

Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 17 November 1999. [disclaimer](#)

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CHAIRPERSON: We resume now and we want to welcome the presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church, Bishop Mvume Dandala and the Secretary of Conference and there are...will you want to introduce? I just want to inform the hearing that Bishop Dandala cut short a visit to Rome where he was part of a delegation of the World Methodist Council which was engaged in bilateral conversations with the Vatican and we want to express our appreciation that you were willing to have done that. Thank you very much.

BISHOP H M DANDALA: I am with the Reverend Vivian Harris who is the Executive Secretary of the Methodist Church and Secretary of Conference and also behind me here as requested by the Chairperson, I would like to introduce three of our Bishops who come from this region: Bishop Simon Gubule of the Queenstown district, Bishop Alec Diko of the Grahamstown district and Bishop Dabula of the ...[inaudible] district, together with the vice-chairpersons from their synods.

DR K MGOJO: Can I ask you and Viv Harris to take the oath please? Could you please rise?

ADMINISTERS OATH.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. It's over to you.

BISHOP H M DANDALA: The Chairman of the commission, the most Reverend Desmond Tutu and the Commissioners. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa appreciates the invitation to make this submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I would like to point out, Sir, that the Methodist Church of Southern Africa covers six countries in our sub-continent. Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, Mozambique and South Africa. Sir, our appearance before the TRC is not a mere formality. Rather, it is a quest to offer our apology to South Africa for our shortcomings, when this country was afflicted with apartheid. And to confess our co-operation with that system, both intentionally and unintentionally. We have agonised with the question of whether a conference can confess on behalf of its local societies or not. We believe that it is our obligation to offer our corporate confession, trusting that our societies and members share in the spirit of this confession. On the other hand Sir, this confession does not seek to prevent those of our members who may have violated the human rights of others from making their individual submissions to this body. In fact, we have sought to encourage such people to approach the TRC for that purpose. Whilst the Methodist Church of Southern Africa can claim to have endeavoured to stand with other religious communities in rejecting the policy of apartheid from its codification in 1948, we do not believe that this opportunity is for us to parade our efforts. Rather we wish humbly to face those shortcomings that

compromised our witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. We confess that on many occasions we failed to live up to the mission of our Lord, to preach the good news to the poor and proclaim freedom for the prisoners. We have, over many years, struggled with our failures and a number of times through our conference resolutions we faced these and sought to bring them to the attention of our people in a spirit of repentance. In 1960, we offered this confession: "The Methodist Conference of Southern Africa recognises that christian people and groups, whilst responsible for contributing towards the solution of the problems of humanity by interpreting the mind of Christ in the situation of South Africa, they themselves are deeply involved in these problems. We as a church, confess that many of our own members are guilty of race prejudice and are prone to the very sins that we regard as our duty to condemn."

In 1976 we again struggled with our failure. We confessed that in the life of our churches, we had not sufficiently shown the possibility of an alternative to racial discrimination and group selfishness. That our fellow countrymen have not been able to look at our churches and say, "See how these christians love one another". We confessed too that as leaders of the christian churches we had failed to give justice and reconciliation high priority. We pointed to the tragic events of 1976 as having brought home to us the need to hear God's word to us at that moment of our national history and to mobilise all our resources for the urgent cause of our people's freedom. In response to the debate on disinvestment in 1985, conference confessed that in our churches there had been no proper debate and consideration of the disinvestment question because we had allowed ourselves to be restrained by the severity of laws designed to prevent open discussion of economic sanctions. This meant that the only arguments being heard in South Africa were those of opposition to disinvestment. In 1986 conference admitted its own failure to grapple timeously with the issues of great importance to the disadvantaged people of South Africa and acknowledged that well intentioned decisions on their part had sometimes been mistaken for indecisiveness and lukewarm commitment to the liberation of our people. Conference asked for forgiveness for its failure and for grace to respond more adequately. In 1988, when our conference recognised that the concept of a peace church had been rejected by its synod, it confessed that we had failed as a church to give sufficient attention to God's call to be peacemakers and thus to provide an alternative to violent action to change. That we failed to provide sufficient opportunity for consultation and study of the peace church concept. We confessed that there were deep divisions within the church over the issue of the peace church. Sir, we now ask that these confessions presented in the past to the Methodist people be heard and met with forgiveness by the public of our beloved land. These are not the only failures we have to confess, there are many more. 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. Sir, the list is endless. We are grateful to God that the holy spirit continues to disturb us. Both our confessions recorded in our

