PROPHETIC WITNESS AND SOCIAL ACTION AS HOLINESS IN THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA'S MISSION

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## *Abstract*

This article will present an overview of the application and unique expression of Christian perfection as it has taken shape within Methodism in Southern Africa. Christianity, and in particular Methodism, is a dominant faith perspective in Southern Africa. The ideology of apartheid in South Africa forms the background against which the Methodist Church of Southern Africa developed a social holiness approach to Christian perfection. The article presents and discusses five seminal historical events in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa which illustrate this theological emphasis.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The history of Methodism in South Africa is unique within world Methodist circles. It also offers topical insights into the church's role as an agent of healing and transformation within the turmoil and pain of South Africa's apartheid past. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) is still the largest mainline denomination in Southern Africa. It will be argued that it is the significant emphasis on social holiness and the ecclesiological approach of Wesleyan pragmatism (often referred to as "practical divinity"), as they found expression in Southern African Methodism, that have made the MCSA such a significant Christian denomination.

The relationship between Christian perfection and social holiness in John Wesley's theology will be discussed first. Second, a brief overview of the social and political milieu of Southern Africa will be given; attention will be given to how this shaped the central tenets of Methodist theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Third, having presented insights that sketch this background and context to apartheid, five seminal historical examples of Southern African

Methodist theology and mission will be presented. These events show how the church sought to respond pragmatically to the social crises that arose in Southern Africa. From a theological perspective, this section will show how these efforts were understood as attempts to achieve the goal of Christian perfection. The article concludes with some remarks on the relevance and effectiveness of this particular theological emphasis in present-day South Africa.

## **2 THE UNBEARABLE AND OFFENSIVE TASK OF WORKING FOR PERFECTION IN AN IMPERFECT WORLD – CHRISTIAN PERFECTION, THE GRAND DEPOSITUM OF THE PEOPLE CALLED METHODISTS**

Most Methodist scholars agree that the order of salvation was central to John Wesley's theology. The following quote from 1746 shows what Wesley himself understood:

Our main doctrines, which include all the rest are three: that of repentance, of faith and holiness. The first of these we account, as were the porch of religion, the next the door; the third religion itself (Wesley in Rack 1989:286).

Wesley regarded one element as more important than the others, namely, Christian perfection. He believed that Christian perfection was a peculiar emphasis and heritage that had been given to the Methodist movement by God. In 1789, just two years before his death, Wesley wrote the following in defence of his emphasis on Christian perfection:

This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up (Wesley in Williams 1988:238).

Sadly, Wesley's views on Christian perfection have been largely misunderstood and forgotten in popular Methodist circles, particularly so among adopters of the holiness movements in recent history. If one truly understands what Wesley meant by the aim and substance of Christian perfection,<sup>1</sup> it comes as little surprise to read the following words from Wesley's sermon on Christian perfection:

“There is scarce any expression in Holy Writ” writes Wesley, “which has given more offence than this. The word *perfect* is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them” (Wesley in Cox 1968:11). It was Wesley’s emphasis on social holiness and the practical expression of the Gospel in everyday life that first led to him being labelled a “Methodist”; it is this same concern which lies at the very heart of Wesley’s understanding of Christian perfection.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Wesley understood that the purpose of “religion” was to bring a person towards Christian perfection. He writes of true religion and true holiness (as opposed to false religion and false holiness) that the

... gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness. “Faith working by love” is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection (Wesley in the preface to the 1739 Methodist Hymn book).

Wesley understood that there is a clear distinction between holiness expressed in personal piety and holiness expressed by social holiness. This kind of holiness, he maintained, is described in scripture (scriptural holiness) and is expressed in our interaction with others and the world around us (perfect love) – this is the ultimate goal towards which we should aspire (Christian perfection) (cf. Forster 2001:4-5; Attwell 1994:4). True Christian perfection is dependent on both personal and social holiness. Moreover, we would do well to remember that Wesley emphasised that there can be no “personal holiness” without “social holiness”, to use phrases from Wesley’s 26th sermon. John Wesley’s sermons and writings are full of references to the fact that true faith must be a balance between “works of piety” and “works of mercy”.

