

**Missionary tendencies in the Methodist  
Church of Southern Africa, 1980 to  
2000: A critical history**



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A Mini-Thesis submitted  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the structured Masters MPhil programme  
University of the Western Cape

# **ABSTRACT**

## **Missionary tendencies in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, 1980 to 2000: A critical history**

The problem that will be investigated in this research project may be formulated in the following way: Which tendencies may be identified in the mission programmes of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa during the period from 1980 to 2000?

This thesis will provide a critical historical overview of missionary tendencies in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1980 to 2000 with particular emphasis on the Journey to a New Land Convocation held in 1995. From 2000, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had begun to reconsider the changes implemented following the Journey to a New Land Convocation. It will investigate such tendencies in the light of the emerging ecumenical paradigm of Christian mission as postulated by David Bosch. I will argue that three phases may be identified in the focus of the mission of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa during this period, namely 1) a period of ecumenical involvement from 1980-1993, 2) the introduction of the process called a "Journey to a New Land" from 1993 to 1995 and 3) the impact of this process on the mission of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1995 to 2000. The thesis will provide an overview and critical analysis of these phases in order to assess whether the emerging ecumenical paradigm of Christian mission as postulated by David Bosch is reflected in each of these phases.

A literary review indicates that the missionary focus of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa does not reflect the emerging postmodern paradigm of working towards togetherness. Nor does it proclaim a vision of unity but shows a tendency towards denominational needs. It does not embrace a diversity thereby enriching its missionary focus to give substance to the emerging ecumenical paradigm but shows more divergence than integration. There is also clear evidence that it opted for a holistic rather than a pluralistic approach to defining its missionary focus.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

Contemporary challenges to the church are of a dynamic nature and this requires from theologians to interpret the context so that the missionary focus of the church remains relevant. This dynamism is crucial to understand whether or not the church's mission addresses the realities confronting its people. To understand the continued relevance of the missionary focus of the church based on the interpretation of the context, it would be important to see how that dynamism is interpreted.

From 1990 onwards the church in South Africa had to adapt to rapidly-changing historical challenges and the church's dynamic reactions thereto following the historic speech of then President, F.W. de Klerk, in which the liberation movements were unbanned, political prisoners released, and exiles allowed to return to South Africa. The church was now challenged with assisting and enabling the country and its people in its transition to democracy. These political and social changes had a profound influence on the missionary focus of the church. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa was not exempt from these influences.

At the same time missionary tendencies in the wider ecumenical church were also dynamic and reflected a need for the church to participate in the journey to work towards a transformed society and this journey towards transformation was bound to have a profound effect on the mission and witness of the church.

This thesis will provide a critical historical overview of missionary tendencies in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1980 to 2000 with particular emphasis on the Journey to a New Land Convocation held in 1995. From 2000, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had begun to reconsider the changes implemented following the Journey to a New Land Convocation. This thesis will investigate such tendencies in the light of the emerging ecumenical paradigm of Christian mission as postulated by David Bosch. I will argue that three phases may be identified in the focus of the mission of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa during this period, namely 1) a period of ecumenical involvement from 1980-1993, 2) the introduction of the process called a "Journey to a New Land" from 1993 to 1995 and 3) the impact of this process on the mission of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1995 to 2000. The thesis will provide an overview and critical analysis of these phases in

order to assess whether the emerging ecumenical paradigm of Christian mission as postulated by David Bosch is reflected in each of these phases.

## 1.2 Background and Relevance

a) The Christian tradition has had a missionary focus since its very inception. As a result, Christianity spread from its early roots in ancient Israel, through the emergence of the early church in all directions: north, south, east and west. The history of the spread of Christianity to all continents through Christian mission has been well documented by authors such as Küng (1988), Barth (1986), Stott (1975), Moltmann (1981) and Neill (1973). Likewise, the history of Christian mission in Africa has been well documented with major contributions from Verstraelen (1975), Mosala (1989), Setiloane (1985), and Pobee (1979). Christian mission in South Africa has been described in numerous contributions too. Eminent scholars include De Gruchy (1979), Villa-Vicencio (1988), Tutu (1990), Boesak (1984), Nolan (1988), Hofmeyr & Pillay (1994), Elphick & Davenport (1997), and Smit (1996). Dutch Reformed theologians like Kritzinger JJ (1984) and Saayman (1994) contributed towards a specifically South African missionary focus albeit within the Reformed family.

b) From these historical overviews, it is clear that the goal, nature and methods of Christian mission were understood in quite varied ways in different geographical contexts and historical periods. In his seminal work, *Transforming Mission* (1991), David Bosch has offered a major contribution to understand such changes by identifying and describing shifting *paradigms* in Christian mission. What does he mean by “paradigms”? He identifies at least eight missionary paradigms namely, Matthew’s, Luke’s, Paul’s, the Patristic and Orthodox missionary paradigm of the Eastern church, the medieval Roman Catholic missionary paradigm, the missionary paradigm of the Protestant Reformation, the emergence of a Postmodern paradigm and an emerging ecumenical paradigm during the last century.

c) In a long chapter on this emerging ecumenical paradigm in Christian mission Bosch describes various features of this paradigm. These features are stated in his book as elements of an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm and are: Mission as the church-with-others; Mission as *Missio Dei*; Mission as mediating Salvation; Mission as the quest for justice; Mission as evangelism; Mission as contextualization;



Mission as liberation; Mission as inculturation; Mission as common witness; Mission as ministry by the whole people of God; Mission as witness to people of other living faiths; Mission as theology; and Mission as action in hope ( Bosch 1991: 368 – 510).

Bosch precursors this chapter on an emerging ecumenical paradigm in Christian mission with a discussion of mission in a time of testing. By this he means that scholarship in all disciplines has become preoccupied with a discussion of the disciplines themselves (Bosch 1991: 363). He states that the modern gods of the West – science, technology and industrialisation – have shown themselves to be illusions of what had been hoped for:

It is becoming increasingly evident that the modern gods of the West – science, technology, and industrialization – have lost their magic (Bosch 1991: 363).

He adds that the “development” of the world has led us to the brink of disaster:

Events of world history have shaken Western civilization to the core: two devastating world wars; the Russian and Chinese revolutions; the horrors perpetrated by the rulers of countries committed to National Socialism, Fascism, communism, and capitalism; the collapse of the great Western colonial empires; the rapid secularisation not only of the West but also of large parts of the rest of the world; the increasing gap, worldwide, between the rich and the poor; the realisation that we are heading for an ecological disaster on a cosmic scale and that progress was, in effect, a false god (Bosch 1991: 363).

Within the church similar questions are being asked of its *raison d’etre*. Bosch asserts that theological questions which had been absent from the church have surfaced again and are now defining how the church sees itself as well as its understanding of mission.

On the one hand the results of a variety of other disciplines – the natural and social sciences, philosophy, history, etc. – have had a profound and lasting influence on theological thinking. On the other hand developments within church, mission, and theology (often precipitated, no doubt, by the momentous events and revolutions in other disciplines) have had equally far-reaching consequences. Theological elements which had for centuries been absent from the churches or have found a home in marginal Christian movements have once again surfaced in mainline Christianity and have, in a sense, effected a return to a pre-Constantinian position (Bosch 1991: 363).

The church has also lost its privileged position in society and has become in some parts even a liability (Bosch 1991: 364). The traditional “mission fields”, meaning territories under white colonial rule, no longer exist and in fact, missionaries go to increasingly hostile environments where they are also rejected (Bosch 1991: 364). Other faiths have become very aggressive in their expansion and Islam, in particular, is now a force to be reckoned with in many parts of the world once dominated by Christian thinking. It is also a reality that former missionary-focused countries which sent missionaries to those countries being colonised, have now become the recipients of mission – by the very people they had once regarded as the mission field (Bosch 1991: 364). Says Bosch on Karl Barth,

It is on this point that Barth’s theology became relevant for mission, but then first and foremost for the Church on the *home* front, the sending Church, which believed that she ‘had’ the gospel and might now impart it to ‘non-Christianity’. But, said Barth, we never ‘have’ the gospel; we perpetually ‘receive’ it, ever anew. The dividing line thus does not run between ‘us’ and ‘them’; it also runs right through the sending, Christian Church herself. More than that: it runs through the heart of every Christian. We are all ‘Christo-pagans’. For this reason there is no fundamental difference between preaching ‘at home’ and ‘on the mission field’. (Bosch 1985: 165 – 166)

In developing his paradigm theory Bosch has shown that there are different paradigms. The question therefore must now be: how do paradigm changes occur?

In the field of religion, a paradigm shift always implies both continuity and change, both faithfulness to the past and boldness to engage the future, both constancy and contingency, both tradition and transformation (Bosch 1991: 364).

Bosch asserts that historical paradigm shifts were characterised by a creative tension between new and old. He does not propagate a casting aside of the old for the new but rather that mission must be understood in an imaginative sense. Bosch (1991: 366) states that “The agenda was always – consciously or unconsciously – one of reform, not of replacement.

Bosch (1991: 367) further asserts that ‘There will be no attempt at propagating a complete substitution of the previous paradigm, at casting it aside as utterly worthless. Rather, the argument will be that – in light of the true nature of mission – mission must be understood and undertaken in an imaginatively new manner today.

He asserts further that the emerging *ecumenical* paradigm must proclaim a vision of unity rather than diversity; emphasize integration rather than divergence. It is also important that we examine why Bosch calls this paradigm an 'ecumenical' paradigm. We need to determine what he means by the term "ecumenical".

Throughout, my reflections will remain tentative, suggesting rather than defining the contours of a new model. Does the emerging postmodern paradigm proclaim a vision of unity or diversity? Does it emphasize integration or divergence? Is it holistic or pluralistic? Is it characterized by a return to a religious consensus or by a philosophy according to which a supermarket of religions will display its wares to self-service customers? (Bosch 1991: 167)

Bosch emphasises the need for the ecumenical church to commit itself to a collective debate on the thirteen issues or features which underpin the emerging ecumenical paradigm.

Then, we must also understand as fully as possible, why Bosch says that it is an emerging paradigm. In other words, it is important that we understand why he does not state that it exists but must still emerge. It is emerging not because everyone agrees on the nature and methods of mission or necessarily agrees on the content of each of the nine features which Bosch states characterises this emerging ecumenical paradigm. Whilst this is an emerging paradigm Bosch asserts that this paradigm indicates a commitment by the churches to address these debates in conversation with one another, that is, *ecumenically*.

Bosch does not necessarily suggest that this emerging ecumenical paradigm of Christian mission should be understood as a standard for understanding Christian mission as it would be difficult to judge given the fact that we operate within this paradigm and cannot see outside it. We also cannot pre-empt further developments in the history of Christian mission.

Clearly, in a period of transition it is dangerous to use apodictic language. We shall, at best, succeed in outlining the *direction* in which we ought to be moving and in identifying the overall *thrust* of the emerging paradigm (Bosch 1991: 367). Bosch contends that the church is still reformulating a theology of mission (Bosch 1991: 598). He also suggests that the mission of the church constantly needs to be renewed and re-conceived (Bosch 1991: 519).

However, his discussion at least indicates that this paradigm has brought some clarity on what Christian mission entails in comparison to earlier paradigms. In a final chapter Bosch refrains from offering an own definition of mission. He does, however, formulate a number of theological themes that any contemporary notion of Christian mission has to attend to. From the rhetorical thrust of his argument it is at least evident that these themes should be addressed by churches together, that is, ecumenically and not in isolation from one another.

d) These shifting ecumenical paradigms are evident in the history of Christian mission in the South African context too.

A feature of 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian mission is that it was essentially mission within a colonial context where missionaries came to the pagan and converted them to Christianity. This missionary focus of the sending churches during the colonialist period included missionary activities that led to the establishment of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

In South Africa the South African Council of Churches is the most representative ecumenical structure or body that embraces practically all the protestant churches as well as a few evangelical churches (albeit primarily black evangelical churches). Virtually all the English-speaking churches, including the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, are very intimately and actively involved in the South African Council of Churches.

## **2. Demarcation and statement of the research problem**

a) This thesis will focus on shifting paradigms of Christian mission in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, especially over the past two to three decades.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa could itself be regarded as the product of Christian mission. The English-speaking Protestant churches in South Africa were established with the arrival of the British in the Cape essentially as soldiers guarding the Castle.

Soon the London Missionary Society sent missionaries to the Cape to start work among the indigenous people in the same sense as its political masters sought to claim the land as its own. Among the people arriving from Britain in 1820 were

Methodists and very soon Rev Barnabas Shaw was sent to the Cape to serve as pastor to the Methodists. Before long he began to undertake missionary journeys into the area now known as Namaqualand and he established the first Methodist church in Lilyfontain in 1815 (Meaker 1985: 192). This missionary station gave rise to the formation of the Methodist Church of South Africa. This growth was defined as missionary outreach and expansion and soon spread into neighbouring southern African countries such as Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, and Botswana.

The Methodist churches established in these countries later became part of the Methodist Church of South Africa which, after gaining its independence from its mother church in Britain, established the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in 1962 embracing all the countries within and adjacent to the borders of South Africa (Minutes of Conference: 1962). This independence meant it was now able to operate within its own Conference and allowed the Methodist Church of South Africa to join the World Methodist Conference (WMC) as a constituent member church.

This brief overview of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa indicates that it could not only be seen as the product of Christian mission but that it continued the task of Christian mission in various ways.

Until 1995, before the Journey to a New Land Convocation was adopted at that Conference, the structure of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa consisted of the following sectors:

An Annual Conference, the highest structure of the church, was made up of clergy as well as laypersons. A President was elected annually at the Conference and served for one year although he became part of the Presidency as President-elect and then after his term as ex-President. Synods, which met annually, were regional structures and they essentially looked at the work of the Methodists in that region, called Districts<sup>1</sup>. At the head of the district was the Chairman<sup>2</sup> who had a small secretariat who assisted him. Districts were made up of circuits which were racially divided into three distinct circuits: “E” – European, “C” – Coloured and “A” – African. Clergy were also largely stationed racially (Atwell 1995b: 14). Circuits were made up

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<sup>1</sup> There are currently 12 Districts.

<sup>2</sup> Only in 1999 did the Methodist Church of Southern Africa elect its first woman to lead a District as Bishop (Directory 2003: 190). Until then, all the Chairmen were males

of local congregations, called Societies, and these are generally geographically located.

The church also had departments which were responsible for specific functions of the church. These departments included: Missionary (which looked at mission, evangelism, church planting, outreach), Christian Citizenship (which was the social and justice portfolio), Youth (which looked at youth work and Sunday Schools), Local Preachers (a system peculiar to the Methodist Church of training lay persons for the preaching ministry). These structures were also replicated at District level. The greater majority of these structures were largely led by white clergy and laity (Minutes of Conference: 1980 – 1995).

An attempt was made by the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to address the reality of racially divided circuits by adopting and implementing a programme called Geographic Circuits which was established in 1974 as part of the missionary department's work (Minutes of Conference: 1974). This was a programme intended to counter the Group Areas Act, a cornerstone of apartheid legislation, which, through legislation, separated people according to race. However, a weakness of the geographic circuit programme was that this was initially voluntary and few circuits were willing to enter such a project. Blacks saw this programme as paternalism by whites, while whites saw this as a threat to their independence and, significantly, the financial independence of the white church.

As a significant member of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was intimately involved in the struggle against apartheid. However, as was patently true of most member churches of the SACC, its praxis and theory did not always complement one another. The Methodist Church in its synods and conferences made very clear statements condemning apartheid but ironically also found itself trapped in its structures which were dominated by whites. Its leadership was primarily white and interestingly, its first black President was Rev Seth Mokitimi who served in 1964 (Meaker 1985: 193). It took twelve years before the Methodist Church of Southern Africa elected the next black President, the Rev Abel Hendricks, who was elected as President in 1976 and again in 1977 (Meaker 1985: 194). Clearly the Methodist Church of Southern Africa reflected a significant lack of commitment to change its praxis.



However, one cannot ignore the contributions relating to the Christian voice against apartheid made by such leaders as Rev Peter Storey, President of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa Conference in 1984 (Meaker 1985: 195). Storey was also President of the South African Council of Churches from 1983 – 85 (Spong 1995: 98). Other prominent Methodist leaders who played a crucial role within the ecumenical movement include Stanley Mogoba and Khoza Mgojo (also a President of the South African Council of Churches in 1989 (Spong 1995: 98). John Rees, who served as General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches from 1982 – 1985 (Spong 1995: 87), also a prominent lay Methodist, and he played a significant role when the apartheid government tried to stop foreign funding coming into South Africa through structures such as the South African Council of Churches.