minutes, conference after conference, and our efforts to respond to these injustices point to a people who felt caught in the complexity of our common sinful life, unable to find the boldness to move together to the future that we knew God desired for us in this land. The opposition of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to apartheid was compromised by fear of possible consequences of radical action, but undue sensitivity to the views of its economic powerful white constituencies. By insensitivity to the aspirations of the black majority, by undue respect for the institution of government and above all, by a failure to adequately express at local level the principles which it proclaimed in its official conference pronouncements. A great number of Methodists, ministers and lay persons in all sections of the community, remained silent and uninvolved and many defended their inactivity by seeking to separate these fears of religion and politics. The Methodist Church acknowledges its failure to convince such people of the integral link between the gospel and justice and to make them aware of the socio-economic and political implications of christian discipleship. 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. We are grateful to God that in spite of our shortcomings we were given strength to resist the evil of apartheid. In spite of extreme government pressure, we refused to withdraw our membership from the World Council of Churches. A number of our pulpits fearlessly proclaimed a wholesome gospel that prophetically declared that the people of South Africa will be free. We constantly focused our prayers to the cause of justice and to the discomfort of many, we used sometimes symbols that sought to keep the hope alive for a new South Africa to dawn. A number of our ministers suffered public humiliation at the hands of the government and its agents of evil. A large number of Methodist families suffered at the hands of the tyrannical system, as they responded to the prophetic call to resist apartheid. These, for us, are not a cause for boasting, for the pain that accompanied such witness is still pulsable. In 1978 the Methodist Church of Southern Africa suffered a major blow when it was banned and declared an undesirable organisation from Transkei, one of the areas where Methodism is strongest in Southern Africa. All our properties in Transkei were confiscated without compensation. The most valuable of them were then sold and they are now lost to us. Apartheid effectively wanted to alienate the Methodist Church from part of its roots in the Eastern Cape. The reason being simply the refusal of our conference in 1977 to accommodate the fracturing of the people of Southern Africa according to their ethnic backgrounds and their balkanisation into independent Bantu states. For ten years we were forbidden from ministering to our mothers and fathers. We were forbidden from bearing our own without the permit of the oppressor. To minister to our own people, turned either into a criminal offence or an act for which one could be labelled ...[inaudible] from the Church Catholic. Today we wish to offer an unreserved apology to those who felt that our refusal to minister in Transkei under these stringent conditions imposed by that government was to abandon them. We also wish to offer an apology on behalf of those who felt compelled by the needs of our members there to serve within the Methodist churches formed according to the law of the government of Transkei. The wounds of that blow are still fresh for us, because some of our people were permanently alienated from us