Thus the point can be made that Wesley understood that God’s great plan for Methodists was to live out and proclaim Christian perfection as the purpose and content of true religion. The aim of this true religion was to form the church, and the individual Christian, to participate with God in the renewal and transformation of society. Moreover, Wesley’s understanding of Christian perfection is fundamentally rooted in social holiness. Henry Rack argues that Wesley’s balance between personal piety and social holiness took shape as a response to the context in which Wesley lived. The needs of the poor and disenfranchised in eighteenth century England led

him to formulate clear and pragmatic strategies for social development, upliftment and reform, whilst his experiences within the Church of England led him to emphasise the need for personal piety (Rack 1989:381-450). Naturally one cannot divide Wesley's theological emphases rigidly into either of these two areas; they do, however, serve as helpful categorisations in understanding the pragmatic development of Wesley's ministry and theology in relation to Christian perfection.<sup>3</sup>

From its inception, Methodism was an evangelical movement which sought to share the Gospel with all. It emphasised the need to honour God by seeking to attain Christian perfection. This emphasis carried early Methodists throughout the world and transplanted this core theology into new contexts with different challenges and opportunities from those faced in Britain.

### **3 STRUGGLE, OPPORTUNITY AND NEW LIFE – PLANTING THE SEEDS OF METHODISM IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN SOIL**

Methodism came to South Africa soon after John Wesley's death. Balia (1991:14) notes that the first record of a Methodist preacher in Southern Africa was that of a soldier of the 72<sup>nd</sup> regiment of the British army, George Middlemiss, who had been stationed in the Cape of Good Hope to secure British interests there in 1805 as a result of the war between Britain and France. Middlemiss soon gathered a small group of Methodists in the Cape. This work quickly grew. By the time Sergeant Kendrick, a Methodist class leader and lay preacher, arrived in 1812 the congregation numbered 142 people, of which 128 were of British descent and 14 were of mixed race (Mears 1973:6). By 1820 and the arrival of the British settlers in the Cape (many of whom were Methodists), Methodism was already well established in Southern Africa.

Missionaries were despatched from England to establish and spread Methodist work throughout the subcontinent. They did this with great courage, sacrifice and faith.<sup>4</sup> By 1860, there were 132 Methodist ministers and missionaries in the Eastern Cape and Natal, and their combined congregations numbered around 5000 members.<sup>5</sup>

From the very beginnings, Methodist work was multiracial; while some other churches and mission organisations concentrated almost exclusively on one racial group (either working among the white settlers or indigenous African people), the Methodists established joint works. This led in part to the Methodist Church of Southern Africa having more black members than any of the other mainline denominations (Hofmeyer & Pillay 1991:253). De Gruchy and De Gruchy (2004:14) note that the Methodist Church also became the largest English-speaking denomination in the country. Methodism continued to spread throughout the nineteenth century.

Even at this early stage, there was a clear and strong emphasis on the need to engage not only in the proclamation of the Gospel and the fostering of personal piety, but also in the work of social transformation and development within the mission communities. Naturally some of the attempts at social transformation and development had a decidedly Western, and even blatantly colonial, slant to them. The emphasis on social holiness in these early years included projects such as

- the establishment of schools and the translation of the first complete Bible into an African language (1859)
- offering medical care to all and the establishment of hospitals
- the establishment of homes for orphans and senior citizens
- the development and publication of Christian literature

The social and political climate of the day played a significant role in the development and appropriation of Methodist theology on African soil. It is difficult to deny that the rise, implementation and eventual demise of the racial ideology of apartheid was one of the most significant social and political forces that the church had to contend with in Southern Africa during the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

Implementing this system of racial segregation and oppression from the early 1940s meant that many native South Africans were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands; the land itself was expropriated and either put to use by the government or sold to white South Africans. To maintain this system of segregation and to force black people to remain in the black homelands, various apartheid laws were employed to systematically oppress black South Africans.

Economically they were disenfranchised through job reservation and Bantu education; moreover, health care, civil service and even freedom of movement were curtailed for black South Africans. The violent and systematic implementation of this evil had considerable and damaging effects on South African society as a whole, and particularly on the individual South Africans who suffered under it. The effects of apartheid are likely to be felt for many generations to come.<sup>7</sup>

In the process of conducting this research, I found that the Methodist Church made statements, and protested and worked against apartheid in many ways between the formal adoption of the ideology in 1948 and its downfall in 1994. All the minutes of the various Methodist Conferences in this era reflect<sup>8</sup> the church's struggle to undermine the false theology that supported the apartheid system and the evil consequences that resulted from it.