As Villa-Vicencio (1988) asserts, the Methodist Church played a significant role in the SACC but was also “trapped in apartheid”. This was true of practically all the English-speaking protestant churches. Those white clergy, like Moffat, van der Kemp and Phillip, in an earlier dispensation, who spoke out against the system of slavery and the dehumanisation of the victims of white domination (through the church) were soon ostracised by their communities. They were, it was said at the time, accused of mixing politics and religion – which it was claimed ought to have been kept apart. Similarly, in apartheid South Africa, whites were increasingly hostile towards the church for speaking out against the injustice and dehumanising policies of apartheid. An example of this dichotomy was the sanctions debate in 1987 which almost divided the Methodist church into black and white; another example was the conscription campaign of the apartheid regime which required all white males from the age of 18 years to undergo compulsory military training, a system which was vilified at synodical and conference level but pastorally approached at congregational level among many white congregations. That dichotomy characterised the church during the apartheid years.

The Conference declares that while our Church is divided on whether or not to commend sanctions and disinvestments as a strategy to bring about change, we are persuaded that this kind of economic pressure is already bringing about a measure of self-examination and reassessment which may yet lead to repentance among privileged South Africans. We cannot condemn something that could succeed where the cries of the people and the pleas of the Church have gone unheard (Minutes of Conference 1987: 288 – 299).

There is no doubt that what the church stated and did at leadership level during the struggle years was not necessarily reflected in the activities and programmes of the church at congregational level. A clear dichotomy could therefore be identified between the leadership and the official positions of the church on the one hand, and congregational praxis on the other.

b) Together with other churches, para-church organisations and other structures of civil society, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had to transform itself during the period of transition to democracy in South Africa. This affected the mission of the church and its understanding of that mission (missiology). For at least a significant part of the church this transition implied a shift from a church involved in the struggle against apartheid and offering pastoral care to those affected by the previous political dispensation. The shift was towards the church fulfilling a more constructive role in civil society and in that new guise to address various new challenges which had now emerged: reconciliation, nation building, reconstruction and development, poverty relief, violence against women and children, AIDS, crime, corruption (social justice issues).

c) This research project will explore the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to assess societal transformation on the mission of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa during this period of transition. More specifically, it will provide a critical historical overview of the missionary tendencies in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1980 to 2000 assessing the outcomes following the Journey to a New Land Convocation in 1995. On this basis, the problem that will be investigated in this research project may be formulated in the following way:

Which tendencies may be identified in the mission programmes of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa during the period from 1980 to 2000?

d) This statement of the research problem calls for clarification on a number of the concepts that are employed.

- As a result of its structure, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa formulated its mission policy essentially at denominational level. It introduced mission programmes that were either implemented or replicated at



congregational level.<sup>3</sup> Missionary programmes like ‘Malihambe’, ‘Lay Witness Mission’, geographic circuits, vanguard mission, even church planting, were decisions taken at denominational level, and more often at Conference level, and then implemented at congregational level. While congregations were not denied the right to implement specific contextual missionary programmes, including evangelism programmes, they were nonetheless required to implement the departmental programmes. In 1991 the Methodist Church of Southern Africa convened a national conference under the title, “Indigenous Evangelism Conference”, which was an attempt to examine and create indigenous models of evangelism. This was a direct response for an alternative to the European (colonial) model of evangelism which had been employed until this conference.

- In 1980 the Methodist Church of Southern Africa embarked on its first wide-scale consultation leading up to the conference in 1981 known as *Obedience 81*. This conference intended to enable the Methodist Church to define a broad-based response to the system of apartheid from a theological perspective while also seeking to define its mission focus. This was a precursor to the “Journey to a New Land” process and was a similar model to the later to the “Journey to a New Land” process from 1993 that culminated in the conference that took place in 1995.
- I chose 2000 as the close of the period under review to enable a critical assessment of the mission shift of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa after the “Journey to a New Land” process had been concluded.
- This research project will entail a critical historical *overview* of such missionary programmes. It will identify and describe historical shifts which occurred within the missionary programmes of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa during the period of transition. These shifts are indicated by changes that emerged in the missionary policies and praxis of the church.
- The research project will offer a *critical* overview of such historical shifts. It will offer an assessment of the shifts in the missionary policies and praxis of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Smit (1996) for a distinction between various manifestations of the church, namely as worshipping community, congregational structures, denominational structures, ecumenical bodies, individual Christians, Christian organisations.

Methodist Church of Southern Africa. This assessment will be based on David Bosch's description of the defining characteristics of an emerging ecumenical paradigm in Christian mission, namely the commitment to address differences on the aims, nature and methods of mission in conversation with one another that is, ecumenically. The critical question which will therefore be raised in the historical overview of the missionary policies of praxis of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa is whether there is evidence of such an ecumenical commitment in each of the periods under consideration.

### **3. Statement of the research hypothesis**

The thesis which will be investigated in this research project is that three distinct phases may be identified in the missionary programmes of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa during this period. These phases are the following:

- 1) A period of ecumenical involvement from 1980 – 1993,
- 2) A shift in the focus of the missionary programmes of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa which occurred through the process called a "Journey to a New Land" from 1993 – 1995, and
- 3) The impact of this Journey to a New Land process on the mission of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1995 – 2000.

During the first phase from 1980 – 1993 the Methodist Church of Southern Africa played a very significant role in the ecumenical movement and offered leadership played a leading role within the South African Council of Churches. During this period its leaders were regularly involved with developing theological positions within the ecumenical movement in the struggle against apartheid.

During the second phase from 1993 to 1995 the transition towards a democratic South Africa took place. As was the case with most of the churches belonging to the ecumenical movement during this phase, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa found itself caught up in the swell of the move towards democracy with the major focus on the elections and celebrating the miracle as it was popularly called. As a consequence, the focus was not very strongly ecumenical. In addition, it had begun

to embark on the consultative process known as the “Journey to a New Land”, a process that was intrinsically inward looking.

From 1995, after the Convocation adopting the “Journey to a New Land” focus, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa became more marginally involved in the ecumenical movement as much of its energy was focused on implementing the principles and focus of the decisions taken at the Convocation in 1995.

#### **4. Research procedure**

The hypothesis whether the Methodist Church of Southern Africa adopted the ecumenical paradigm will be investigated in this thesis on the basis of the following logical steps:

The first step describes the emerging ecumenical paradigm as postulated by David Bosch in more detail. This will involve a detailed reading of the particular chapter in Bosch’s book, and also extensive reading on the background to the paradigm theory behind his position. Some of the authors who will be studied will include Küng (1990), Barth (1986), and other contributions by Bosch (e.g. 1980, 1985). I will also look at Bosch’s own description of mission, and critical appraisals of his theory by theologians such as Kritzinger (1989), Saayman (1994) and others.

Chapter two will therefore critically examine Bosch’s understanding of mission. It will further look at how Bosch asserts that mission has developed. This chapter will also pay attention to critical appraisers of Bosch’s theory of mission. Unless the church approaches its missionary task in South Africa from an ecumenical perspective it would find itself marginalized and ineffective.

The third step will be to give a brief history of the ecumenical movement in South Africa, from its birth to 2000. In this step I will give an outline of the ecumenical movement, and in particular the South African Council of Churches, and how the ecumenical movement impacted on the missionary focus of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. This will constitute Chapter Three.

The fourth step will be to describe the missionary programmes of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1980 – 1993. In this step I will analyse the missionary programmes that defined the Methodist Church in this period and then

also assess how effective it had been. It would also be important to understand the role of the Methodist Church as a member of the SACC and how the missionary focus of the ecumenical movement impacted on the missionary tendency of the Methodist Church. The results of such an investigation will be reflected in Chapter Four of the research project. I will use the official Methodist Church of Southern Africa Minutes of Conference (1980 – 1993), as well as Storey (1995) as sources for such a reconstruction. The sources will be used to give a detailed description of the process as well as the mission focus of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in the period defined. It will also give an overview of the Methodist Church's focus on mission.

The fifth step will outline the “Journey to a New Land” process as adopted by the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1993 leading to its adoption at the Convocation held in Benoni in 1995 where sweeping changes were introduced which affected the missionary focus of the Methodist Church. This will also include the interactive process which started in 1993 in which the broader church was consulted as part of integrating a new missionary strategy. Again Storey (1995) and the Minutes of Conference (1992 – 1995) will be significant sources. This will form Chapter Five of the project.

The sixth step will assess the outcomes of the “Journey to a New Land” process on the missionary focus of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1995 to 2000. This will include a critical assessment of whether the church's mission during this period reflected the emerging ecumenical paradigm postulated by Bosch as part of the outcome of the Journey process. For this discussion, Olivier (1996) and the Minutes of Conference (1996 – 2000) will provide the most important resources. An assessment of the mission of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa during this period will be done in Chapter Six of the project.

I will use the sources to evaluate to what extent Methodist Church of Southern Africa in its “Journey to a New Land” programme reflected the ecumenical paradigm. In this regard I will be leaning heavily on the Minutes of Conference (1995 – 2000), and Olivier (1996). I will use other documentation sourced from the Mission Unit of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to understand how the Methodist Church had developed its missionary programmes after the “Journey to a New Land” process had been completed.

Finally, chapter Seven will offer some conclusions in this regard.



## **Chapter 2: Developing a critical theory: David Bosch's views on mission and the emerging ecumenical paradigm**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter will critically examine David Bosch's understanding of mission. It will look at how Bosch asserts that mission has developed. In particular, it will look at how Bosch describes the emerging ecumenical paradigm, what characterises the paradigm, why Bosch asserts that it is still emerging. It will also look at critical appraisals of Bosch's theory by other theologians. In order to examine Bosch's emerging ecumenical paradigm critically, it will require a detailed reading of the relevant chapter from his book, *Transforming Mission* (1991) as well as other writings by Bosch on mission.

### **2.2 Bosch's theory of missionary paradigms**

Change is a constant. The shift, or change, from one way of thinking to another, is considered a paradigm shift. The notion of paradigm shift is transformational and this is not possible without agents of change impacting on the shift.

Bosch contends that the new emerging paradigm for mission may be regarded as a consequence of the end of the Enlightenment period. He further contends that the emerging thought is to dispense with the absolutism of the Enlightenment. Instead there is now an emerging understanding that nothing is absolute. The realization of this relativity does not mean that objectivity is completely ignored and that everything is now subjectively viewed. On the contrary, the absolute objectivity of the Enlightenment period has now given way to a more balanced perspective which includes both objectivity as well as subjectivity.

The Enlightenment period had developed a culture that in a sense dehumanised humans. It also encouraged a more solitary approach to life, in which the individual was greater than the collective. Society was of lesser importance. This also led to a wanton destruction of the environment in pursuit of capitalistic goals. The new emerging ecumenical paradigm, according to Bosch, will focus on a deepened

understanding of the need to change from the narrow focus on an individual to a broader focus on society.

For the church, this new paradigm is crucial as it marks a rediscovery of humility and self-criticism. With the emerging world-view and the growth of world religions, Christians, and indeed Christianity, cannot escape the fact that a very serious introspective approach needs to be taken. This introspection would ultimately also influence the church's understanding of mission and its missionary attitude towards other people's faith. The previous notion of individualism has to give way to a realization that we are all together in this world. Thus we have to challenge the notion that 'every individual was free to pursue his or her own happiness, irrespective of what others thought or said' (Bosch 1991: 362).

This selfishness had disastrous consequences. It developed a culture of self-centredness that taught that people did not need to take others seriously, and in fact, did not need others at all. This ultimately led to a lifestyle that was completely engulfed in work and play, but also led to a denial to confront the reality of a somewhat vacuous existence.

Bosch argues that if we are to ensure the adoption and implementation of the new ecumenical paradigm, then we must begin to look very seriously at rediscovering two very essential realities: accepting the need for change, and a commitment to change. Through these realities we will be able to break the grip of autonomy and rediscover what it means to be human (1991: 362). The African word for this is *ubuntu* (I am because of others; only through community can I be). If the grip of autonomy is broken, then we need to replace it with something else. And that something else must foster and promote community, togetherness. We need to rediscover our need for others, to be connected. According to Bosch (1991: 362),

The individual is not a monad, but part of an organism. We live in one world, in which the rescue of some at the expense of others is not possible. Only *together* is there salvation and survival. This includes not only a new relationship to nature, but also among humans.



### 2.3 What is the new emerging paradigm?

Bosch asserts that there is an emerging ecumenical paradigm for mission which he motivates in terms of the following: If the period of Enlightenment encouraged and fostered analytical and selfish reason, the new paradigm that is emerging poses a challenge to the notion that we do not need one another; that nature exists for our selfish needs and desires, and that we are free to do whatever we want. This new paradigm is introducing a culture of togetherness and sharing.

The “me generation” has to be superseded by the “us generation”. The “instrumental” reason of the Enlightenment has to be supplemented with “communicative” reason, since human existence is by definition intersubjective existence. Here lies the pertinence of the rediscovery of the church as the Body of Christ and of the Christian mission as building a community of those who share a common destiny (Bosch 1991: 362).

Following the almost natural demise of the age of Enlightenment there developed two paradigms. Bosch (1991: 349) goes on to say that paradigm changes do not happen overnight but that it may take decades, even centuries to develop the distinctive contours that shape and define the paradigm.

He then goes further and states that as the new paradigm takes shape there is a period of transition and as such a consequent period of uncertainty. Change is never easy to cope with and most of those confronted with change rather prefer the known than the unknown. Consequently, as the new paradigm begins to take shape, the uncertainty engenders a strong sense of looking for the relative safety of the Enlightenment era (Bosch 1991: 349).

And yet, it was precisely from within the exact disciplines of science that the assault on rationalism took place. Events, especially the two world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shattered any illusions of the absolutism of the Enlightenment. It exposed the naïve attitudes and, in a sense, forced a new paradigm to begin emerging. Karl Barth, with his “theology of crisis”, was the initiator within theological circles and the one to inaugurate a new theological paradigm.

Within the rationalist ideology there was an expectation that religion would die out. However, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an upsurge in world religions, including Christianity, with the virile growth of the Pentecostal movement (Bosch 1991: 352).



Africa has shown a tremendous growth in religion. Bosch (1991: 352) cautions that religion must not be regarded as an escape from the realities of the world in which we live which may be characterised by a privatisation of faith or where religion acts as a buttress for a society which appears to be crumbling. Certainly, in post-apartheid South Africa this phenomenon is prevalent. The upsurge in religious fundamentalism, of all faiths, bears evidence to this.

The Enlightenment perception of rationality, in which everything must be explained in almost unqualified terms, was not compatible with symbolism. Whereas metaphors, signs, symbolism, etc. was considered irrelevant by the rationalists, in the emerging paradigm, these become more crucial in helping to shape the contours of the paradigm. The Third World, especially, critiqued the rational approach and in fact has reflected an upsurge in theology through narrative. These new modes of thinking are not anti-rational but embrace more than mere rationality (Bosh 1991: 353).

In the emerging paradigm following the Enlightenment period, there is a new discovery of religion and science. Some assert that science and religion have embraced and now live in some kind of tensionless relationship. This may be true for some Eastern religions, but certainly does not hold true for Christianity. Says Bosch (1991: 353),

The Christian faith has always designated as evil whatever destroys life. It has never affirmed its trust in God without challenging the power of the anti-gods. It has concerned itself with the victims of society, but not without calling to repentance the perpetrators of injustice.

Small wonder, then, that in those societies where structural injustice prevails and various theologies of protest are developing, there appears to be little enthusiasm for Capra's integrationism and avoidance of conflict.

For the church this new way of thinking and being is crucial. The emerging paradigm that Bosch is referring to is one that embraces togetherness. In other words, the concept of ecumenism, of being the church together, in shared mission and ministry, is crucial to the building of the missionary task of the church. It also means that denominationalism, while not being totally disregarded, must make way for ecumenical relationships that extend beyond mere statements on a common issue.

This new paradigm has far-reaching consequences for the church (Bosch 1991: 355).

## **2.4 Bosch's notion of ecumenism and mission**

For Bosch, the notions of ecumenism and of mission are inextricably linked. He contends that you cannot engage in one without the other. You cannot be “one” without the other. The witness to the world of the unity in both purpose and structure is mission. In a sense ecumenism shapes mission whilst simultaneously mission helps to develop ecumenical relations.

The Church has been engaged in mission from the very outset of its existence, in response to Christ's commission and challenge. However, mission is also dynamic and has to be constantly reinterpreted so that it is both contextually and theologically relevant. We must accept that mission is also not universally appropriate. In other words, mission must be made relevant to the context in which it is being exercised, so that the recipients of mission are able to relativise this mission.

If we contend that mission is dynamic, that mission must be contextually relevant, then we must accept that mission is interpreted according to the context and time in which such interpretation is done. Thus, Bosch contends that mission must be seen in relation to various ecclesial contexts.