as a result. We deeply long for a reconciled Methodist Community, restored to its full fellowship and connection. We thank God for the changes that have come to our land. We wish to state without ambiguity that we are committed to our responsibility to help bring healing and reconciliation to South Africa. We will continue to build racially mixed congregations where individuals are honoured and their heritage welcomed for the growth of all together. We have committed ourselves to joining hands with other christian communities to fight hunger and poverty, which is often, if not always, a direct consequence of our unjust history. We are prepared to be in dialogue with people who may have a claim on some of our property, as a result of having been unjustly removed from their land. We have called on our congregations to use our facilities for projects that will assist those who were denied opportunities to gain valuable skills for their future. We have opened our facilities for healing and counselling sessions such as Kulumani, and we have set as one of the three goals of our connection that the church at every level will encourage the creation of speaking forums where people can speak about their pain and help one another to heal. We are deeply conscious of the breakdown of morality in our land as a result of apartheid and we seek to place emphasis again on values such as family life, that were broken down by apartheid acts such as the migratory labour laws. We have, and we will continue to write liturgies that allow people to look back at their history and see that their heroes were not victims, but people, who like Jesus, laid their lives down for the freedom of the nation. We will endeavour not to flinch or hesitate when required to say a prophetic word that will help our country and all its organs so that we will never allow ourselves to repeat the mistakes of the past as a nation. We believe that it is all the people of South Africa who must have the will to move their country to a destiny of freedom, wealth, charity and respect for creation and human dignity. We believe that it is our task that we should appeal to the gospel of Jesus Christ for such a will to be nurtured and strengthened among our people. I thank you Sir.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. Is Viv going to add anything or it will happen in the question and answer section? Is there anything you want to add? Thank you very much for another moving testimony. Siyabulele. Mncebisi?

REV. M XUNDU: Thank you very much Mr Chairperson. I also want to start in saying how you have raised our feelings in your submission about trying to reveal the total truth and the position of the Methodist Church as such for all the things that happened in the period of our repression. I do, however, want to put one or two questions just for clarity. You have listed say in page 2 for instance what the Methodist Church did in terms of resolutions. There is a period I want to ask about that does not appear in that submission. Remember in 1970 all the mainline churches and their relations made the resolution which condemned the World Council of Churches for their attitude to support the programme to combat racism. And if I remember correctly, the Methodist Church also made such a resolution. That resolution resulted in probably giving an indication to the government of South Africa and the rest of the world community that the churches are indeed against the liberation movements. Would you like to make a comment on that?

BISHOP H M DANDALA: Yes. You will recall that in my submission I have made reference to the tensions that existed within the Methodist Church itself. It is not my intention to try and speak about our church as a divided body, because we are trying all we can still to help one another to get to a position where we will have a reconciled attitude to our history. The Methodist Church at that time officially did express its uncertainty about the programme to combat racism, but at the same time it affirmed the responsibility of the World Church to raise questions against apartheid and one of the reasons the Methodist Church did not at that time pull out of the World Council of Churches was precisely its commitment and understanding that the World Church has a responsibility to be prophetic about any aspect of life. But having said that, it is with shame that in fact we or some parts of our church felt very strongly at the time that the World Council of Churches might have been interfering in what in their view was not a territory they should intervene in. But that was not the official position of our church.

REV. M XUNDU: Also you mentioned at some stage the painful rift with the Transkeian area. What I want to know is what kind of witness and resistance did the Methodists both ordained and non-ordained try to organise in the Transkei against this unnecessary and totally dictatorial way of seizing literally both properties and also making it impossible for the Methodist Church to pastor in that area?

BISHOP HM DANDALA: You will recall Sir that there were some of our ordained ministers who refused to be part of the church that was created in Transkei by the government of that time and a number of them suffered severely in the hands of the State. You will also remember that the intention of the Transkei government at the time was not merely to mobilise those ministers who at the time were ministering in the territory of Transkei, but it sought to try and lure back into Transkei all Methodist ministers whose birth roots were in Transkei. And so there was a very significant resistance in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa at the level of individuals. Officially the church organised a number of meetings with that government to try and bring that government to its senses on this matter to no avail. Also it would be appropriate to say here as I have indicated in my submission some of our ministers felt that they could not leave at that time. There were some who I would believe took the opportunity and probably used it for their own ends, but as we were in consultations with our ministers in the area, one of the thorny questions that used to disturb them very deeply in their consciences, was whether they would abandon the people God had given to them to minister to at that time. And I know a good number of ministers who were never happy and this is why it is difficult to condemn all of them outright, but the situation compromised all of us. It compromised those who did not go back to Transkei as people who did not care for the spiritual lives of their own people, it compromised those who remained in Transkei as people who did not care for the welfare of the church Catholic, so we all came out of that soiled.