Richardson notes just how influential this ideology of systematic oppression was:

... the church under apartheid was polarized between “the church of the oppressor” and “the church of the oppressed”. Either you were for apartheid or you were against it; there was no neutral ground. Given the heavy-handed domination of the minority white government, those who imagined themselves to be neutral were, unwittingly perhaps, on the side of apartheid. This complicity was especially true of those Christians who piously “avoided politics” yet enjoyed the social and economic benefits of the apartheid system ... While young white men were conscripted into the South African Defence Force, many young black people fled the country to join the outlawed liberation movements that had their headquarters and training camps abroad. What could the church do in this revolutionary climate? And what should Christian theology say now? (Jones, Hutter & Ewell 2006:231-232).

It is in this social context that the Methodist Church of Southern Africa sought to bring about its own brand of Christian perfection, a perfection shaped by social justice.

What was required was a measure of flexibility which allowed for interaction between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, an approach to faith which recognised and celebrated the truth of who God is (personal piety), yet was expected to enact God's will for individuals and society (social holiness). Attwell (1994:4) affirms that "Methodism seems peculiarly well-adapted to meet the spiritual and social needs of [a] changing Africa".

#### **4 FIVE IMPORTANT MARKERS IN THE JOURNEY TO THE NEW LAND AND BEYOND: A THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION, AS SOCIAL HOLINESS, IN THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA**

The Wesleyan heritage has allowed Southern African Methodists to face one of the most dehumanising and destructive systems of abuse in our time, namely, the sin of apartheid. Storey is correct when he notes that John Wesley said little about the great obsession of Southern Africa – race. Yet, Wesley was not ignorant of racial abuse.

The word "racism" had to wait until the 20<sup>th</sup> century to be invented, indicating how long the European world remained supremely unconscious of any pathology in its attitude to people of colour. Nevertheless, Mr. Wesley did have passionate things to say about slavery, the most brutal expression of that pathology ... In his opposition to this most degrading of all racist practices Wesley moved from simply seeking the conversion of the slaves, and the amelioration of some of the horrific conditions under which they laboured, to joining those, led by the Quakers, who were working for the total abolition of slavery itself (Storey 2004:77).

Wesley was public about his opposition to slavery. In his 1744 pamphlet entitled *Thoughts upon slavery*, he not only denounced those who justified slavery on the grounds of European superiority, but said that they were even less civilised than their victims. More

pointedly in relation to the Southern African context, it is clear that Wesley had some apparent sensibilities about the tyranny and evil of racism. In Wesley's famous letter to William Wilberforce (1791), he refers to the racism of the colonial legal system. He states as follows: "It being a law in all our Colonies that the oath of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this!" Storey (2004:78) furthermore states as follows:

When Wesley said that liberty is "the right of every human creature as soon as he breathes the vital air", there is little doubt that in his mind, this genuinely embraced *every* human creature, regardless of race.

John Wesley's heritage of practically addressing both the needs of people and the abusive and oppressive structures in society that bring about these needs, aided in the development of Methodism in the years after Wesley's death. This heritage remained important in the new contexts into which Methodism was planted as a result of missionary work.<sup>9</sup>

This groundwork of social engagement and practical care laid a firm foundation from which Southern African Methodists could work against the system of apartheid. The Group Areas Act of 1950 was the first significant political challenge to the structure of Southern African Methodism.

#### **4.1 "One and undivided" 1958 – a movement from above: The MCSA's stand against the structural sin of racial segregation**

Up to this point in Southern African history, the Methodist Church had been a single denomination in which black and white Methodists studied together in Methodist schools, worshipped together in Methodist Churches and ministered together in Methodist communities. Although there were some exceptions where conservative communities sought to align themselves with the "petty apartheid" ideologies of separation according to race, the MCSA was, on a structural level, a racially integrated denomination (Storey 2004:78). The Group Areas Act of 1950 and the Separate Amenities Act of 1953, however, made this unity both difficult (due to geographic separation) and illegal. The Methodist Church was facing



significant pressure both from conservative members within its ranks, mainly white members, and from the Nationalist government to segregate along racial lines. Many other denominations had already done so and some others had been segregated from their missionary beginnings.