### **2.4.1 Mission and the local church**

To understand mission one has to see it in relation to the local church<sup>4</sup>. After all, mission must be the primary focus of any local church's work and ministry. We must also accept that when we look at the local church we are dealing with Christ's instruments to take his message into the world. However, we must also accept that the local church is too often engaged in maintenance ministry and that its focus is thus inward looking. Because the greater emphasis is on ensuring its continued survival, often brought about as a result of financial considerations, mission takes a minor or secondary role. Within this reality, even the discussion on developing a theology of mission becomes less important. It remains crucial that the local church must be included in the development of a missionary focus. How the church identifies itself within the context becomes crucial in defining its missionary focus. To that end, Bosch (1991: 368) says,

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<sup>4</sup> By local church is meant the local congregation. However, we cannot exclude the denominational structures either. This is because some churches structures are such that mission is determined by the structure of the denomination.

In a perceptive study Avery Dulles (1976) has identified five major ecclesial types. The church, he suggests, can be viewed as *institution*, as *mystical Body of Christ*, as *sacrament*, as *herald*, or as *institution*. Each of these implies a different interpretation of the relationship between church and mission.

He states further,

The “voluntary principle” was widely followed. Groups of individuals – sometimes members of one denomination, sometimes devout believers from a variety of denominations – banded together in missionary societies which they regarded as the bearers of mission (Bosch 1991: 369).

It becomes clear that consideration of the nature and understanding of mission, the relationship between the church and mission, is of crucial importance for the local church. How it sees and defines the nature of church is also crucial (in the light of Dulles’ definitions) as it seeks to embody mission.

The various ecumenical missionary conferences held from 1910 onwards had all begun to address the question of mission and the church. By the time of the Ghana Assembly, the ecumenical movement had made significant progress towards a theology of mission that would be acceptable to all of its membership. Bosch (1991: 370) explains:

In a pamphlet published soon after the Ghana Assembly, Newbiggin summarized the consensus that had by now been reached: (1) “the church is the mission”, which means that it is illegitimate to talk about the one without at the same time talking about the other; (2) “the home base is everywhere”. Which means that every Christian community is in a missionary situation; and (3) “mission in partnership”, which means the end of every form of guardianship of one church over another.

This consensus is indicative of the new understanding of mission and the Church that was beginning to develop. The local church was thus the epicentre of mission, to its local community but also beyond. Thus the definition of local church (see footnote 4) becomes important in realizing this new consensus on mission. Mission is not an option for the local church but indeed crucial to its very being and purpose for being. It is thus imperative for the local church to recognize its missionary mandate as it seeks to live out Christ’s commission as embodied in Matthew 28:19-20,

Go therefore to all nations and make them my disciples; baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you (REB).

The local church cannot escape its responsibilities and commission from Christ himself that it has a fundamentally missionary task. It means that the local church exists to be a sent church, in other words that it bears witness to the world, in this case the local community. Says Power (quoted in Bosch 1991: 372),

Mission is not 'a fringe activity of a strongly established Church, a pious cause that [may] be attended to when the home fires [are] first brightly burning.... Missionary activity is not so much the work of the church as simply the Church at work'.

We can deduce that the local church must be engaged in mission. It is thus crucial for the local church to realize, and accept, that the community does not exist for the church, but that the church exists for the community. In other words, the local church must realize that the community is not something that exists out there and with which it has little relationship, but that it [the church] can only exist because of the community to which it must fulfil a missionary task. Mission in the local church in South Africa, particularly during the apartheid years, was epitomised by a tension between evangelisation (proselytising) and social justice. Dr Donald English, in a report-back to the Methodist Church in 1997 following a meeting with the former State President, P.W. Botha, told the gathering that South Africans were fortunate that their faith was vibrant because of the struggle against apartheid. He cautioned against the local church losing that crucial focus in post-apartheid South Africa.

Newbigin (as quoted in Bosch 1991: 373), assists us further in seeking to understand mission and the local church when he introduces the distinction between the church's missionary dimension and its missionary intention. Bosch (1991: 373) goes further and says,

The missionary dimension of the local church's life manifests itself, among other ways, when it is truly a worshipping community; it is able to welcome outsiders and make them feel at home; it is a church in which the pastor does not have the monopoly and the members are not merely objects of pastoral care; its members are equipped for their calling in society; it is structurally pliable and innovative; and it does not defend the privileges of a select group.

### 2.4.2 Mission and the broader church

These are crucial manifestations which are encapsulated in the concept of the 'priesthood of all believers'. The responsibility for mission is on the shoulders of all the members and provides a missionary focus which embraces both the worshipping community as well as addressing the social and justice issues confronting that community. Especially when we consider the tension that exists between the ecumenical movement (primarily the protestant churches) and the evangelical alliance (primarily the evangelical / Pentecostal churches) whose perceptions and understanding, and indeed expressions of mission and witness are radically different. To this end it is a sad indictment on the church, both protestant and evangelical, that we have failed in that we have tried to limit our missionary work to one of the two sides of mission, namely evangelisation and working for justice and peace – as defined by Newbigin (1991: 373).

### 2.4.3 Mission as *missio Dei*

As the world church engaged in the debate towards developing a theology for mission, and towards a new understanding of relationship, the birth and development of a world understanding saw the emergence of the ecumenical movement. From Edinburgh in 1910 the ecumenical movement began to take root and developed into a formidable structure. The debate around mission certainly was central to the birth of the ecumenical movement

Bosch (1980: 227), in his book, *Witness to the World*, states,

We have to determine the Church's missionary involvement in the world more accurately. What is the nature and scope of mission? Since the nineteen-twenties, when the concept of the 'comprehensive approach' in mission began to develop, there has been a recognition that mission is more than proclamation. This awareness is expressed in various ways. The most adequate formulation subsumes the total *missio* of the Church under the biblical concept *martyria* (witness), which can be subdivided into *kerygma* (proclamation), *koinonia* (fellowship) and *diakonia* (service).

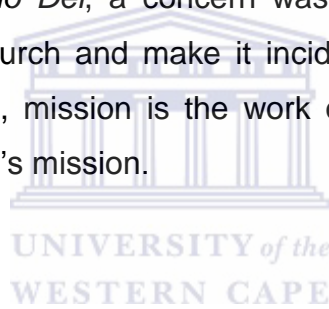
For Bosch (1991: 389), mission is always God's mission, which he contends has come about as a result of a subtle shift over the past five decades. This shift is important since it begins to challenge the prevailing thought and views of mission. The understanding of mission has evolved over the centuries where its focus

changed from salvation or introducing people in the East to the privileges of the Christian West or the expansion of the denomination,

At the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council (IMC) in 1952 the idea of *missio Dei* was formed. A crucial change was that mission was now affirmed as being part of God's mission. God is a fountain of sending love (1991: 390). In fact, this new missionary focus saw the emphasis on the cross preventing missionary complacency.

Bosch (1991: 391) argues that mission cannot be narrowly defined as the planting of churches or saving of souls, but rather the church witnesses to the fullness of the promise of God's reign and participates in the ongoing struggle between that reign and the powers of darkness and evil.

Although there has been significant debate in ecumenical circles subsequent to the acceptance of the term *missio Dei*, a concern was raised about the danger that mission could exclude the church and make it incidental to mission. However, as Bosch (1991: 392) points out, mission is the work of God and that the church is privileged to participate in God's mission.



#### **2.4.4 Mission and context**

As the church interpreted theology contextually, to make it relevant, it was only when the Third World church redefined theology from within their context that the real breakthrough took place. Bosch (1991: 422) asserts that the real breakthrough in this respect came with the birth of Third-World theologies in their various forms. This was perceived to be so pivotal an event that Segundo referred to it as “the liberation of theology”. Contextual theology truly represents a paradigm shift in theological thinking.

This was reflected in most of the other members of the ecumenical movement, and even the evangelical churches, as efforts to find a peaceful solution to the violence that was threatening to wreck the emerging democracy. From this it becomes clear that mission and justice are indisputably linked to one another.

From the outset of the birth of the church, Christians faced persecution and it was difficult to challenge justice issues. Only after Constantine's conversion did



Christianity become the state religion. But then justice was sacrificed as a compromise to being accepted by all people. By the dawn of the Enlightenment the relationship between Church and State had been severed. It was now deemed imprudent for the Church to make comment on societal justice issues (Bosch 1991: 402).

#### **2.4.5 Protestantism and evangelism**

Defining evangelism is very complex. Seeking one definitive, and universally acceptable, understanding of evangelism is a challenge. It is also true that the term has become divisive in that there are churches that have almost wanted to claim copyright on the use of the term. It has also very often been confused with mission. The Afrikaans term for gospel, meaning good news, is '*evangelie*'. Hence one would assume that the term ought to refer to the good news of Jesus Christ. Bosch defines his use of the term to refer to (a) the activities involved in spreading the gospel (however we may wish to define these), or (b) theological reflection on these activities (1991: 409).

Depending on the emphasis employed, whether it be evangelisation or ecumenism, the terms are linked indissolubly with one another. In stating that we are living in uncertain times of transformation, times when many things are not clear, and interpretations and understandings are in a state of flux, seeking for uniform definitions become very difficult. This gives rise to a plethora of meanings which are symptomatic of the uncertain times we live in (1991: 411).

For Bosch mission embraces evangelism, but with a much wider scope than merely evangelistic campaigns. It is the total task of God for the church. It therefore stands to reason that evangelism cannot be equated with mission. But evangelism cannot be excluded from mission. Evangelism is part of the witness of the church. By this is meant, that the church bears witness through its proclamation, service, actions, and worship. It is about revealing what God has done, is doing, and will do. However, we cannot ignore the fact that evangelism requires a response. The hearer responds to the good news that is proclaimed however that proclamation may be.

Both the church and mission are in a constant state of flux and change. It draws on the past to plant the seeds for the future. To this end, it must be acknowledged that

theology is not about reconstructing the past but a reflection of the church's own life and experience (Bosch 1991: 422).

The tension between Protestantism and Evangelicals lies also in their understanding of the mission focus of the church on the issue of justice. Says Bosch (1991: 402),

In the Protestant *ecumenical* movement, and to a lesser extent in contemporary Catholicism, it seems it is the *prophetic* motif that predominates. In some manifestations of ecumenicalism, however, it seems that the rational ethic, which aims at justice, is more powerful than the religious ethic of love.

By way of contrast, Bosch (1991: 403) says of the evangelicals,

However, Bonhoeffer also refers to the other extreme where – in the pious radiance of otherworldly realities – earth pales into insignificance and ultimately becomes meaningless. This is the danger in the *evangelical* position on the church's calling in respect to justice in society.

What bound the ecumenical movement during the years of resistance against apartheid was the issue of justice and the need to work together. For Bosch it was critical to the church's mission that it almost consciously pursued an agenda of developing mission as something done together. This mission would serve as a unifying agent thereby ensuring that the notion of ecumenism would be kept pertinent and valid. This working together would ensure that the church worked collectively towards developing a society that would build on the ideal of social cohesion and togetherness. This would assist in reshaping society so that there was greater acceptance and unity within its diversity.

This would have been in line with Bosch's emerging ecumenical paradigm, of the church collectively working towards a new society. The question is therefore whether the Methodist Church of Southern Africa recognised this opportunity and acted on it.



## 2.5 Mission and denominationalism

When mission is interpreted as winning people to your church or denomination, it gives an indication that adherence to your denomination rather than grace plays a greater role in salvation. Where membership of a church is in decline, using evangelistic campaigns to increase membership shifts the focus to the church and away from the reign of God (Bosch 1991: 415). Bosch (1991: 415) argues that 'authentic and costly evangelism' may well result in a decline in a church's membership. Authentic mission, according to Bosch, has numerical growth as a by-product.

Within evangelical churches, there is a sentiment that, unless a person subscribes unconditionally to their way and becoming a member of their church, you are not yet saved. Evangelistic campaigns and church planting are considered the essence of mission for these churches (later, a tendency also seen in the Protestant churches which show a numerical decline) with the consequence that denominationalism is supplanting ecumenical mission.

The new emerging ecumenical paradigm should focus on togetherness, that is a conscious decision for churches to work together. The need for ecumenical partnerships in realising mission must be the underlying approach to achieving the objectives and goals of the missionary task of the church.

The need to work together must also align the missionary focus of the church. The focus on denominationalism must be replaced by an ecumenical perspective, and this perspective must be a conscious choice. While acknowledging the existence of the denomination, the choice of working together towards shared goals must define the missionary focus of the church. Finding a common unity of purpose, a unifying agent in a sense, must underline what the church is seeking to achieve through its missionary focus.

While acknowledging that change is difficult, the church must nonetheless consciously work towards realising the objective of togetherness. This choice must be made at both national as well as grassroots level. There needs to be an active promotion of encouraging churches to work together towards addressing social issues which the church needs to confront.

There needs to be a movement away from the notion of “me” to the notion of “us”. The church needs to rediscover the idea of the church as the body of Christ and of Christian mission as the building of a community with a shared destiny (Bosch 1991: 362). There needs to be developed a culture of togetherness and sharing. There has to be the recognition that the churches need one another; that they are not in competition with each other, but share a common goal which should serve as the unifying agent building the idea of togetherness.

## **2.6 Ecumenism and mission**

Throughout the struggle against apartheid, the ecumenical movement and its member churches played a crucial role in serving as a prophetic voice. The reality, at the time, of having a common cause bound the member churches of the ecumenical movement more closely. The struggle against apartheid also served as a means of keeping the faith journey of the church more focussed, and thus more relevant. The debates within the ecumenical movement also helped to shape the church’s understanding of mission. In the emerging ecumenical paradigm, it is critical to understand how ecumenism helps to shape the church’s understanding of mission.

Churches affiliated to the ecumenical movement were often key leaders in the mass mobilisation of people opposed to the apartheid system and the senior church leaders were often seen at the forefront of public action, like marches. As the apartheid government introduced new oppressive legislation, the churches, both denominationally and ecumenically, brought theological responses challenging the laws. In its resistance to apartheid, the member churches of the ecumenical movement found a unity in purpose that helped to shape the missionary focus of the church.

In recognising their common purpose, the churches working together to address an issue will focus their missionary work on addressing the issue ecumenically.

## **Chapter 3: Ecumenism and the ecumenical movement in South Africa**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I will describe the ecumenical movement in South Africa focusing on the role of the South African Council of Churches. Up to 1994, ecumenism played a prominent part in the missionary focus of the so-called mainline Protestant churches. To some extent after 1994, ecumenism has played a lesser role.

The second section (3.2) will briefly outline the ecumenical movement in South Africa from its birth to 1990. This period is significant as the missionary task of the ecumenical movement was shaped primarily by its commitment to bringing an end to apartheid and injustice. As arguably the most significant structure influencing the missionary focus of its member churches the South African Council of Churches provided a platform for the church to address the scourge of apartheid.

The third section (3.3) will look at some of the significant statements that came from the ecumenical movement during the years of struggle against apartheid. These statements were crucial in shaping the missionary focus of the member churches.

The fourth section (3.4) will focus on the ecumenical movement after 1990. This will include a description of the process of transition and transformation of the South African Council of Churches. Also of significance, the membership of the South African Council of Churches had changed after 1994 when churches like Rhema, and the Dutch Reformed Church joined the South African Council of Churches.

### **3.2 The ecumenical movement in South Africa from birth until 1990**

The Church Unity Commission started in 1968 and comprising the mainline English-speaking churches being the Church of the Province of Southern Africa, Methodist Church of Southern Africa, United Congregational of South Africa and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa and also two Black churches, the Reformed Presbyterian and the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa came into being in an attempt to bring organic union between the six churches. There were difficulties which needed to be addressed such as, recognition of ordination,

ordination of women, the role of women in leadership, issue of sacraments, and the relationship of clergy to denomination.

Brigalia Bam (1995: 44), former General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches at a Conference convened in 1995 to look at the role of the ecumenical movement and by implication the church in South Africa after the first democratic election, said of the history of the ecumenical movement,

The first national ecumenical initiative – if I may dare call it that – was in 1904 when the first General Missionary Conference was founded. This was, as its title implies, a meeting of missionaries to discuss common problems. Its aims were to ‘promote co-operation and brotherly feelings’ to better serve ‘the native races.’ In keeping with the times it was not a meeting *with* Africans. It was a meeting *about* Africans.

Then later she says of the birth of the South African Council of Churches,

Missionary agencies began the process of handing over control of churches to local hands. This gave room for South African churches, following world church trends, to form the Christian Council of South Africa in 1936. The Council brought churches and missionary agencies into fellowship with one another, paving the way for the creation of the South African Council of Churches in 1968. With all the apartheid legislation that had been passed in the fifties and sixties there was a need for a strong, locally based and united voice to speak out in opposition – a role the SACC was positioned to fulfil.