REV. M XUNDU: Thank you.



CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. Any other questions? Mgojo? (Laughter) I wonder why? I mean...(indistinct) Thomas?

MR T MANTHATA: Subject to correction, Bishop, there was a time in our history when the Methodist Church was a very strong provider of education and that that era was interfered with by the State. I don't know whether that in itself doesn't mark the failure of the church to provide sound moral standards to the black people, more especially looking at the present day situation. I can't understand why the churches don't account for just that loss and that kind of a weakness that was characteristic of it, and this is perhaps is why they have not even begun to tackle the issue of local community schools very strongly. That is whether to revive them and what the obstacles can be and to open up a debate in that direction Bishop. Can you please account for that. Why don't we see failure to provide black people with education as a failure of the church? More so as imposed by the government of the day.

BISHOP H M DANDALA: Indeed Sir, I would agree with you entirely. There are two aspects to this issue. First, I would like us to remember that one of the most difficult things about apartheid was not always what apartheid made the whites do to us, but also what apartheid made us do to ourselves. We have records of some of the debates in our conference at the time when the government was taking the schools from our church. And sadly, but truthfully, some of the people who argued very strongly at the time for the church to surrender some of the schools given the pressure that was exerted on the church, came from our black communities and that is a very sad thing when we look back at our history and or course, needless to say again, the white leadership at the time and again I have indicated to you that one of the problems in the Methodist Church for a long time was the suppression of black leadership, the white leadership at the time turned around and said we don't believe that it's a wise move, but who are we to say when some of the key leading black people say that maybe this will bring education cheaper to all of their people. It is a very unfortunate situation, but it is true that we also burnt our fingers.

But having said that, we should be ashamed, and we are ashamed that we did not put up a stronger resistance to our schools being taken from us by the state. We must confess even more our sins that at that time when we should have been not only vigilant but also at our most creative we were not creative enough to look at how we could have developed other alternatives to bring education to black communities. It is one of the key areas at the moment that is occupying us in the Methodist Church in our discussions. We took a decision a few years ago that as part of our process of getting back to the formation of our people, we must challenge every single Methodist Church to try and get back into early child education and one of the most successful programmes at this point in time of the Methodist Church is precisely that. I have now eluded in my submission to the fact that we have called on all our churches to now start further programmes that will help those people who were disadvantaged through education or lack of education, to be assisted to regain those skills. Therefore in our fellowship, we are very conscious of the great challenge for the church to get back into some form of education again.

CHAIRPERSON: Joyce?

MS JOYCE SEROKE: Bishop Dandala, you mentioned earlier that one of the things you were unhappy about was the unequal stipends that were based on the colour of the skin of the priests. What is the situation now?

BISHOP H M DANDALA: I don't want to be frivolous in the presence of this meeting, but you do know that the English structures and language sometimes confuse us and sometimes says things that sound good, but in fact are not quite that. We have, in terms of our books, corrected that misnomer and therefore until you go beyond the books of conference, you will not find inequality in the stipends among our ministers. But when you actually go down to the local churches you will find these. One of the most vexing problems is the problem of a church that has a tradition where ministers have primarily received their stipends through the congregations they serve. Now, what we have done is to try and encourage the breakdown of those dividing lines so that where our ministers work together to serve our people together, those distinctions will be overcome. I can say therefore in the Methodist Church today, there is no inequality strictly according to race, but I can go on and say that there is inequality that arises from the unequal socio- economic situations of our people and the Methodist Church has to deal with this problem.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. I don't know, is there anything that you wanted to add, Viv? No. Thank you for your submission and we are very deeply touched by what you have said and how you have said it and we are aware of how you yourself were moved when you were speaking about what happened when the break with the Transkei happened, that you had some difficulty. We had some difficulties ourselves when you were making that - but we are thankful that up to now the presentations are presentations of people seeking to be the publican and not the pharacy. Thank you very much.

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