In response to this pressure, the minutes of the Conference of 1958 record the following statement:

Like other parts of the life of our country, the church is facing choices which will determine her future development, and in particular the choice between unity and division. The Conference, in prayer and heart-searching, expressed its conviction that it is the will of God for the Methodist Church that it should be *one and undivided*, trusting to the leading of God to bring this ideal to ultimate fruition (Minutes of Conference 1958:202).

This radical stance, often referred to as the church's resolution to be "one and undivided", is remembered within its original theological context. Because of the overbearing power of apartheid, it has most often been seen primarily as a social response to the political abuses of the day. However, the context within which this statement took shape was fundamentally linked to the Southern African Methodist understanding of Christian perfection, that is, what it means to live as God intended; in other words, to strive for perfect holiness despite government pressures from without and personal prejudices from within. The minutes of Conference (1958:202) record as follows:

We do not pretend that there are no difficulties; barriers not only of prejudice but of real difference will have to be subordinated to the love which the Holy Spirit implants in our hearts. But this will be an expression in life of the message for which Methodism was created, the message of Scriptural Holiness and Perfect Love, whereby we follow our Lord in stretching out our hands to all men [sic] that they may be saved from all evil, and may be brought into the unity of the household of God.

The members present at the Conference were instructed to find ways to love the nation, but not the nation's sins.

This resolution was a truly significant and courageous one, not only for its time, but also certainly for the decades to come when the pressure to segregate would increase manifold.

One of the most vivid examples of how the 1958 statement of intent was applied in a local church context was the exemplary struggle of Peter Storey between 1956 and 1981 to work against the Nationalist Government's forced removal of coloured people (mostly Methodists) in Cape Town. The multiracial congregation, Central Methodist Mission in Buitenkant Street, was significantly disrupted by the forced removals. The church naturally opposed the removals in every possible way. Yet when the removals were eventually enacted in 1966, the congregation decided to remain united in spite of the forced removal. Ministries of care and support for those who had been removed were set up. Transportation was arranged to bus the congregants the many miles from the settlement areas to the church so that multiracial services and meetings at the church could continue unabated. A plaque was put up at the front of the church, facing the busy Green Market Square, which read as follows:

All who pass by remember with shame the many thousands of people who lived for generations in District Six and other parts of this city, and were forced to leave their homes because of the colour of their skins. Father forgive us (Theilen 2003:33).

It was during this period that some stark theological divisions began to surface within the mainline denominations in Southern Africa. While the Methodist church maintained the principles of unity and inclusiveness at its highest levels, and drew attention to it in their official statements, this was sadly not the case in most local congregations; it was also not adequately reflected in the leadership of the denomination.

In conclusion, the 1958 statement set the tone for the church to work pragmatically, through the vehicle of social holiness, towards the Christian ideal of scriptural holiness and perfect love. Yet, while the

top structures of the church officially addressed the evils of apartheid and opposed the state, there were not many congregations that were truly racially integrated or directly fighting against government-led segregation. This led to the next significant marker in the development of social holiness in the MCSA, that is, the formation of the Black Methodist Consultation in 1975.

#### **4.2 The formation of the “Black Methodist Consultation” 1975 – a movement from below: The MCSA’s stance for a church that reflects the true nature of Southern African society**

The next radical movement towards social holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was the formation of the Black Methodist Consultation (BMC) by the Reverend Dr Ernest Baartman in 1975. More than 75 per cent of the membership of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa is black, yet in the early 1970s the leadership of the church did not reflect this reality. Black Methodists were largely excluded from the decision-making processes of their church. Of the 12 districts in the MCSA at that stage, 10 were led by white Methodist “Chairmen”; only 2 districts were led by black Methodists (Theilen 2003:28).

Conversely, it must be noted that the very first mainline church to be led by a black person was the MCSA with the election of Rev Seth Mokitimi as the President of Conference in 1964. This was a bold statement of intent that sent a clear message from the church to the apartheid state. Sadly, however, the reality of the internal racial struggles in the church and its inability to follow through with similar leadership choices at lower levels of church government meant that the racial transformation of church leadership was haphazard and slow.

This legacy of white leadership had arisen out of the missionary movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The time had come, however, for the MCSA to come of age and to come under the leadership of African Christians. Theilen (2003:28) explains the purpose in the formation of the BMC:

The BMC’s mission was to ensure that white domination was progressively reduced and the entrenched hierarchy

transformed. The BMC also saw the need for political life in the church. It's [sic] membership was open to both clergy and laity. Further the BMC laid the ground for a necessary self-examination, for a "Black awareness"; its aim was to undo any psychological oppression born out of existing structures.