We cannot claim that this meant immediately that the Council represented the membership of the churches. Rather, it represented their leadership – which was still predominantly white. At the inaugural meeting of the SACC there were thirty-eight white men, one woman, and seven black clerics. Hardly representative! But the idea was let loose and within a very short time the Council was filled with voices of indigenous church people. Only four years later, in 1972, the SACC was declared a black organisation by the apartheid government (Bam 1995: 45).

During the 1960’s and 1970’ most of the Protestant church leadership was predominantly white. And at the time of the formation of the South African Council of Churches, the voice of the Black majority of the membership of the protestant churches was largely silent. However, this was changed very quickly as the Black majority asserted itself and became more active in its response to apartheid.

With access to independent donor funding, the South African Council of Churches was able to expand its work at regional level and had established 32 Regional Councils of Churches. These were local ecumenical initiatives which sought to grow ecumenism and ecumenical partnerships at grassroots level. The Regional Councils were also instrumental in promoting ecumenism within local church parishes by assisting with the establishment of local ministers' fraternals (fellowships). Through these grassroots structures, the work of the ecumenical movement was promoted and implemented.

Ecumenical debates are crucial in assessing the tendencies in missionary thoughts and trends. These ecumenical debates are crucial in enabling the ecumenical movement to hold true to one of its stated goals: being a prophetic voice. Bosch asserts that such an ecumenical paradigm has been emerging since the inception of the modern ecumenical movement.

When we consider what the ecumenical movement in South Africa had to contend with as it provided a prophetic voice to the country in its struggle against apartheid, we must acknowledge the tremendous sacrifice that was made by the member churches.

De Gruchy (1995: 12) states in a paper "during the years of the struggle against apartheid it was increasingly clear what was required of us, and we found our unity in that struggle. Indeed, we *became* the ecumenical church in South Africa, that is, a community of churches and Christians who were united in our witness to the gospel around a common cause. In many respects the struggle in which we found each other continues, not against apartheid legislation but certainly against its awful legacy. To that extent we still have a common point of reference which keeps us related in witness and mission."

With the advent of democracy, the ecumenical movement engaged in a restructuring process which had an adverse impact on the social and justice programmes it had offered to various communities it had been engaged in during the apartheid era. As the ecumenical structure sought to redefine its focus in the new democratic dispensation, there was an acknowledgement within the member churches of a need to continue playing a prophetic role of social criticism (Mgojo, 1995: 10) while offering its members a pastoral ministry.

Mgojo (1995: 10) states,

The church is called upon to prophesy. It is called upon to care. It is called upon to witness in this dangerous age. With God we shall overcome, albeit with serious bruises.

Interestingly, there were several debates amongst the ecumenical partners on emerging theologies that addressed the social and justice issues that dominated the church's agenda in South Africa during the struggle years. During the 1970's and 1980's, for example, Black theology played a prominent role in shaping the debates of the ecumenical movement and these mostly focused on South Africa. The debates on Liberation theology, Feminine theology, and on sanctions were prominent moments of critical reflection in the ecumenical movement.

### **3.3 Significant statements from the ecumenical movement**

In this section I will describe several documents that emanated from the ecumenical movement during the years of struggle as well as the period of transition to a democratic South Africa. These documents outline how the ecumenical movement influenced the missionary focus of its member churches.

The Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid South Africa (SPROCAS), was the first attempt to harness the expertise of South Africa's progressive scholars to begin to write blueprints for an apartheid-free future. Some of those who contributed to the many studies SPROCAS produced - on human rights, health, the legal system, education, etc. - later became household names in the transformation process.

This initiative set the tone for theologians to write important theological works and responses to apartheid. Through the SACC these theological works received wide-spread acceptance from the members of the ecumenical movement.

In post-apartheid South Africa, there was a shift from focusing on South Africa only towards a broader political perspective which acknowledged the place of South Africa within the African continent. As the political perspective changed towards an increasing focus on Africa, so the ecumenical movement engaged in debates around policies, like NEPAD for example, which were being developed to give focus to the new African perspective.

### 3.3.1 The Kairos Document

This was a seminal document or response by South African theologians in 1985 to give expression to the position of the church against apartheid. In its foreword the document says,

The KAIROS document is a Christian, biblical and theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa today. It is an attempt by concerned Christians in South Africa to reflect on the situation of death in our country. It is a critique of the current theological models that determine the type of activities the Church engages in to try to resolve the problems of the country. It is an attempt to develop, out of this perplexing situation, an alternative biblical and theological model that will in turn lead to forms of activity that will make a real difference to the future of our country.

There was an initiative of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) in bringing together theologians to fashion a theological response to apartheid with reference to the rising death rate through political interventions by both the apartheid state as well as the liberation movements. Although located in the struggle against apartheid it was also a forward-looking document that wanted to plot the way forward for the churches to define their role and to ensure that its activities would contribute to the future of South African in a meaningful way. There was a decided attempt to secure wide-spread participation of laity as well as clergy as the intent was for a “bottoms up” approach.

This is highlighted in that the process of production of the Kairos Document is interesting in itself. It sought to be a "bottom-up" process, by which the people of the townships were able to articulate and own theological reflection. To this end there were a whole series of consultations.

([http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/commiss/trc/sacc\\_sub.htm](http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/commiss/trc/sacc_sub.htm))

The Research Institute for Christianity in South Africa (RICSAs) describes the significance of the Kairos Document as follows:

The Kairos Document was an initiative of the Institute for Contextual Theology. It is listed here as a most important international and ecumenical statement of its time that received the support of many persons associated with the SACC. It examined a State Theology which maintained the status quo and a Church Theology based on tradition, and went on to suggest the need for a Prophetic Theology.



The SACC was supported in statements by its member churches. It was supported in its actions by individual members and small groups among those churches who were committed to the struggle against apartheid and willing to act accordingly. ([http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/commiss/trc/sacc\\_sub.htm](http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/commiss/trc/sacc_sub.htm))

Mark R. Amstutz (1995:8-20), affirming the relevance of the Kairos Document, nonetheless critiqued the English-speaking member churches of the South African Council of Churches for their statements against apartheid while not embarking on moral education for their members to change their behaviour.

The Kairos Document contained a critique of State theology which is the recovery of an abhorrence of idolatry. The essence of the Kairos document is that State theology is an idol which replaces the God of the Bible ([http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/commiss/trc/sacc\\_sub.htm](http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/commiss/trc/sacc_sub.htm)).

Church Theology has two characteristics. Church language presupposes that the church is supposedly neutral and seeks reconciliation and secondly the critique is that religion which is private and isolates one from the world ([http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/commiss/trc/sacc\\_sub.htm](http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/commiss/trc/sacc_sub.htm))

A third theology critiqued in the Kairos Document is that of Prophetic Theology which is supposed to 'read the times' and provide theological direction for the church. This theology is intended to show how a government that does not promote the common good of all the people, then the people have the right to replace the government. The apartheid regime was considered the enemy of the people and resisting it was the right thing to do. ([http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/commiss/trc/sacc\\_sub.htm](http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/commiss/trc/sacc_sub.htm))

### **3.3.2 The Rustenberg Declaration**

Peter Storey, a former head of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and President of the South African Council of Churches, comments that at the Rustenberg Conference held in November 1990, churches who had been divided from one another met for the first time since 1960. The Rustenberg Declaration set the stage for the establishment of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is at present seeking to heal the nation's past *Remembering the Ecumenical Struggle against Apartheid*, (Storey 1998: 5).



A significant issue under apartheid was the forced removal of millions of Black people from their homes to new settlements often very far from where they were living. This was done under the Group Areas Act, for example. As a consequence places like District Six in Cape Town and Sophiatown in Johannesburg, which were in a sense cosmopolitan in its make-up, were destroyed and the inhabitants moved out to new areas. There was a distinct lack of facilities of virtually every kind.

For organisations such as the Pan Africanist Congress, the struggle for liberation and justice was inextricably linked to the question of land. However, this issue has many complexities and restitution of land remains a critical element in post-apartheid South Africa (Camay & Gordon, Case Study no 2).

### **3.4 The ecumenical movement after 1990**

The period following the unbanning of the liberation movements and the release of the political prisoners together with the returning of the exiles saw an unprecedented escalation of violence as political movements fought with each other for domination of the emerging political realm. The Church increasingly found itself being called upon to act as an agent for and of reconciliation, by mediating between warring factions. In fact, the Church was pivotal in forming the *National Peace Accord*, an attempt to pursue an option of peace by all political factions. In an attempt to secure a peaceful transformation to democracy, the Church played a pivotal role in bringing the conflicting political entities together to engage in negotiations rather than using violence. There are numerous stories of clergy entering into very dangerous and life-threatening contexts, such as hostels, and implementing the process of conflict management so that the antagonists would speak to each other thereby minimizing the need to resort to violence in resolving disputes. We must also acknowledge the impact of the armed struggle and the resultant oppressive mechanisms employed the apartheid state in seeking to crush this resistance as a very serious contributing factor that explains why there seemed to be a prevalence of resolving conflict through violence.

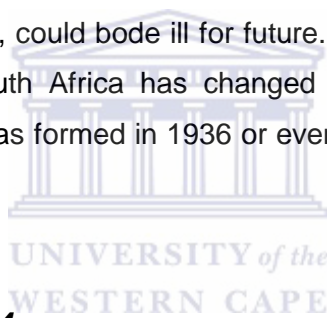
Shortly after the onset of democracy, several churches which were divided racially now began the process of meeting to discuss unification. These discussions had an

adverse effect on the ecumenical commitment of these churches as they expended a lot of energy on unification talks.

It was also apparent that the leaders of many member churches had changed. The leadership who had been in the forefront of the church's engagement in the struggle against apartheid, were now exhausted and were replaced by a new band of leaders who didn't seem to have the commitment towards ecumenism.

de Gruchy (1995: 12) states,

We are all aware, however, that there has been a growing lack of ecumenical enthusiasm these past few years, and a growing spirit of denominationalism. After years of intense struggle, there is a sense in which those who have been most involved and committed to the witness of the ecumenical church are also exhausted. This, together with significant withdrawal of funds by donor agencies and the failure of the churches themselves to provide anything like adequate funding to ecumenical projects and programmes, could bode ill for future. Equally significant is the fact that the church scene in South Africa has changed considerably since the Christian Council of South Africa was formed in 1936 or even since it was reconstituted as the SACC in 1968.



#### **3.4.1 The churches after 1994**

There is little doubt that the political transformation that enveloped society in South Africa from the elections on 27 April 1994 and following the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the first democratically elected State President also had a profound impact on the mission, prophecy and witness of the church.

Mvume Dandala (see 2001:3), President of the SACC, in his Presidential address to the Conference in 2001 said "It is proper and right that it is stated that the legacy of apartheid continues to haunt the South African nation. This legacy has manifested itself in a myriad of ways, including landlessness and massive impoverishment of the majority of our people and the accumulation of property and wealth by beneficiaries of the past regimes, and the tendency among emerging leaders to emulate these."

In addressing the issue of church-state relations, Dandala (SACC Report 2001:3) further says "We must state clearly and unequivocally that we do not see government as an enemy of the church, or our people. This we must state with no blind eye of

loyalty because our loyalty is to the One who called us into being, as the church, and to his mission in the world.”

These words, whilst spoken in 2001, certainly echo the sentiments expressed by many church leaders in the period after 1990 and especially after 1994. It is a summation of the crisis facing the ecumenical movement following the negotiation process and the first democratic elections in 1994. It also mirrored the reality confronting most churches who were struggling to define their role in the new dispensation.

Khoza Mgojo (1995: 9) challenged the church to formulate a new identity and to also redefine its ministry for the regional and global context.

Bam (1995: 50) puts it differently when she says “Now we have a new government. It is one for which we voted in a democratic election. We have to identify a new and suitable manner in which to relate to government in both a prophetic and supportive manner. How to do this is a current debate among us.”

The role of the church in the period following the unbanning of the liberation movements and the onset of democracy in South Africa also saw the church emerging as a major factor in the shaping of the proposed *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) under the chairpersonship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Again, the Church was a pivotal figure in ensuring the establishment of the TRC and made use of scriptural concepts of truth and reconciliation to lend unconditional support to the TRC process.

Bam (1995: 48) said that the church should be very involved in the Truth and Reconciliation process as the concepts were at the root of the Gospel. She further asserted that the church should be assisting the victims to enable them to voice their needs in the search for truth.

Albert Nolan (1995: 155) adds “None of us would doubt that the government’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission needs the support of the churches. We may want to criticize some elements of it, but it will be much more important to complete its work with our preaching repentance, our teaching about God’s forgiveness and by offering the counselling that will be necessary in many cases.”

In this context the church is challenged to assist the victims and indeed also the perpetrators to come to terms with their experiences of the past under the apartheid

regime. For the victim it is finding peace and closure to the pain of the oppression and for the perpetrator that of confessing what was done in defence of apartheid. The church is called here to examine its mission as being both pastoral and also prophetic. In this sense, despite the weaknesses of the truth and Reconciliation commission, the church is called to play a role in dealing with the past.

### **3.4.2 The ecumenical movement from 1994 to 2000**

Following the political transformation and the move towards democratic change in South Africa after the general election and inauguration of the first State President (of the new South Africa), the ecumenical movement also went through fundamental changes that impacted on its mission and ministry. There were churches which had never shown an interest in the ecumenical movement, indeed some of these churches had regarded the ecumenical movement as unchristian because of its challenges to system of apartheid and the rejection of the apartheid government, who were now seeking closer ties with the ecumenical movement. It seemed that there was a general clamour for a repositioning of churches with various claims of engagement in the struggle against apartheid. It appeared as though no church had supported the previous regime. Even the Dutch Reformed Church, once the pariah of the ecumenical movement because of its theological support for the apartheid government and its policies and which had been expelled from the World Council of Churches (WCC) at the Cottesloe Conference, now applied for readmission to the ecumenical movement, albeit merely as observers.

Bam (1995: 46) said,

In the early days of the African National Congress, a number of prominent churchmen were among its leaders. But in general the church neither shared in that movement, nor in its strength – namely unity. We have to confess today that the Government of National Unity, despite its problems and failures, its party politics and strident arguments, stands in judgement upon churches that remain tied to denominationalism, to self promotion in the guise of evangelism, and to a seeming lack of awareness of the demands and opportunities of these special times.

### **3.4.3 What constitutes the membership of the ecumenical movement in post-apartheid South Africa up to 2000?**

As stated previously, the political changes that took place in South Africa after 1990, and even later after 1994, saw a drastic realignment of positions by churches. Whereas the evangelical<sup>5</sup> churches had taken an apparently apolitical position under the apartheid regime, in the new democratic dispensation they were now more than keen to take an active interest in political participation. When the apartheid government had banned and incarcerated such persons as Nelson Mandela, who was to become the first State President of the democratic South Africa, Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Steve Biko, and many other activists against apartheid, many of these churches had agreed with the then government.

However, after 1990 and especially 1994, they were very anxious to invite Mandela to their assemblies and conferences and to be seen with him. This about-turn reflects the attitudes of the churches which were now anxious to be seen to have embraced the transformation process – but without acknowledging their complicity in the atrocities of the past under apartheid.

Brigalia Bam (1995: 46) says,

We delight in the Catholic Church's decision to finally agree to full membership of the Council, We have walked close together for many years. We also delight in the observer status of the Charismatic International Federation of Christian Churches; in the return of the Salvation Army; and in the decision of the Dutch Reformed Church to become part of this fellowship. And, of course, we rejoice still with those many denominations that have made up the fellowship of the SACC since its inception.

The International Fellowship of Christian Churches had, in the new dispensation, become members of the South African Council of Churches, albeit at national level only. It would appear that this newfound interest in the ecumenical movement could be interpreted as being politically correct and to give them a sense of credibility especially since they appeared to harbour the perception that the South African Council of Churches would be received as comrades by the ANC government, thereby granting them, the IFCC-aligned churches, similar status. The reason for

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<sup>5</sup> These churches are primarily Pentecostal and charismatic. They are affiliated either to *The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa* (TEASA) or *International Fellowship of Christian Churches* (IFCC). They were initially opposed to any kind of relationship or association with the SACC

stating that they have become members at national level is important since it is at provincial level that implementation of activities and programmes takes place. Through the evangelical churches' membership at national level only it means that they are excluded from the implementation level.