While black Methodists were never officially unequal to white Methodists within the church, the reality was quite different on the ground --- this reality is still present today.<sup>10</sup> What the BMC has done for Methodism in Southern Africa is truly significant. First, they have engaged in the process of bringing the church to more adequately represent and reflect the voices of black South Africans. The MCSA currently has nine black Bishops (of which one is a woman) and three white Bishops. Second, they have helped to re-appropriate the values, traditions and religion of Africa in the Methodist Church. Sadly, missionary imperialism often sought to eradicate elements of African tradition and religion. The BMC has significantly helped the MCSA to reinvent itself as an African Christian denomination through education, publication, and the presentation of the value and necessity of black and African theologies.<sup>11</sup> Third, the BMC has ensured that politics (often viewed by conservative Christians as the ambit of the state) are dealt with as part of the official agenda of the church.

The BMC still exists as a formidable and respected movement within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. What is important to note in the context of this article, however, is that the BMC was formed as a movement within the church that sought to honour God by being both black and African in a church that was largely controlled by white liberals in a nation that faced massive oppression at the hands of conservative white Christians. We should never forget that the large majority of Nationalist government officials were active members of the Dutch Reformed Church (cf. De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1983) and that approximately 80 per cent of the ordinary white South Africans who kept the system of apartheid in power for over 40 years declared that they were Christians of one form or another. Yet, this movement arose from within the church to work against the sin and evil of segregation and the lies of apartheid.

The critical work of social holiness, as undertaken by the BMC, led in large part to the next milestone in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's appropriation of Christian perfection, namely, Obedience '81.

#### **4.3 "Obedience '81" - a movement from within: The MCSA's radical stance for costly and painful shifts in power relations and cultural adjustment, within the church**

At the height of the violence and oppression of the late 1970s, after the deaths of so many in the 1976 student uprisings, and the rising temperature of the armed struggle for liberation, Methodists of all races, ages and genders gathered for the most representative consultation ever held in the denomination up to that point. Such brave steps came at a great cost to the church's official image in society and its ecumenical relationships with other Christian churches in South Africa. The church led marches against state-sanctioned oppression, violence and abuse, and made official statements condemning apartheid; this created a great deal of animosity against the Methodist Church as a denomination, and Methodist clergy and laity as individuals. Many Methodists were banned, persecuted and prosecuted for their stance against apartheid. Moreover, some churches openly opposed the MCSA's stance on apartheid. The Hervormde Kerk, for example, taught in its Catechism that the Methodist stance against apartheid was heretical. It is in this context of pressure from within and persecution from outside that Obedience '81 was envisioned. The gathering itself openly defied the prevailing powers and was a further pledge to unity within the church amidst great struggle.

Storey (2004:78) writes as follows of the gathering:

This time they acknowledged how difficult it was to achieve [unity], and how painful togetherness could be, requiring significant shifts in power relations and much cultural adjustment.

The outcome of this engagement was the *Message of obedience '81*, in which the theology and cost of true transformation was clearly understood:

When we spoke and wept, argued and agonised, [God] was there. He met us in our hurt and anger, humility and shame. Because God in Christ was in the midst, he brought us to repentance. He opened our eyes to the wounds we inflict on each other by our insensitivity, bitterness and fear (Storey 2004:5-6).

With particular reference to the shape of social holiness that was required in opposition to apartheid, the “message” of *Obedience '81* noted as follows:

Every Methodist must witness against this disease which infects our people, our church and our country. We have experienced how hard it is to abandon long-held prejudice and long-felt bitterness, but we have seen God work this miracle. It happened because we continued to search for each other even at our times of deepest division. We now declare to all South Africans that there is a *third way where people who discovered their love for each other, translate it into justice for all* (Storey 2004:79).

The way of perfect love was clearly understood to be the path to justice. Once again, one can see the strong emphasis on Christian perfection as social holiness. The promise that members of the consultation made read as follows: “Therefore we promise before Almighty God and each other that we will henceforth live and work to bring into reality the concept of an undivided church and a free and just Southern Africa.”