A natural development is that the mainline protestant churches continued their affiliation of the South African Council of Churches after apartheid. Whilst recognizing that many churches were engaged in unification discussions, this did not deter from their participation in the ecumenical movement including the Dutch Reformed Church which now applied for observer status membership of the South African Council of Churches. This application evoked fierce reaction and debate within the ecumenical movement but eventually their application was accepted. Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church, while always a participant in the struggle against apartheid, yet were never full members of the South African Council of Churches, ostensibly because of a papal decree, but now had to reassess its relationship with the South African Council of Churches.

The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA) has formed working ties with the SACC and in so doing has brought the two structures closer together. However, it is clear that this process only involves the leadership of TEASA but has not yet filtered down to the base membership at local level, or at best, provincial level. This, too, is important since the debate regarding ecumenism and evangelicalism has often been blurred as being between ecumenism and evangelism. This latter term has been regarded within the evangelical circles as being their exclusive domain, despite the ecumenical movement member churches also engaging in evangelism within their own denominations. Thus, the animosity that lingers between these two entities is superficial, from a missionary basis. However, fundamentally there needs to be a momentous shift in attitudes from both structures if the Church in South Africa is truly to be one in mission and purpose.

Bam (1995: 46) asserts,

This widening fellowship has many attractions. It also poses new problems. How can such a diverse group of churches and associations of churches speak together on the issues – especially the moral, social and justice issues – facing our nation?



#### **3.4.4 How is the role of the ecumenical movement defined in post-apartheid South Africa?**

In his address to the Triennial Conference of the SACC in 2001, Molefe Tsele, (General Secretary Report, 2001) commented that “The African Christianity has either borne bitter fruits or none at all. For many Africans, the Church continues to be an ambiguous institution they love to hate. Prof Tinyiko Maluleke, in his recent inaugural lecture, likens it [the Church] to a ‘problem child’. On the one hand, Christianity is more rooted in the Continent than anywhere else, on the other hand, the Continent continues to reap bitter fruits of poverty, wars, abuse and enslavement.”

He goes further and tries to define the emerging role of the ecumenical movement in the emerging new dispensation:

For us as a national council in South Africa, the same challenges and questions continue to present themselves. How are we to become an organ which can minister to, and advocate for the good of, the poor in our society? Indeed the question of our continuing relevance and indispensability can no longer be evaded. Has the time not come for us to be cut down from existence? Has the ecumenical model not outlived its relevance? This Conference seeks to address squarely the issue of the mission of the SACC. What do we exist for? Does the ecumenical movement have a future? It is in response to this question that we understand our role in the lives of our people (2001:3-4).

These questions are important because they were questions asked since 1994. However, it would appear that structural and constitutional reform dominated the answers to the questions rather than an earnest and in-depth searching for the defining of a new mission for the ecumenical movement in post-apartheid society. As it was insightfully remarked on one occasion, “We were so adept at saying ‘No!’ that we never learned to say ‘Yes!’

In the book, *Being the Church in South Africa Today* (Konrad Raiser 1995: 32) says, “The planting of Christianity in Africa was generally done along ethnic lines”. He asserts that the political reality of apartheid provided a basis for unity of church purpose. However, he also says that churches tend to unite on the basis of a common problem but that the issue of church unity had not been given the



necessary emphasis it required. He feels that church unity should be an intentional objective (Raiser 1995: 32).

During the struggle against apartheid, donor funding which facilitated much of the work of the SACC was freely available. With the change to a democratic South Africa, donor funding now became a greater challenge as the availability of funds became more of a challenge. This lack of funding had begun to affect the activities of the SACC shortly after 1994.

However, at the same time, the SACC had opened the Parliamentary Office which was established within the General Secretariat in 1996 as a witness to the South African Council of Churches' commitment to strengthening the voices of poor and marginalised groups in the public policy process.

The decision to establish a parliamentary office was informed by the ethical concerns of the churches and the principle of "critical solidarity". This meant that the SACC would support South Africa's democratically elected government in the work of reconciliation, nation building, and reconstruction and development, but reserved the right to criticise the government if it violated principles of justice and democracy or if it contravened the bill of rights. At the 2001 National Conference, SACC members adjusted the principle underlying the SACC's interaction with government from critical solidarity to critical engagement.

#### ***3.4.5 What is the relationship of the ecumenical movement with its member churches?***

The ecumenical movement, as defined and constituted by the South African Council of Churches, had never sought to dictate to its member churches what and how they should define their missionary focus. Nor had the ecumenical movement engaged in dictating, or even be seen to be engaged in, the formation of policy, doctrine and / or theology. If anything, it was always as a collective through consensus that the ecumenical movement defined its responses to any of the issues it had discussed. It has also always strived towards a collective response but did not expect all of its members to accept its decisions.

The ecumenical movement, freed from the constraints of church polity and having an independent source of financing, was able to make radical and provocative decisions

that allowed the member churches to grapple with the issues through their structures.

However, with unification dialogues underway in many of the ecumenical movement's member churches which had been previously racially separated, much of what the ecumenical movement had initiated was often left to the staff and other regional structures to implement. Thus, for example, the Conference of 1998 was rather poorly attended by members who would previously not have stayed away from any ecumenical gathering. This highlighted the crisis facing the ecumenical movement as it tried to define its new role in society as well as redefine its relationship with the member churches. Dandala (2001: 6) said,

At first, as changes were taking place in this country, we believed in political solutions. We therefore, left politics to the politicians and politics to find its ground and space without our interventions. We became occupied with internal denominational and structural processes, as these things unfold in our face. To a large extent, we have felt as though we are not qualified to partake in finding solutions to the problems that plague the nation.

Dandala (2001: 6) concludes his address with these providential words "We cannot afford to be onlookers when Christ is working in our midst. We belong to Christ and with Christ we must be at work."

These sentiments very clearly define the missionary focus of the ecumenical movement, and indeed its member churches. It evidences the real need for the church (both corporately and individually) to engaged in mission.

### **3.5 The Methodist Church of Southern Africa and ecumenism**

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa was a founding member of the ecumenical movement in South Africa that later became the South African Council of Churches. During the struggle against apartheid years the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, along with almost all the protestant churches who constituted the ecumenical movement, shared a common goal: ending the unjust rule of the apartheid regime. A major missionary focus of the member churches of the South African Council of Churches was to work towards the implementation of the Kingdom of God within the South African context. At the same time, there was a recognition that the church also

had to fulfil its missionary task in terms of the individual spiritual needs of its members.

As a founder and constituent member of the ecumenical movement of South Africa at both national as well as provincial (regional) level, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa has played a crucial role in shaping ecumenism and mission. However, in saying so, it is also important to note that the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, like most protestant churches, also had denominational paradigms of mission. And yet, the struggle against apartheid dominated the church's agenda for a very long time, and the events from 1990 onwards shaped the church's response as a missionary entity. The debates in the ecumenical structures, be they at regional or national level, dominated the debates within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa whose membership also engaged in these debates, albeit at a more fundamental level.

During the years of struggle against apartheid the church in South Africa found that consolidated action was the only credible means of challenging the system. This included finding a common mission and thereby a common interpretation that shaped the missionary focus. It is accepted that apartheid formed a common enemy around which the Church could rally. However, it must further be stated that whilst the Church was seen to be involved in the struggle against apartheid, it did not necessarily mean that everyone in the Church supported the church's stance. There were indeed many outspoken churches which disagreed quite vehemently with the church leaders. But this did not deter the church from condemning the system of apartheid nor did it desist from seeking a peaceful transition to democracy.

Molefe Tsele (2001: 4), in his address as General Secretary of the SACC, said at the Conference of the SACC in 2001,

We need to correct this misrepresentation of history which says we as Churches were the champions of the struggle.

Allan Boesak addressing a Conference held at UWC in 2003 said,

The English speaking churches, although the majority of their membership was black, were essentially *white* churches. They, under the tutelage of their white leadership, were firmly and comfortably ensconced in the warmth of the ruling establishment, very much aware of the "white man's burden".

Boesak (2003) says further,

In short, the church asked of the government what, *as a white church*, it thought black people needed or wanted, or deserved. But there was no thought of fundamental justice, of full and meaningful participation that would mean black majority rule. The protest was always within the boundaries of “white guardianship” and the need for white supremacy.

This correction is crucial to our understanding that a missionary agenda was forced upon the Church, including the Methodist Church, but that most churches were still giving credence to the apartheid regime through its structural composition and the way in which it administered its affairs. There was a loud cry, during the TRC process, for a similar process to be held within the Church so that the truth of the Church’s collusion with apartheid could be revealed and excised. It is true that most, if not all of the member churches of the ecumenical movement, had regularly decried and condemned the apartheid policies, and challenged the government of the day through its resolutions passed at its gatherings, yet it did not do nearly as much as it ought to have to challenge in a very real sense the apartheid system.

Boesak further states,

We allowed our skewed society values to dictate our actions. We paid unequal stipends to our ministers. We trained our ministers incorrectly and in most cases we did not equip our ministers for the struggle against apartheid. We stationed our ministers racially ensuring that both black and white congregations were locked into their own separate cultural worlds instead of allowing them to be informed by one another. For a long time we did not recognise black leadership in our midst (Boesak 2003: 5).

### **3.6 The Methodist Church of Southern Africa and ecumenical statements in South Africa**

In addressing the relationship between the Methodist Church and the statements emanating from the ecumenical movement we need to understand and answer why the Methodist Church has accepted the ecumenical statements. It is also important that we understand where these statements came from as well as what the statements sought to respond to or address.

The Methodist Church of *Southern Africa* stated at the Conference in 2001,

We continued to examine our life in co-operation with the other churches in the witness of the SACC and later in the work of the Rustenberg Declaration.

This statement shows an ongoing commitment of the Methodist Church to ecumenism and its ecumenical partners. It is also clear that there is an acknowledgement of the role ecumenism has played and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had engaged in the debates on the statements issued by the ecumenical movement. At the same time there is evidence that the significant moments in the life of the ecumenical church impacted directly on the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and undoubtedly influenced its missionary focus.

While acknowledging its historical participation in the ecumenical movement in South Africa during the years of struggle against apartheid, in post-apartheid South Africa the Methodist Church of Southern Africa has not shown the same commitment to ecumenical participation as it did previously. The discussions and debates at its Synods and Conferences reflected more on its internal structures than on building stronger ecumenical ties with its ecumenical partners.

In the development of its mission strategies, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa did not actively strive towards a more inclusive approach to mission to build togetherness with other churches, but rather focused on its own needs and denominational issues.

While it affirmed its ecumenical commitment through statements adopted at its Synods and Conferences, in practice it did not give expression to this commitment by actively working towards togetherness with other churches. Nor did it seek to build partnerships with other churches to give credence to the notion of togetherness.

## **Chapter 4: The Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1980 to 1993**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter will provide a brief historical overview of the understanding of mission in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1980 to 1993. In 1980, in response to the increasing repression by the apartheid government, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, as a member of the ecumenical movement in South Africa, began a wide consultative process which culminated in a conference held in 1981 called Obedience 81. In 1993 it held its second consultative conference, called Convocation to a Journey to a New Land. This consultative process was to shape the missionary focus of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in an attempt to make it relevant to the new demands of a democratic dispensation which was to commence in 1994.

The second section (4.2) will give a brief historical overview of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from its birth in South Africa leading to the convocation held in 1995 (chapter 5). The third section (4.3) will outline some of major missionary programmes of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa between 1980 and 1993.

### **4.2 A brief history of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa up to 1993**

This section will give a brief historical overview of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa reflecting its history from the time of arrival of the first British settlers to the Conference held in 1993.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa, an English-speaking Protestant church, came into existence in the 1800's following the arrival of British garrisons which were stationed at the Cape. Initially they received pastoral care from the mother church in England, but it soon became apparent that there was a missionary field. To that end missionaries were sent to the Cape by, among others, the London Missionary Society. Work was soon started among the indigenous peoples in the Cape. Rev Barnabas Shaw started work in Namaqualand where the first church was planted at Lilyfontain. In the Eastern Cape Rev William Shaw did sterling work among the Xhosa people and the first church was planted at Wesleyville north of

Grahamstown following the conversion of Chief Kama of the Ciskei people. Soon the Methodist Church spread throughout Southern Africa and in 1962 the Methodist Church of Southern Africa came into being.

Methodism came to South Africa with the soldiers of the British garrison stationed at the Cape in the first years of the nineteenth century. It became more firmly established with the arrival of the 1820 settlers, many of whom were Methodists (Meaker 1985: 192).

The Eastern Cape was seen as an integral area for mission when the first mission station was established following the conversion of Chief Kama. This growth was defined as missionary outreach and expansion and soon spread into neighbouring southern African countries like Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, and Botswana (Meaker 1985: 192).

These countries later became part of the Methodist Church of South Africa who, after gaining its independence from its mother church in Britain, established the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in 1962 embracing all the countries within and adjacent to the borders of South Africa (Minutes of Conference 1962). This independence meant it was now able to operate within its own Conference and allowed it to join the World Methodist Conference (WMC).



#### **4.3 The missionary policy of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1980 – 1993**

The missionary focus of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was largely programme-driven and following the Obedience 81 Conference, it was intended to address issues within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in particular but often necessitated by socio-political issues of the day.

At the Obedience 81 Conference, Bill Meaker, in an address on mission, said:

We are deeply indebted to Rev. Dr Alan Walker for his reminder to us last year that there are certain basic and fundamental doctrines of Methodism to which we must be true, and to which we must return if we are to fulfill the Mission of our Church. He analysed these so well.

- (i) The centrality of conversion in the Christian life



- (ii) A passion for souls (i.e. a soul must not be viewed apart from the whole person)
- (iii) Disciplining and teaching our people
- (iv) Holiness and Christian perfection
- (v) Social consciousness.

Our Mission as a church needs to take these emphases seriously. We have a rich heritage as Methodists and we can be proud of our balanced theological foundations. We have managed, I believe, to maintain the delicate balance between participation in the riches of salvation and worship of God on the one hand, and keeping both feet firmly on the ground on the other (1981).

This view by Meaker is indicative of the prevailing thought and praxis within the Methodist Church in 1981 that virtually denied the need for a social awareness, but saw mission as something the church did to others and also embraced the concept of worship as mission. While the leadership of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa declared its rejection of the apartheid government's policies, it is also a fact that the oppressor was also Christian and that they believed in the rightness (and indeed the righteousness) of their actions, and that their views, both theologically and practically, was supported by sections within the church.

For the Methodist Church, mission was indubitably linked to its endeavours to encourage unity within its structures and membership. As such, its mission policy underlined this focus. As stated in the Minutes of Conference (1985: 76),

The Conference declares 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, and that this be the general basis of our missionary policy.<sup>6</sup>

This missionary policy also affirms the Methodist Church's commitment to seeking an end to apartheid which was intended to divide the people.

#### **4.4 The structure of the Methodist Church from 1980 to 1993**

From 1980 to 1993 the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had a structure based very closely on the British Methodist Conference model. The over-arching impact of the church's struggle against apartheid to some extent mandated the Methodist

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<sup>6</sup> This missionary policy was reaffirmed each year by the Annual Conference.

Church of Southern Africa to place its emphasis on bringing an end to apartheid. Consequently, the structures were changed only marginally with the church seeking to enforce its mission focus on issues that directly affected people's lives.

The local congregation or parish is known within Methodist terminology as a *Society*. A number of societies within a geographic location are known as a *Circuit*. A number of circuits within a specific region are called a *District*. There are twelve Districts that are collectively known as the *Connexion*, the national structure of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

At national (connexional) level there are specific departments which were tasked with ensuring the Church's participation in a variety of ministries. These departments were replicated at district level and were governed by a small committee elected at the annual synod. They were managed by both a ministerial secretary as well as a lay secretary. However, these departments were largely administrative in function and did not necessarily influence the missionary task of the church.

#### **4.5. Missionary programmes that emphasised the church's mission**

As stated at almost every Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa also had to focus on what was narrowly defined as the spiritual focus of the church. Recognising the limitations placed on the definition of mission as often adopted by the church (in this case mission being equated with evangelism) the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had very specific programmes which sought to underpin its missionary approach to the work of the church.

In the following section I will describe some of the significant missionary programmes that were implemented by the Methodist Church during the period under consideration.

##### **4.5.1 Lay Witness Mission**

This was a mission programme that had been a part of the Methodist Church for decades. Essentially it was a mission programme that was run over a weekend and was completely under the leadership and implementation of laypersons. This programme was highly evangelical in nature and was intended to secure a

commitment (conversion) from those who attended the various services. Subsequent to 1995 the lay witness mission programme had lost some of its effectiveness and ministry.

#### 4.5.2 *Malihambe Home Mission Programme*

This programme was an entirely indigenous and exclusive mission tool that was developed and implemented throughout the Methodist Church. It was also intended to enable the local church to embark on mission and required lengthy preparation with a four-day mission focus with a structured follow-up programme to consolidate the mission focus of over the four days. Whilst evangelical in focus, the programme also endeavoured to empower the local laity who were required to play a crucial role in the mission preparation, implementation and follow-up work. In a resolution adopted at the Methodist Conference of 1986 (1986: 99), the church states,

Conference affirms the Malihambe Home Mission Programme as a bold attempt by the Mission Department to help local Societies<sup>7</sup> discover anew for themselves Christ's imperative for mission and evangelism in Southern Africa, and commends the Programme to Circuits and Societies throughout the Connexion.

#### 4.5.3 *Obedience 81*

As the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, along with its ecumenical partners, grappled with a missionary focus to challenge the apartheid government, there arose a need within its structures to respond to the apartheid policies. From these humble beginnings the seed germinated that culminated in the convening of a Conference of Methodist people from across the Connexion, laity as well as clergy, to prayerfully and in dialogue, struggle together to seek God's guidance for the Methodist community in South Africa (and indeed Southern Africa) in a time of crisis. The Conference, named *Obedience 81*, because of the year of its convening as well as the desire and commitment of Methodists from all walks of life to be obedient to the prophetic voice that would emerge from this Conference, was a milestone in the life and ministry of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa at the time. It was a tremendous forward-looking step that was controversial in its condemnation of apartheid, but was also extremely vital in establishing the need for Methodists to get

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<sup>7</sup> The local congregation or parish is known within Methodist terminology as a *Society*. A number of societies within a geographic location are known as a *Circuit*. A number of circuits within a specific region are called a *District*. There are twelve Districts who collectively are known as the *Connexion*, the national structure of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

to know one another across racial and cultural divides and thereby constitute a direct challenge to the apartheid laws and goals of the time. Noting that this Conference took place when the country's security forces had become more militant and received the support of the government of the day through legislation as well as financing, this Conference brought into sharp focus the need for reconciliation, and for the Catholic Church to play a critical and pivotal role in bringing people together so that apartheid could be challenged as well as opening people's eyes to the reality of the suffering of the oppressed people in South Africa.

This Conference was a genuine attempt at engaging the local congregation in mission, and was probably an important forerunner to the Journey to a New Land process that would take place several years later. However, this missionary focus was to be offered on a cross-cultural basis, or alternatively a cross-racial basis. John Tooke, in a paper aimed at equipping participants to the Conference in this new form of mission, refers to various groups that must be reached, and each group requires a different strategy. He says,

Different kinds of people require different kinds of evangelistic outreach:

- E-O No barriers to this person's coming to faith in Jesus Christ. This person is already "in the church", though not necessarily "in Christ".
- E-1 No cultural or language barrier here, but the person is outside the church.
- E-2 Outside the church and already IN another cultural/religious setting.
- E-3 Outside the church, in another culture AND separated by language etc.  
(Unpublished paper, 1981).

This clearly shows the Methodist Church already in 1981 beginning to recognize the need for an indigenous approach to mission and evangelisation. This is crucial since it also opens the door to recognizing the role that culture and language play in proclamation of the gospel.

At the Obedience 81 Conference Bill Meaker (1981: 5) commented on the subject of mission:

What then is the mission of the Church? Obviously there are a great number of different opinions on the subject. In order to get a little deeper into the problem let me begin by stating two opposing and in a sense rather extreme views, and I must ask to be forgiven if I have to generalize.

- (a) The older more traditional view is that mission has to do with such things as evangelism, preaching, missions, missionaries, evangelistic programmes, etc. In other words the emphasis is on verbal proclamation of the Word. The gospel is to be preached, in one way or another, so that all men everywhere might turn away from their sin and be saved. Social awareness in the form of education and hospitals or hand-outs of food and clothing is sometimes a part of this method insofar as it provides a platform for evangelism. I should like to refer to this as the “evangelical” view.
- (b) The “ecumenical view”, for want of a better term, is rather different. Here there is a conscious turning away from verbal proclamation because God is already out there and at work in His world. He is to be seen in the cutting edge of change and in all forms of revolution and reform of Society. God is alive and works outside the church to produce “shalom” (a Hebrew word for peace, justice and prosperity of God). This mission of the church therefore is simply to point to God who is at work in this process. Mission is seen in terms of dialogue, liberation of the oppressed and the coloured races, industrial relations, rural development, etc. And since God is at work in the world, the world provides the agenda for the Church.

What is insightful, especially in his second model of mission, is that, as a white person, he sees mission as being to blacks and coloureds, and those of other languages and cultures. Thus, it is still a European model of mission to the *uncivilised* non-Europeans. It is a very narrow interpretation, almost simplistic, but it certainly reflects the prevailing missionary approach of much of the Methodist Church of the time. Meaker (1981: 7) goes further and says, in seeking to differentiate between the evangelical and ecumenical perspective on mission:

The evangelical stance takes seriously the need to proclaim the redemptive nature of God to a fallen world, but it does not always properly recognize that God is bigger than the Church. It tends to see the world as a place into which evangelical “raids” have to be made from time to time. The ecumenical view on the other hand, whilst it takes seriously the problems of the world and recognises the work of God on a broader front, nevertheless has a tendency to rather naively regard all revolution and social reform as movements of the activity of God. Mission cannot be equated with everything God is doing in the world, nor is Biblical “Shalom” to be simply identified with social renewal. The evangelicals may fail to take social concern seriously, but equally the ecumenicals fail in their attitude to the fallen and sinful nature of man, nor do they leave much room for evangelism.

This simplistic analysis of mission is precisely why the debates and divisions between evangelicals and ecumenicals, as Meaker puts it, remains a stark reality even today. It is also typical of the attitudes of whites in the struggle years who took a dim view of ecumenism, seeing it as counter to the missionary task and purpose of the church. He does state later that mission includes both evangelism and social concern, not either/or, but both/and. Nevertheless, there is an urgency and a priority for evangelism and conversion (Meaker 1981).

Jim Wallis, quoted in Guma (1995: 148), shares a moving account of a former gang member who addressed a group of USA clergy bringing a different perspective on mission: an understanding of mission born from experience. A young gang member, Andre, had committed his life to Jesus following a summit between rival gangs and churches. Andre said to the gathering of clergy, 'You are pastors and Bishops. Since I'm a new Christian you are going to have to help me get some things right. Let me see if I've got this right. Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Is that right?' All the pastors nodded their heads saying, 'Yes my son.' He replied, 'But Jesus dwelt in the valley with the pimps and the hookers and the gangsters like me. Is that right?' And the pastors told him once again he was right. Andre went on: 'But being the Son of God, he could have stayed in the suburbs. Is that right?' Once again the pastors acknowledged that he was right. Andre said, 'But he dwelt in the valley! Is the church not supposed to do what Jesus did? Is the Church not supposed to be in the valley?' And the pastors, who were staring at their shoes by this point, responded, 'Yes, that's right.' Mac Charles Jones turned to me and said, 'Now that is liberation theology!'

This anecdote is crucial in understanding how the church has moved away from its primary task of being among the people. It reflects instead a tendency to be more concerned about its image in broader society and its financial survival. It could be seen as an indictment on the church that it appears to be more concerned with protecting its material possessions, like buildings, etc. than the church should be about proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

#### *4.5.4 Faith and Life (1986-1996)*

One of the needs that were identified at *Obedience 81* was that of educating Methodists to understand the issues from a biblical and theological perspective as



well as to raise the issues that needed to be confronted. This need for Christian education also highlighted the need for a correction of the distorted theology of the reformed churches and theologians who had given a theological grounding for the apartheid policies. It was imperative that an alternative theology be developed that would enable the laity (and in some instances also the clergy) to see the heresy of apartheid through sound theological and doctrinal teaching and thereby to begin the process of working towards the dismantling of apartheid and all its structures that dehumanised and in fact demonised the greater majority of South Africans who had the “misfortune” of being born black. This programme did not focus exclusively on raising the awareness of apartheid and its consequences, but also developed the spirituality of the Methodist people.

At the Conference of 1986, the following resolution was adopted:

The purpose of the Programme [Faith and Life Programme] is to provide a programme of Christian Education for all our members which will help them grow to greater levels of Christian maturity by:

- Deepening their commitment to and relationship with Jesus Christ our Lord;
- Improving their understanding of the Christian Faith and how to implement it in a Southern Africa context;
- Encouraging a deeper knowledge of understanding of the Bible and its relationship to life;
- Developing a greater understanding of and commitment to service, unity, evangelism, gifts and giving and obedience;
- Enabling them to become more informed about our Methodist roots, traditions, and current practice, and to discern their relevance to our time (1996:94).

#### *4.5.5 Consultation on Methodist Theology*

In 1988 a Conference was convened to address the theological issues with which people were grappling. Although this was not intended to be a theological discourse on the South African political and social issues, some of the speakers would inevitably raise these issues in their papers. However, the Forum sought to raise an awareness of the need for sound theological interpretation and hermeneutics in the light of South Africa’s issues. It is interesting that the Consultation tried to initiate discussions on theological issues as it prepared the way for a post-apartheid South



Africa whilst still continuing to grapple with the struggle against apartheid and social inequities.

#### 4.5.6 *Holy Spirit Conference (1991)*

As Methodists were grappling with the social and political issues of the day that had culminated in the momentous decisions of 1990, there arose a need for a reawakening and rekindling of the spiritual life of the people called Methodists. To this end it was decided that a *Holy Spirit Conference* would be convened in Cape Town in 1991. This Conference was remarkable in that it revealed the need for a deepening spirituality that would underscore the *Journey to a New Land* some years later. It was also revealing in the sense that it showed the propensity for Christians to seek an inner spiritual nourishment and escape from the struggles that confronted them on a daily basis. This was crucial in order to demonstrate the later tendencies for Christians to focus on a spirituality that was almost devoid of a social context and focus. Whilst in this instance the focus is on the Methodist Church, it was certainly a reflection of the greater ecumenical movement membership, and in particular the English-speaking Christians, to hide behind a spirituality that was very inward looking. Indeed, this inward-looking tendency was manifested also during the apartheid years when many Christians sought to escape confronting the evil system through a denial of its existence and consequences by claiming that all Christians had to abide by Romans 13.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.5.7 *Indigenous Evangelism Conference*

At the Conference of 1989, the Conference resolved that the Methodist Church should engage in mission for the 1990's. It states in Minutes of Conference (1989: 96),

The Conference further urges the Department<sup>9</sup> and Circuits to begin planning for evangelism in the 90's.

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<sup>8</sup> This was to emerge even more starkly in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process when there was a measure of denial that anyone ever supported or even realized the consequences of apartheid. This prompted the black members of several Protestant churches to call for a TRC for the Church so that Christians could be given the opportunity to tell their stories of how they had experienced the effects and implementations of apartheid by their own Church denominations and people.

<sup>9</sup> The Methodist Church had divided its various sections into Department that were regulated at both connexional as well as district level. These Departments included the Missionary, Christian Citizenship, Education, and Education for Ministry, and Youth Departments.

In 1991 the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, realising that its evangelism models were based on the English (and to some extent, the American) models of evangelism, convened a Conference to examine and create indigenous models of evangelism. This Conference, which had representatives from all the Districts in the Connexion, was an excellent vehicle for highlighting the need for the Southern African church to develop models of church and mission that were unique to its context. To this end, Bosch's (1991: 355) emerging paradigm for mission is reflected in the attempts by the Methodist Church to respond to the needs of the day by seeking to determine an indigenous model for evangelisation and mission which was relevant to the needs of context.

This Conference was convened under the auspices of the Institute of World Evangelism. Although the focus was on developing indigenous evangelism models for South Africa, there were representatives from overseas who made significant contributions to the proceedings.

As the Minutes of Conference (1991:99) states,

We thank God for this example of the Church pointing the way forward for the future of Southern Africa in which the love of God will triumph over human divisions and give hope for a great future for the whole region and the whole continent of Africa.<sup>10</sup>

In seeking to define the context in which this Conference took place, the Bishops, through their statement, said:

We have again become painfully aware of the context in which we are to evangelise.

1. Human brokenness through injustice, greed, suspicion and violence – which is institutional, political and criminal. We believe that restitution and empowerment of the oppressed needs to be seriously addressed.

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<sup>10</sup> Recognising that South Africa dominated the proceedings through sheer numbers, it was inevitable that the focus would be on the problems South Africans were grappling with (as opposed to the problems of neighbouring countries who formed part of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa). It is also crucial to note that the concept and notion of evangelism was not confined or restricted to conversion only, but was seen as holistic in that it addressed all aspects of human existence, and not only a narrowly-defined spirituality. This is as a result of our understanding that we cannot escape the reality of living in the world and that it is part of our mission to transform the world in which we live. However, we also cannot deny the fact that South Africa's problems and struggles affected all of the regions and even beyond the Southern African region to the rest of Africa. At the same time, South Africa was seeking to be integrated into Africa, especially following the events of February 1990 and later. Consequently, the Conference endeavoured to include representatives from Southern Africa.

2. Personal deprivations as seen in widespread and endemic poverty, homelessness, unemployment and disease; the spectre of AIDS looms over us all.
3. The serious assault of Islam and the insidious attraction of the Occult, sects and Satanism particularly to our young people.
4. Rapid political changes bringing hope for some but for others a real sense of despair at the failure of initial political expectations (1991:99).

Again, at the end of the Conference, the Secretaries from the various Districts who attended the Conference were appointed to take the process further within their own District and as such to indigenise evangelism within their District. Flowing from the Mission Secretaries of Africa South Statement, some of the far-reaching decisions and commitments included the recognition for training of clergy and laity on evangelisation, sharing of indigenous models of evangelisation, and the promotion of indigenous styles of worship ( Mission Secretaries Report 1991: 103):

#### 4.5.8 *Geographic / Integrating Circuits*

In the 1980's the Methodist Church Conferences adopted and pursued a radical programme called *Geographic Circuits* as part of its mission focus for the Church. This programme was a direct challenge to the apartheid government's programme of forced separation. The principle was for Methodist societies and circuits who were geographically aligned to form a new circuit that included people of various population groups (as defined by the then South African constitution). This programme received relative support. Only in 1993 did the Methodist Church take the bold decision to compel the formation of geographic circuits. By this time the name had changed to *integrating circuits*. This initiative is laudable as it reflected the Methodist Church's commitment to confronting and changing the racist past. At the Conference of 1982, seeking to concretise the Methodist Church's response on racism, the following resolution on *Integrating Circuits* was adopted:

The Conference considers that a necessary expression of our strategy for mission is the uniting of our people in multi-racial Circuits and Societies. The Conference therefore resolves:

- (i) that ministers and laity in neighbouring Circuits either group themselves or be grouped by the District Chairman into regional teams, meeting regularly

for co-ordination of effort and mutual assistance, under the general direction of the District Chairman;

- (ii) that District Synods initiate combined meetings of members of our three women's organisations at regional and Circuit levels and that men's and youth organisations be similarly drawn together;
- (iii) that District Local Preachers' organisations work towards racial integration;
- (iv) that inter-racial contact of our members be further promoted by regular meetings of people from neighbouring Circuits of different racial groups;
- (v) that Liaison officers be regularly exchanged between Quarterly Meetings of such Circuits. District Chairmen are asked to bring this to the notice of Circuits;
- (vi) that District Synods seek to re-define Circuit boundaries on a geographical rather than a racial basis (1982:96-96).

This resolution demonstrated the commitment of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to acknowledge and address the racially divided circuits. This process called for churches to engage in deliberate actions to bring about an end to the racial divisions within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and its acquiescence to the laws of the apartheid state which had brought about the divisions within the church.

#### *4.5.9 Vanguard Mission Programme*

This programme was developed by the Methodist Church to enable mission and evangelism to take place in newly established areas. It was specifically focused on mission and church planting in informal housing areas, at the time known as squatter camps. Whilst the major focus was on financial assistance, it did signify a bold initiative of the Methodist Church to be proactive in church planting and mission in hitherto unchurched areas. There was, and still is, a popular statement within the Methodist Church that 'we arrive breathless on the scene long after everyone else is established.'<sup>11</sup> The Vanguard Mission Programme was an attempt by the Methodist Church to defeat that negative sentiment.

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<sup>11</sup> This sentiment implies that the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was always reactionary in its missionary approach. As new housing areas were developed while other churches had already embarked on church planting the Methodist Church was almost always delayed in church planting in these areas

The goals it aspired to are included in the expanded definition of a Vanguard Mission:

An evangelistic thrust with the express purpose of reaching the unreached for Christ;

A serving/caring thrust to the poor, aged, hungry and sick where such needs are not, or cannot, be serviced by an existing Church, especially in the vast resettlement areas in our land;

A reconciling thrust, especially where such ministry focuses on overcoming the negative effects of apartheid in our Society and the Church” (Minutes of Conference 1997: 68).