Pragmatically, *Obedience '81* achieved the aim of further cementing the notion that the Methodist Church is one and undivided, that is, that the church will remain fundamentally one even if society is segregated. The work of creating unity across racial lines was both costly and difficult, partly because of the powerful laws that restricted movement and forced separation, but also because of the strong psychological effects of almost 300 years of racial ideology that permeated all elements of Southern Africa society. Storey recalls as follows:

Those congregations that sought to demonstrate Methodist one-ness by deliberately [racially] integrating their memberships were relatively few, but they were prototypes of a future that apartheid claimed was impossible and had an impact far beyond their numbers of size (Storey 2004:79).

Such acts of social engagement and the moments of deliberate and carefully-brokered discovery were the building blocks of the new South Africa. What is notable is that these prophetic acts took place long before the end of apartheid had even begun to dawn. Surely, these are signs of the Kingdom of God that were being evidenced in local Christian churches.

#### **4.4 The “Journey to the new land” in the early 1990’s – a movement outward: The MCSA’s decision to reconstruct the church to help facilitate the birth of the new South Africa**

The Presiding Bishop’s addresses to MCSA Conferences from the late 1980s to the early 1990s all began with a note of concern about escalating violence and tension that had beset the country. It was hard to imagine in the late 1980s that apartheid would ever end; there were fears that if it did, it would almost certainly lead to a brutal and bloody revolt. Yet, in spite of these fears, there was a relatively peaceful transition to democracy in 1994. The MCSA played no small role in this process. The 1992 Conference, under the leadership of Bishop Mvume Dandala, agreed to the formation of a church-initiated peace force which would help to monitor and quell violence throughout the land (Minutes of Conference 1992:434). It had become clear that the church had a central and significant role to play in preventing total anarchy and collapse in Southern African society. If the church was to be effective both in eradicating and overcoming the structural sin of apartheid, and also in offering support and care for the increasingly impatient and militant victims of apartheid, it would need to restructure itself to take its members and the wider society on this journey to the new land.

What was required was not just another statement of unity and solidarity, but rather a bold and courageous restructuring of the church that could best position the institution to support and

encourage its members to make the changes required for renewal and change. As such, the Conference of 1993 in Benoni gave four of its eight days to a convocation called the “Journey to the New Land”. The convocation was once again attended by representatives of varying ages, races and genders. “Listening was a feature of this Convocation, as we sought to hear God’s Word and the cry of the community. We listened as Methodists spoke of their pain and their dreams” (Minutes of Conference 1993:392). The Conference’s attention in its decision making was focused towards

- the call to be a priesthood of all believers
- growth in spirituality evidenced by contextual worship and lifestyle
- a return to the values of Ubuntu, family life and servant mission

The issues that were addressed covered both personal piety (i.e. the development and encouragement of contextual African-Christian worship and lifestyle) and social holiness (i.e. the values of Ubuntu, family life and servant mission).

The call for the priesthood of all believers was an expression of the desire that the church should be democratic and representative of its various levels of governance and ministry. The desire was that the church should not reflect the oppressive and disenfranchising structures of Southern African society, but rather that it should lead the way to equality and transformation. All of the calls were to find their fullest expression in the call to servant mission. It was recognised that the church had become “maintenance” focused (caring only for its own needs, its own members, and dealing only with its own concerns). If the church was to actively participate in God’s plan for the renewal and transformation of Southern African society, it would need to engage far more actively in practical acts of servanthood and ministry outside of the confines of the traditional church. As an expression of this ideal, all ordained Methodist clergy were encouraged to spend one day a week labouring in some form of social or community ministry (e.g. working as a peace monitor, counselling victims of violence and abuse, monitoring the work of the police, visiting prisoners detained under the Security Act in their prison cells, serving as electoral officials, helping to ensure that all South Africans had identity documents, engaging in voter education



to ensure that intimidation and electoral fraud did not occur) (cf. Minutes of Conference 1994:389-393).

After the peaceful democratic elections of April 1994, the function and responsibility of the church had to change from that of a prophetic activism against apartheid, to that of reconstructing and developing society. This led to the dawning of a new era and an expression of social holiness in Southern African Methodism.

#### **4.5 The “Mission Congress” 2004: The MCSA’s stand to deliberately position itself to bring about “healing and transformation” of both individuals and society to work towards a “Christ healed Africa for the healing of the nations”**

Under the leadership of Bishop Ivan Abrahams, the church struggled to reposition itself for reconstruction and development. Under apartheid, the enemy seemed so obvious and the goal so clear. However, 10 years after the dawn of democracy, very little had changed in Southern African society. Poverty and segregation were still rife. The causes of this segregation now were economic disenfranchisement, a high rate of HIV/Aids infection, and the slow pace of service delivery by the new government.

As a result, in 2003, the church adopted the vision of working towards “A Christ healed Africa for the healing of Nations”. Clearly this statement was grounded in the understanding that African Christianity was both valid and valuable as an instrument for achieving God’s mission in the world. By this mission it was understood that “God calls the Methodist people to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ for healing and transformation”. The subsequent mission strategy was divided into four clear areas of development, ministry and growth, namely

- Spirituality
- Justice, service, and reconciliation
- Evangelism and church growth
- Development and economic empowerment<sup>12</sup>

It is evident that the contents and thrust of this initiative struck a strong balance between personal piety and social holiness. Through

an examination of the priorities of this mission strategy one can clearly see how the concept of Christian perfection, as social holiness, took on a rich expression in the context of Southern African Methodism. Some of the priorities highlighted by the Conference of 2005 included the following:

- A mission consciousness shaped by the imperatives of spirituality, evangelism and church growth, justice and service, development and economic empowerment.
- The liberation of the laity, to be facilitated by the clergy, that will enable their full participation in the life and witness of the church.
- The revamping of our structures that they may serve our vision, mission thrust and transformation strategies.
- The eradication of racism, prejudice and inequality in institutional life.
- Taking seriously the call to a healing ministry, especially in our response to the HIV/Aids pandemic.
- A clear understanding of Church/State relations within the socio-political realities of our time, and the jealous guarding of the duty to be ready to speak with a prophetic voice when necessary.

The MCSA is still engaged in addressing the social and spiritual needs of Southern African society – working not only for the salvation of individuals, but also for the healing and transformation of society at large.

The five milestones discussed above display the clear emphasis that Christian perfection is understood as social. There is little doubt that there is still a great deal of work left to do in Southern Africa – one need only think of the problems of HIV/Aids, the collapse of the rule of law and the economy in Zimbabwe, and the slow pace of transformation and change in South Africa. However, an approach of social holiness is surely the most God honouring way of achieving Christian perfection in this context.

## **5 CONCLUDING REMARKS ON OUR PAST OUR FUTURE AND GOD'S MISSION FOR THE CHURCH**

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa is the largest mainline denomination in South Africa. According to the 2001 national census, 7.3 per cent of Christians in Southern Africa are Methodist, whereas 7.2 per cent are Reformed, 7.1 per cent are Roman Catholic, 5.5 per cent are Congregational, 3.8 per cent are Anglican, and the remaining 48.8 per cent (of the total 79.8% of the Christian population) belong to independent and African Initiated Churches (Stone 2007:1).<sup>13</sup> One may conclude that among many other complex motivators, South Africans have favoured the pragmatic approach of Southern African Methodism with its balance between personal piety and social holiness. Of course there are many other historical, theological and practical reasons for the statistical dominance of Methodism among mainline Christians in South Africa.

However, whilst the previous conclusion is speculative, what cannot be denied is that these statistics show that Southern Africans are still largely Christian – yet they long for new and different expressions of the Christian faith. Many are no longer satisfied with a church that seems more Western than African. The African renaissance is teaching us to appreciate our richness as Africans and that richness must surely find expression within our faith. For others (within the 48% who belong to African and Independent Church groupings), the allure of the prosperity Gospel and the promise of miraculous healings are a means of coping with the challenges of poverty and disease that are so common in Southern Africa.

The conclusion is thus that the Methodist Church must take seriously the need to appropriate and inculcate the central tenets of the Gospel, and of Wesleyan Methodism, in the local contexts in which it finds itself. Moreover, it is also clear that if the church does not continue to find significant and effective ways of bringing healing and transformation in society, Christians will continue to seek the quick fix solutions offered by churches that promise prosperity and miraculous healing.

In conclusion, if the MCSA is to remain a church at all, it must remain true to the reason for which God raised up the Methodist people, namely, Christian perfection which is run through with both personal piety and social holiness.