From this definition, it becomes clear that the Methodist Church was aware of the effects of apartheid on the people and had developed programmes to address them. It is also clear that these programmes were developed as a consequence of the unique problems it had to confront, problems that were created out of apartheid. However, this was more than just a European form of evangelism, but was rather a mission programme that looked at all the presented needs and addressed them through such programmes as Vanguard Missions. It is also important to note that the greater majority of Vanguard Missions were located within the black (including coloured and Indian) churches.

The programmes adopted by the Methodist Church to define its missionary focus reflect an internal tendency only. There appears to be no attempt to embrace the ecumenical paradigm which Bosch identifies. Indeed, the missionary programmes were geared towards the Methodist community only, even though they could have been of value to the ecumenical movement.

The emerging paradigm that Bosch (1991: 355) identifies is one that embraces togetherness. In other words, the concept of ecumenism, of being the church together, in shared mission and ministry, is crucial to the building of the missionary task of the church. It also means that denominationalism, while not being totally disregarded, must make way for ecumenical relationships that extend beyond mere statements on a common issue.

This new paradigm has far-reaching consequences for the church. This new paradigm dispenses with the objectification of nature and humans open to exploitation.



## **Chapter 5: The Journey to a New Land process from 1993 to 1995**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I will describe the Journey to a New Land process that took place from 1993 and culminated in the convocation held at Benoni in 1995 where sweeping changes were adopted by the broader representation of Methodists who attended the Convocation. This process led to a renewed understanding of the missionary focus of the Methodist Church so that it could be relevant for South Africa after the birth of democracy. During the struggle against apartheid the Methodist Church of Southern Africa focused on bringing an end to this unjust system and heresy. With the release of the political detainees and the unbanning of the liberation movements the role of seeking political freedom now principally fell on the 'professional' politicians. The birth of democracy in 1994 was a pivotal moment for South Africa and indeed the church as well. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa had already in 1991 identified a need to relocate the missionary focus of the church in a democratic dispensation. This gave rise to the notion of a broad-based consultative process to define the mission of the church. From this was born the Journey to a New Land.

In the next section (5.2) I will describe the process from the inception of the idea of the Journey to a New Land until the Convocation in 1995. The next section (5.3) I will outline the decisions taken in 1995. The fourth section (5.4) will assess the impact the Journey to a New Land process made on the missionary focus of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa until 2000. The final section (5.5) will assess to what extent the Journey to a New Land had reflected the emerging ecumenical paradigm postulated by Bosch.

### **5.2 The inception of the Journey to a New Land**

In using the Journey to a New Land model of broad-based consultation the Methodist Church of Southern Africa set out to be more relevant in its mission by addressing the new challenges that emerged in the wake of a new democratic dispensation that now confronted the Church and society in general.

The Conference of 1992 states,



Our Bible Studies reminded us of what we need in order to love in a transforming way. Our proposed Journey to a New Land Convocation will help us develop an obedient response to the challenges of being the Church in a changing sub-continent (1992: 437).

### **a) The motivation for the journey**

The Journey to a New Land Convocation began on 23 September 1993 when more than 400 Methodists from all ranks and corners gathered in Benoni. This journey had begun two years earlier when the 1991 Conference debated the need for a radical transformation process to set the course for a new era. As Peter Storey (1995:1) says,

Speakers recalled that a decade before, a great gathering of Methodists called 'Obedience '81' had been crucial to the church's witness in the darkest days of Apartheid. They argued that a similar assembly should be called to set the course for a new era.

### **b) The process outlined**

From the opening worship, which reflected the various cultures and worship styles within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, a message was sent out that this was to be a truly inclusive event, blending the cultures of Southern Africa into a celebration of togetherness. This journey also reflected a two-pronged process. There would be the 'journey inward', which was to be an introspective approach that underlined the spiritual dimension of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa followed by the 'journey outward' which endeavoured to concretise the convocation through practical ministry.

Peter Storey (1995: 5) comments,

The Convocation was more than an exercise in introspection: it needed to identify the areas of *outward ministry* to which God was now calling the Church. For more than forty years the priorities of Methodism in Southern Africa had been determined by the need to resist Apartheid. This struggle was coming to an end, leaving a deeply wounded society. The time had come to identify the worst wounds and minister to them. Was it possible to find a unified vision of ministry which could engage the energies of all Methodists for the healing of the land?"

Since 1994, the deeply divided South African society now had to engage in a process of healing. With the advent of democracy it had become painfully clear that the hurts and scars of the apartheid era were still a long way from healing.

Whereas the church had defined its missionary focus on fighting the injustice of the apartheid system, in the new dispensation there was the reality of healing the wounds of the past and this was perceived as being critical to the church's missionary focus in the new democratic dispensation. The need to define its missionary focus so that it was relevant to the needs of society formed the underlying motivation for the process leading up to the Convocation.

### **5.3 The 1993 Convocation**

The Convocation held in 1993 was the culmination of a process in which a very broad representation of Methodists came together in Linden, Johannesburg. At this convocation, which was much broader and more representative than the traditional Annual Conference, the outcomes of the process were debated and decisions were taken which were then referred to the Conference for ratification. The convocation was characterised by an emphasis on a broad representation of laity and it was decided that there would be a ratio of 3 lay persons for every minister. The intention was to ensure that the interests and sentiments of the laity were adequately captured. It was in a sense a direct challenge to the perceived idea that clergy dominated the mission focus of the church.

#### **a) Outcomes following the process**

In the light of the challenge extended to the wider church to participate in defining the issues and needs confronting the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and its membership, there was a muted expectation that the response would be negligible. This was further supported by the fact that the initial journey process had to be aborted in 1992 when there was virtually no support for the process. Peter Storey (1995: 1) states,

The Biblical paradigm of the Exodus from slavery to freedom inspired the theme '*Journey to the New Land*' and in the following months a programme was finalized, speakers engaged, a venue secured and careful formulae worked out to attain maximum representation from all constituencies within the Church.

The only problem was that *nobody seemed interested!* Reports from the 12 Districts across Southern Africa revealed a poor response. A mood of cynicism and apathy was reflected back to the organizers and suddenly the entire journey was in jeopardy.

This poor response generally reflected the way in which the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had previously approached mission: from the top down. The Connexional departments would determine the missionary focus and then pass this down to the lower structures that would be required to implement it.

Peter Storey (1995: 1) writes,

*Then came the message that made the difference. The Black Methodist Consultation (BMC) had met and given a thumbs-down, not because they opposed the gathering, but because they questioned the process through which it was coming about. Their message was blunt: 'If our people are to really own what comes out of this, stop planning from the top-down. Let the people themselves write the agenda – then it will be their journey'.*

By meeting in the middle of the Annual Conference, the model of using workshops proved to be an overwhelming success, to the point where the organisers were unable to meet their own commitment (Storey 1995: 19).

In the process adopted for the journey to a new land it was agreed that it would be an ongoing process. The response to this process overwhelmed the organisers and gave proof that the missionary focus of the church was not the preserve of the professional clergy only but was to include the laity as well. It also emphasised the need for the recognition of the inclusive participation of the whole church in ensuring that the new missionary focus was both influenced, and accepted, by the broader church.

#### **b) Six “Pillars” defining the new mission**

Having studied all the relevant inputs and submissions received from across the connexion, the Continuation Committee recommended to the Conference that, after the Convocation in 1995, all the submissions and subsequent discussions had led them to develop what they defined as the “Six Calls” on which the Journey to a New Land would be based, at least the consolidation of the journey principles. These pillars are:

The first is for deepened spirituality for all our people in the life of our church

The second is that the life and work of the church be directed towards God's mission rather than maintenance

The third is that we rediscover 'every member ministry', or 'the priesthood of all believers'.

The fourth is for us to truly express what it means 'to be one so that the world may believe'.

The fifth calls us to re-emphasise servant-leadership and discernment as our model for leadership and decision-making.

The sixth is for us to set the ordained Ministers free for their primary vocation of preaching, teaching and spiritual guidance (1996:4).

The "Six Pillars" became the basis on which the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was to develop its missionary strategy particularly at local parish level, to move from its previous propensity for maintenance to become a church that is mission-oriented. Consequently, it was felt very strongly that the Church should pursue the engagement of the ordinary member to become an active participant in mission.

Trevor Hudson, a Methodist minister was invited to do the daily Bible studies at the Convocation. In what was a very radical decision, Hudson decided not to attend any of the sessions so that his Bible studies would not be influenced by, or seek to respond to, any of the issues raised each day. Instead he chose to let the Holy Spirit guide his insights so that he was able to give each day a fresh impetus. Storey (1995: 18) states,

Here was a doctrine of the church as a *listening, Christ-centred, empowering community*. Standing back from the intensity of the *Journey* experience, Trevor Hudson was giving Biblical authenticity to the process the people were discovering. The final words of his third Bible study could have been a summing up of what so many were discovering: 'There is nothing like the testimony of a lame person who can now walk'.

### **c) From 'maintenance' to mission**

After lengthy self-examination, and seeking to hold true to the six calls that were derived from the Convocation, there was unanimous agreement and consensus that the Church should move from maintenance to mission. It is also interesting that

many protestant churches had taken similar decisions at their conferences, synods and assemblies, and all more or less during the same period. What this meant was that the Methodist Church should pursue a new focus of engaging in mission and move decidedly away from the former structures that were essentially reporting structures to a new approach of pursuing mission.

This new approach also required the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to look at issues, both national and local, and to determine a relevant response to each issue.

In his book, *The Next Step* (1996), Ross Olivier writes about mission,

**Mission must determine structure.**

Present structures are based on a secular (not New Testament) institutional (Parliamentary) model rather than dynamic mission priorities. Church government must be re-invented, offering more authentic paradigms for doing mission.

**Mission must not be confused with management.**

Present structures are management-oriented and do not free the Church for mission.

**Mission thinks globally but acts locally.**

Leadership and decision-making must be as close to local level as possible without losing the advantages of connexionality.

**Leadership requires exercise of appropriate authority but not abuse of power.**

Servant leadership is not weak, but it is accountable at all levels.

**Accountability and transparency must be cornerstones of our Church's life** (1996:6-7).

The consultative approach adopted for the Journey to a New Land, led to a renewed understanding of how the church should develop its missionary focus. It now introduced a new understanding of the tension between maintenance (management) and mission. Mission had to be more important than management with a renewed understanding of the role and place of leadership. While the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had previously used a top-down approach in determining its missionary focus, now mission was to be developed from bottom-up, and holding those in leadership accountable for the implementation of its mission focus.

#### **d) Inclusivity**

Recognising that previously the Departmental structures had essentially been reporting structures, and that defining mission had been almost the exclusive responsibility of the various structures of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, and all too frequently for the Connexional office to give direction and focus for mission at local level, the consultative and consensus approach would ensure that the local church would be more actively engaged in defining missionary focus.

The new concept of defining a parish-focused mission engages the local church to assist in defining the missionary focus of the church to its context. The essence of this process was for the whole church to collectively, at its annual general meeting, define the mission focus for the ensuing year. In determining the leadership, the whole congregation should assist in defining the job descriptions of the various leadership positions. Thereafter they should collectively define the characteristics of the person who would ideally fill that position. Thereafter, following prayerful consideration and being guided by the Holy Spirit, the ideal person would emerge naturally.

In reality, leadership positions have essentially become more of a power struggle in which the democratic process is of greater importance to those who are more pursuant of power than of engaging in mission. As a consequence, mission suffers and is left to the minister to define. This defies the sixth call of the Journey to a New Land, "The sixth is for us to set the ordained Minister free for their primary vocation of preaching teaching and spiritual guidance" (1996:4). Ministers had been considered as the leaders of the local church who had to assume responsibility for defining mission. What the Journey to a New Land sought to do was to make mission the responsibility of the broader leadership of the local church leaving the Minister free to take greater responsibility for preaching, teaching and pastoral work.

It is also contradictory of the third call of the Journey, being "that we rediscover 'every member ministry', or 'the priesthood of all believers'" (1996: 4). This pillar was intended for the laity in the local church to take greater responsibility for the missionary work of the church.

It would appear that the Methodist Church has clearly opted for a process of inclusivity in determining its missionary focus but that the local parish has yet to

realize the full potential for mission that it offers. A broad-based participative approach to defining the mission of the church would be in keeping with Bosch's assertion that mission is not the exclusive domain of a select group but involves everyone who would be participating in the missionary work (Bosch 1991: 373), and would enable the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to realize its potential for developing a new missionary focus, one that would be within the parameters as defined and postulated by Bosch.

#### *5.4 Conclusion*

There is no doubt that the process of the Journey to a New Land from its inception to the Convocation had realised a new approach – that of being inclusive and parish-driven as opposed to its former model of a top-down missionary focus. It is also significant that the process was embraced with so much vigour and that the Methodist Church had embarked on a course that would have an irrevocable influence on the way it developed its missionary focus.

However, while the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had radically altered its approach to developing its missionary focus, this new missionary tendency did not reflect an ecumenical commitment for Christian mission as the church tended, for example, to focus more on revisiting its structures, focused less on its ecumenical participation, made the local church more responsible for developing a mission strategy for its context, did not recognise and utilise the issues which offered an alternative unifying focal point to promote togetherness.



## **Chapter 6: Assessing the missionary focus of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa from 1995 to 2000**

This chapter will assess to what extent the missionary focus of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa embraced the emerging ecumenical paradigm shift postulated by mission following the implementation of the Journey to a New Land process that began in 1993 and concluded with the Convocation in 1995. Specifically, it will look at how the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's missionary focus had been developed and whether it reflected the emerging ecumenical paradigm as postulated by Bosch.

### **6.1 The Methodist Church after 1995**

The period after 1995, when the principles that were adopted at the Conference held at Linden, Johannesburg were implemented, saw tremendous tension developing in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. These changes had far-reaching consequences for the mission of the church, and yet, the fundamental question must remain: Were these changes merely structural or did they reflect the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's realization of the missionary challenges? Unfortunately it would appear that the laity perceived the new changes as being a democratisation of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, a perception which brought great tension between ordained clergy and laity. Whilst the Church had been adamant that the changes introduced in 1995 were not an attempt to democratise the Methodist Church of Southern Africa but rather to create a more inclusive approach to mission and for the development of mission at local level, the practice was different. Instead of creating a greater partnership between clergy and laity there was rather a deepening polarization between these two entities. As a consequence mission at local level was stunted rather than promoted. In some sectors of the Methodist Church there was open hostility and enmity between clergy and laity that resulted in stand-offs that retarded mission. A further consequence was that for some people within the church the inclusiveness was rather an opportunity to secure the election to leadership of people who were not interested in mission but rather in challenging the local minister. This period also saw the Methodist Church take bold initiatives in addressing the racial issues that it had avoided for so long. This included the

appointment of clergy in cross-cultural appointments (where possible) thereby challenging all its members to confront the racist past that had shaped the Methodist Church and indeed also within the ecumenical movement member churches.

### **6.1.1 Changes in the governance and structure of the MCSA**

In describing the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's new approach to missionary tendencies, Olivier (1996: 6) states,

**Mission is a result of call.**

It cannot be driven by Committees.

**No structure is sacrosanct.**

All can and should be regularly evaluated and improved if necessary.

Oliver's description of missionary tendency is crucial in understanding the renewed missionary strategy and focus of the Methodist Church. Previously it was the Connexional Missionary Department that determined mission, and was also the driving force behind the mission. However, in terms of the new approach to mission, it was the local church that was to determine mission priorities. In a sense, it was defining a new missionary approach. The new approach of mission not being driven by Committees seeks to emphasise that mission has to evolve from the local context and be assisted by the connexional committee.

A significant change that resulted from the Journey to a New Land process is that decision-making was now deferred to a variety of different structures. Significantly, the District was to assume a greater importance of driving mission at local level, especially with the demise of the various Connexional Committees and the emerging of a new single Connexional Department that embraced almost all of the previous Departments. The essence of this new approach was to ensure that mission was an all-inclusive process rather than just the preserve of one Department. Mission and service was seen as integrated and thus were to operate as one entity. Through this the Church would theoretically recognize its need for holistic mission.

With the emphasis on local parish mission, and with the new model of doing mission through call rather than structure, it seemed logical that a greater emphasis and accountability would be found at local and circuit level. However, this new process was also fraught with difficulties in that the Connexion now had less authority, in a

sense, of ensuring that the local churches were indeed engaged in mission and not merely maintenance. Accountability structures were definitely compromised in that reporting on mission had to be sacrificed under the new structure.