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## ENDNOTES

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- 1 For a discussion of Wesley's use of terminology regarding Christian perfection, please see Forster, D. *Wesleyan Spirituality: An introduction*. Methodist publishing house, Cape Town, 2001:4-5.
- 2 For a thorough and insightful discussion of the broader elements of this argument, see Baker, F. *Practical divinity – John Wesley's doctrinal agenda for Methodism* <[http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyan\\_theology/theojrnl/21-25/22-01.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyan_theology/theojrnl/21-25/22-01.htm)> accessed 20 July 2007, 21h34.
- 3 For a detailed and thorough discussion of the development of Wesley's understanding and adaptation of personal piety and social holiness within early Methodism, please see Heitzenrater, R.P. *Wesley and the people called Methodists*. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995:165-180, 199-241, 261-280. Moreover, Richardson wrote a succinct and clear account of the balance between personal piety and social holiness in the African context. See Richardson, N.R. & Malinga, P. (eds.). *Rediscovering Wesley for Africa*. Education for Ministry and Mission Unit, Pretoria, 2005:161-172.
- 4 A superb account of early Methodist missionaries who lost their lives in Southern Africa is written by Jackson, J. *Methodist South African martyrs – are they also saints?* Unpublished paper presented at the Theological society of South Africa annual meeting, 2007, John Wesley College, Kilnerton.

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- 5 It is not necessary to discuss the details of the work of these missionaries in this article. This topic has been well covered elsewhere. In particular it would be worth reading Attwell, A. *The Methodist church*. Methodist Publishing House, Cape Town, 1995:3-6, for a succinct historical overview of Methodist mission in Southern Africa.
- 6 It is not possible to chart all of the significant shifts in society and politics in Southern Africa in a study of this scope. For an insightful and scholarly account of the social and political trends from the first colonies at the Cape through to the dying days of apartheid in South Africa, please refer to Sparks, A. *The mind of South Africa*. Ballantine Books, New York, 1990.
- 7 Please see the following wikipedia article for a basic and accessible introduction to the history of apartheid <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apartheid>> accessed 17 July 2007, 22h41. Please see the following wikipedia article for a succinct outline of the crimes of apartheid <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime\\_of\\_apartheid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime_of_apartheid)>.
- 8 In order to establish this information, I simply read the address of the President (later Presiding Bishop) to Conference, the resolutions and the reports to the British Conference (when the Southern African Conference still reported to Britain) from the Minutes of Conference for each year between 1948 and 1994.
- 9 For more information on this development, I would suggest three sources: first, for a Southern African perspective see Grassow, P.S. in Richardson & Malinga 2005:87-96. For a truly superb, and scholarly, account of this emphasis in both Britain and America please see Rack 1989:381-449, 471-488. For a further perspective on developments in Methodism in Latin America and South Africa after Wesley's death please refer to Maddox 1998:169-196. Finally, there is the exceptional work by Heitzenrater 1995:261-280, 311-316.
- 10 The current debate on equitable stipends in the MCSA, as well as the stark reality that a black Methodist minister will serve on average 3 000 members, and 12 societies, whereas a white Methodist minister will serve on average 350 members and a single society, show that there are still very different standards for black and white Methodists.
- 11 For a detailed discussion of this, please see Forster, D.A. Validation of individual consciousness in strong artificial intelligence: An African theological contribution, Doctoral Thesis. University of South Africa, Pretoria 2006, chapters 5-7. And, Forster, D.A. Identity in relationship: The ethics of Ubuntu as an answer to the impasse of individual consciousness. Paper presented at the South African Science and Religion Forum. Published in the book *The impact of knowledge systems on human development in Africa*. Du Toit, C.W. (ed.). Research institute for Religion and Theology, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 2007:245-289).
- 12 The Mission Unit of the Church published a detailed document entitled *Mission congress 2004: Report on the key outcomes of the Mission congress*, Methodist publishing house, Cape Town, 2004. This was followed by the *Mission charter* that was tabled and adopted by the 117<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in Johannesburg. See 2006

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*yearbook of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa*, Methodist Publishing house, Cape Town, 3-22.

- 13 SA Government, Statistics SA, *The 2005/6 Christian handbook*, WITS University Library, Johannesburg. 2005. These statistics are also available online <<http://www.statssa.gov.za/census01/html/default.asp>> accessed 10 July 2007, 22h09. A theological critique of this data is available in Hendriks, J & Erasmus, J. Religion in South Africa: 2001 population census data. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 2005, 121, 88-111.