Olivier (1996: 28) states,

Nothing destroys enthusiasm quite as swiftly as meetings that are uninspiring, ineffective, unproductive or boring. Meetings of this sort are worse than poor stewardship; they are also a certain recipe for resentment, cynicism and ultimate withdrawal.

What the Church had failed in was to properly equip the local church and its leadership in effective leadership. There was an assumption that the people were skilled in ensuring that effective and productive meetings would enable and assist the process of decision-making and ownership of mission. Theoretically all was in place.

In describing the purpose of membership of the church Olivier (1996: 30) says,

Christian community is formed as the membership of a meeting expresses the life they share in Christ. When members become united in fellowship of love, truth, service, suffering and joy, they are more likely to discern the Spirit and reflect the will of God in their decision-making.

'The Church's call is to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to Himself (Basis of Union, Uniting Church of Australia)'.

The above sentiments, while being noble, had not found expression within the local context. There was a sentiment expressed by some clergy who felt somewhat threatened by the changes introduced and as a consequence seemed to resist implementing the changes even though these changes would have freed them to do ministry rather than maintenance. In addition, following informal discussion with some of the clergy it appeared that they were struggling with how to encourage the laity to participate in promoting and engaging in mission at the local parish level. However, it must also be pointed out that the greater majority of clergy did not receive adequate training in mission or in some cases no training at all. As a consequence, it is little wonder that in discussions with clergy there was concern

about how clergy were supposed to respond to the changes without adequate training to effectively implement the changes introduced by the Church. Even after the Journey process had been adopted and implemented, the Mission Department of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa offered very little by way of equipping and training to ensure that clergy were able to participate meaningfully in this new concept of doing mission through participation and consensus. This ultimately meant that the Church would continue to be a church focusing on matters of maintenance instead of on mission.

### **6.1.2 Decision-making processes**

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa contended that when there was a more participative and effective meeting strategy and structure, then the decisions made by that body would have greater impact on the mission and witness of the local church, or body making that decision. This required a radical rethink of the way meetings are to be conducted.

The principles or mechanics outlined the ideal concept of effective and purposeful meetings which should have enabled mission to be shaped even within the local church. These principles are:

#### **Clarify the objectives.**

For any meeting to be productive its members need to be clear about its purpose and objectives.

#### **Prioritise**

Ensure that most time is spent dealing with the most important matters.

#### **Agree on the agenda.**

The agenda is a map that gives direction to the meeting and should generally be followed.

#### **Establish procedures.**

Clarify whether the meeting will be conducted in a formal or informal manner. How are decisions going to be taken - by vote and formal majority, or by consensus?

#### **Avoid boredom.**

Focus on planning – meetings that are so occupied with ‘matters arising’ that there is no space for new business will soon cease to be meaningful.

### **Convert decisions into action**

Many meetings suffer because their good decisions and intentions are not implemented.

Any meeting which neglects to hold itself collectively or its members personally accountable for decisions that have been made soon becomes an exercise in futility.

### **Review and evaluate**

Feedback is a vital part of any meeting's work. It is a tool for measuring effectiveness, discovering unintended consequences, correcting mistakes, etc. (Olivier 1996:33-34).

This new approach of utilising the meeting as a structure for defining mission for the local church was intended to be more than a structure for reporting but rather for defining and developing effective strategies for mission. The approach was intended for the local church to engage in accountability and for revisiting strategies if these were found not to be effective tools for mission.

### **6.1.3 Synods**

In terms of the decisions taken at the Convocation, there was to be a greater devolution of responsibility for mission and service to the District synods. These bodies were now to appoint mission groups that would be determined by the Synods at its annual meetings and such groups would report to the District Executive and through them to Synod. The intention was for these mission groups to be focused and contextually relevant.

Again, Olivier (1996: 10) states,

As many functions as possible have been devolved to the Districts as they are much closer to Circuits and Societies, where most of the work of the Church gets done.

### **6.1.4 Triennial Conference**

It is interesting to note that the Conference first debated the concept of a Triennial Conference in 1989. However, it voted against such a concept. The Minutes of the Conference of that year (1989: 485) state,

After a great deal of debate, Conference turned away from the concept of a Triennial Conference, while acknowledging that the way in which Conference business is handled needs some streamlining. It was felt that issues of democracy and the

ability to respond adequately in a fast-changing country outweighed some of the financial and practical considerations.

However, one of the decisions taken by the Convocation in 1995 was indeed for a Triennial Conference to replace the Annual Conference. The structure and composition of the Triennial Conference would be very different to the Annual Conference. The whole notion of broader representation was intended to characterise the inclusivity that had shaped the Journey to a New Land process. Thus the first Triennial Conference was held in Durban in 1998. Olivier (1996: 9) captures this decision in his book when he says,

The annual Conference has been replaced by a 3-4 day triennial Conference which has direct representation from every Circuit and will be designed **to provide leadership and vision** for the Church. The primary work of the Conference is to engage in serious Bible Study, prayer, and listening to the voice of God.

## **6.2 The missionary focus of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa against Bosch's ecumenical paradigm**

This section will assess whether the Methodist Church's mission focus had reflected the ecumenical paradigm Bosch emphasised was crucial for the church after apartheid. It is also important to look at the relationship of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to its ecumenical partners and see whether this paradigm shift was reflected in that relationship as well.

### ***6.2.1 The Methodist Church of Southern Africa and ecumenism: Thought and practice***

The church in South Africa during the apartheid struggle years had found the need for consolidated action the only credible means of challenging the system. This included finding a common mission and thereby a common interpretation that shaped the missionary focus. It is accepted that apartheid formed a common enemy around which the Church could rally. However, it must be stated that whilst the church was seen to be involved in the struggle against apartheid, it did not necessarily mean that all of the members of the church supported their church's stance. There were church members who disagreed quite vehemently with the church leaders and these debates ensured that Synod discussions were often very

heated. But this did not deter the church from condemning the system of apartheid nor did it desist from seeking a peaceful transition to democracy.

### **6.2.2 The Methodist Church of Southern Africa and ecumenism after 1995**

Konrad Raiser, addressing a Conference convened in 1995 said,

Ecumenism in South Africa has in fact been flourishing over many years. The prophetic ministry that the SACC so ably articulated and carried out was the right thing at the right time. Through that ministry churches not only upheld and strengthened one another, but were a source of tremendous hope for the oppressed majority. The ecumenical churches embodied the hopes and aspirations of the people of South Africa (Raiser 1995:33).

In pursuit of its objective of bringing an end to apartheid and an introduction to a social and just society, the Church, through its prophetic ministry, had produced several ecumenical statements that served as pointers of the missionary focus of the church. Some of these included the *Standing for the Truth Campaign*, the *Kairos Document*, and *The Road to Damascus*. The debate around sanctions and disinvestments also evoked fierce division within the ecumenical movement.

As the struggle against apartheid dominated the mission of the ecumenical movement and indeed that of its member churches, the concept of human rights dominated the debates within these circles. There was unanimous consensus that without a culture of human rights, which have always been regarded as God-given rights, no future South African society and dispensation will be just.

It is crucial to our understanding that many churches, including the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, were still giving credence to the apartheid regime through its structural composition and the way in which it administered its affairs. There was a concerted call, during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process, for a similar process to be held within the Church so that the truth of the Church's collusion with apartheid could be revealed and excised. It is true that while most, if not all of the member churches of the SACC, had regularly decried and condemned the apartheid policies, and had challenged the government of the day through its resolutions passed at its gatherings, it did not do nearly as much as it ought to have to challenge in a very real sense the apartheid system. For example, the churches ministers appointed in terms of race; where cross-cultural appointments were made, the



ministers lived in their designated racial area; different stipends were paid according to the racial category of the minister.

### **6.3 Did the Methodist Church of Southern Africa reflect the shift to an ecumenical mission paradigm?**

As stated previously, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa made the necessary structural changes at connexional level and it did put in place the mechanisms to ensure effective mission. It also ensured that the missionary tendency would be generated from grassroots level and that the local church ought to be the base upon which mission is built. The overall national mission programme of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa would therefore be a reflection of the missionary focus of the local church, whether at parish or circuit level.

However, as this new missionary focus was being developed, ecumenical relations suffered. The consequence of mission at a local parish and circuit level resulted in the church putting its ecumenical ties and responsibilities aside. This was also not only a Methodist Church of Southern Africa phenomenon but was reflected in most of the ecumenical partners' response to ecumenism, especially after 1994. This could be seen in, for example, the declining lack of enthusiasm for ecumenical participation. Or where churches were asked to support an ecumenical activity there was a lack of active support. It is unfortunate since the Church had lost a credible part of its witness and missionary strength that had kept ecumenism vibrant and dynamic. Also, bearing in mind what Donald English said about the struggle against apartheid feeding and fuelling the missionary activity, both as the Methodist Church of Southern Africa as well as the broader ecumenical movement, it has become clear in post-apartheid period mission that there was a lack of focus within the church as it struggled to find a unifying issue which would provide the basis for concerted ecumenical activity.

Within the ecumenical movement there was certainly a very difficult period in which the member churches struggled to find more than a traditional role and responsibility to the ecumenical movement after 1994. The consequence of this approach to ecumenical partnership is that ecumenism at local level is also not being promoted or pursued effectively. Whilst engaged in the struggle against apartheid, the local

ecumenical fraternal was a key factor in looking after the social needs of the local community. With the gradual decline of ecumenical co-operation at local level, social issues did not receive as much prominence in terms of the mission of the church. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa at local level also reflected this tendency and reality.

Certainly through the *Journey to a New Land*, the six missionary calls and the whole new approach of initiating and doing mission as proposed through the Journey process, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa would appear to have recognised the need for a paradigm shift in defining its missionary tendencies. However, in practice it is rather doubtful whether this has in fact taken place. In essence the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had an opportunity to show other churches the way forward in realising this new model for mission. But, it is clear from the Journey to a New Land that the model for mission adopted by the Methodist Church of Southern Africa did not embrace the paradigm shift of cultivating togetherness and interdependence as suggested by Bosch. This is seen in its ecclesial revisionary approach, the almost conscious move away from engaging with ecumenical partners, the lack of intentionally seeking to find ways of engaging with its ecumenical partners.

Instead it resorts to an inward approach to mission with structural revision being of greater importance. Ecumenical commitment does not feature very strongly in this new model of mission within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. While the Methodist Church of Southern Africa retains links with the ecumenical body, it has tended to focus more on denominational issues rather than on broader ecumenical cooperation as it did during the struggle against apartheid. The reports submitted to its Synods and the Conference reflects a church that reflects a diminished ecumenical commitment and does not pursue the value of working towards togetherness.

It becomes clear that the new missionary strategy of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa is primarily related to a revisioning of ecclesial structures. Whereas the Missionary Department had previously determined mission, it is now the responsibility of the local church to determine mission. It stands to reason, therefore, that this missionary focus would not be on ecumenical partnerships or fostering togetherness, but would look more intently at its internal structure and future survival.

It also defeats the paradigm shift of interdependence. Newbigin, quoted in Bosch (1991: 373), says of the local church and mission,

However, the church's missionary dimension evokes *intentional*, that is *direct* involvement in society; it actually moves beyond the walls of the church and engages in missionary "points of concentration" (Newbigin) such as evangelisation and work for justice and peace.

Much of the church's activities are related to maintenance issues at parish level, like meeting its financial obligations, retaining its members. This has led to a church that is more inward looking and not moving beyond its doors into the broader community to address pertinent issues and doing so together with other local churches.

## **Conclusion**

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa, whilst adopting the principles of the Journey to a New Land must revisit its missionary strategy and intentionally seek to embrace an ecumenical perspective so that through its interdependence with other churches it can begin the process of creatively developing new models for doing mission.

While recognising the fundamental shift in determining its missionary tendencies, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa needs to recognise that it also needs to address social issues affecting the communities wherein the church is located and that this can be achieved through engagement with other churches. It needs to deliberately focus on developing strong ecumenical ties at both national as well as local level.

In recognising that it had focused primarily on structural ecclesial revisions, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa needs to shift its focus to developing the principles of the Journey to a New Land, specifically the Six Pillars, so that these principles will determine its missionary focus. Additionally, it will need to develop a stronger congregation focus in determining missionary needs at local level while allowing the national structure to serve as a coordinating body, not only to ensure mission is taking place, but also acting as repository for missionary programmes which can be shared with other congregations and even churches.

The missionary focus of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa does not reflect the emerging postmodern paradigm of working towards togetherness. It further does not proclaim a vision of unity but shows a tendency towards denominational needs. Nor does it embrace a diversity thereby enriching its missionary focus to give substance to the emerging ecumenical paradigm. There is more divergence than integration. There is also clear evidence that it opted for a holistic rather than a pluralistic approach to defining its missionary focus.



## **Chapter 7: Epilogue**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa had taken very interesting and challenging decisions in the period from 1980 to 2000. These decisions had a lasting effect on its missionary focus while at the same time allowing the church to begin assessing its role in the changing face of a democratic South Africa.

### **7.2 Consultation as a strategy for developing mission**

The *Obedience Conference* in 1981 saw the Methodist Church of Southern Africa embark on a radical programme of broad-based consultation to assess its response to the oppression of the apartheid regime. This was the first broad-based consultation and was the forerunner of the later Journey to a New Land process.

Following the dramatic political changes that occurred after 1990 and leading up to the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the Methodist Church had again embarked on a process of determining its mission focus. Whereas the struggle against apartheid provided a relatively clear-cut missionary agenda and focus for the church, post-apartheid South Africa found the church searching for a new missionary focus. The resistance to apartheid had dominated the church's agenda and it now found itself needing to reassess its purpose and missionary focus to reflect the new dispensation. It was interesting that following the first elections the membership was no longer prepared to merely accept what the church leadership proffered as the missionary focus of the church. To its credit, the Methodist Church leadership had recognised this and the process leading to the Convocation in 1995 reflected this broad-based approach to defining the missionary focus. However, because of this approach, the ecumenical paradigm Bosch postulated that should help to inform the church's mission in post-apartheid South Africa was lost. It is understandable that the ordinary member would not have been aware of this paradigm.

### **7.3 Mission and service**

The later 1990's and early 2000's saw the dominance of HIV/Aids in South Africa and sadly, that has become the most dominating factor in the church's missionary task. While addressing HIV/Aids is critical, it is crucial for the church to distinguish

between pastoral care and concern and mission. The response of the church to the Aids pandemic must certainly be seen as pastoral and yet it has become more of a service focus of the church.

It is interesting that the Methodist Church's Biennial Conference in 2005 adopted two very significant resolutions: the first is to return to an annual conference. This is important as it comes ten years after the Convocation in 1995 adopted a triennial conference. The very reasons cited at the convocation in 1995 for maintaining the annual conference were now being offered for this new resolution. Matlhare Mtsweni in the *New Dimension* (Vol 35 No 09, September / October 2005: 9) writes:

Also the Church would be able to respond to issues while they were still pressing ...  
The CCS called for future Conference business to achieve a balance between its administrative, legislative, missional and prophetic components.

In 2004 the Methodist Church convened a Mission Congress and adopted a Mission Charter, which is a home grown set of guidelines that reflects the mind of the Methodist Church in carrying out its mission endeavour.

Val Pauquet, editor of the *New Dimension*, writes,

It is envisaged that such an event will be held every five years to assess the progress made and to devise new strategies for effective mission (Pauquet 2005: 8).

It is interesting that the church recognises the need to engage in a regular reassessment of its missionary task and focus to reflect the changes confronting the church. It is also clear that mission and service are increasingly being seen as separate yet complimentary tasks of the church. While mission reflects the theological and prophetic need, service reflects the church's pastoral response to these issues. The period from 1993 to 2000 offers a different perspective on the church's approach to mission and is reflected in its approach to define its missionary tendencies.

## **Conclusion**

The post-apartheid period saw many of the mainline Protestant churches move away from an ecumenical engagement as it tried to respond to the changing socio-political landscape. Whereas it had previously had stronger ecumenical ties, now the denominational debate on a new approach of developing a missionary strategy had

a negative impact on the Churches working together. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa was not unaffected by this new approach to developing missionary tendencies and strategies.

The consequences of apartheid which divided the church in South Africa, albeit on racial or language grounds, saw many Protestant churches, like the Presbyterian and Reformed Presbyterian Churches, the Moravian Church, the Lutheran churches, engaging in denominational unification talks and processes at a time when it should have been developing stronger ecumenical links. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa was also caught up in those processes. It will be difficult to develop this ecumenical paradigm now as most churches appear to have become insular in their approach to mission and service. This can be illustrated by the various denominational responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Whilst acknowledging that Aids affects everyone, very few churches have engaged in ecumenical programmes to address the pandemic choosing instead to focus on their own denomination's response to the pandemic.





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