

Theory and Praxis: An Evaluation of the 1958 “One and Undivided” Mission Policy of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa 60 Years Later

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Abstract

The year 2018 marked the 60th anniversary since the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) resolved to be a “One and Undivided” church in 1958. It was at the peak of apartheid when the MCSA was brave enough to embark on a journey of oneness. This was a mission policy seeking to unite Methodist people of all races in the midst of segregation in South Africa. This paper, therefore, seeks to evaluate the implementation of this mission policy over the past 60 years. The paper will interrogate the inclusion of black clergy into critical positions in the church, the Black Methodist Consultation, and the formation of geographic circuits and cross-cultural stationing as means of achieving the mission statement. The important question in this study is: Looking back, 60 years later, is the MCSA now “One and Undivided?”

Keywords: Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA); theory and praxis; “One and Undivided”; apartheid; racism; ethnicity

Introduction

The church is guilty of often adopting policies, which most of the time it fails to implement. These policies are not always demonstrated in praxis. In most cases, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) is quick to respond in matters of concern within society, which is good. However, the question is: Does the church really implement what is on paper? This paper seeks to evaluate the relationship between theory and praxis in the MCSA, especially regarding the “One and Undivided” mission policy, and will endeavour to answer the question whether the “One and Undivided” mission policy was indeed taken into circuit quarterly meetings in local churches.



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According to Breunig, theory is perceived as an abstract idea while praxis involves an action.¹

The assumption that theory is higher than praxis is logically incorrect. When theory is emphasised more than praxis, a gap is opened between the two. And when there is a gap, the church contradicts itself because policies say something else while in real society, a different thing is practised. Theory and praxis are directed towards each other, require each other, and depend upon each other. The truth is that theory only makes sense when it is reflected in praxis. The theoreticians of the MCSA are those who sit in the Connexional Executive meetings² and Conference.³ The practitioners are the resident ministers, most of whom are not part of Conference. They are merely informed of the resolutions adopted by Conference. Although resident ministers are expected to take the theories of Conference into praxis, they are not fully included upon discussion and adoption of these theories.

Theory: Policies and Statements

Racial Segregation in South Africa

The outcome of the 1948 elections marked the beginning of apartheid⁴ in South Africa. When the National Party won the elections for the first time, it became an opportunity for it to implement an ideology of apartheid, which it had invented in 1944. This was a favourable ideology to the English and Afrikaans-speaking people, since it was to preserve white supremacy in South Africa. This was to be achieved by degrading non-white South Africans. I mention “non-white South Africans” intentionally because in fact, blacks, coloureds and Indian people were also full citizens of South Africa. Rycroft⁵ explains citizenship as a full national membership in a country, which should include the possession of all political rights. Under the apartheid regime, however, the right to vote, to own land in certain places, the right to education and so on, was determined by skin colour. Therefore, all “full” citizens of South Africa did not enjoy equal rights and privileges.

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- 1 Mary Breunig, “Turning Experiential Education and Critical Pedagogy Theory into Praxis,” *Journal of Experiential Education* 28 (2) (2005): 109.
 - 2 The Connexional Executive Meeting is attended by bishops, lay leaders, and representatives from organisations and directors of units. The function of this meeting is to provide general oversight of the administration and management of the Connexion, acting on behalf of Conference, especially implementing the lead and direction set by Conference for the Connexion.
 - 3 Conference is the MCSA’s governing authority and supreme legislative body which provides direction and inspiration for the church.
 - 4 Apartheid is a political system in which people of different races were separated in South Africa (Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary).
 - 5 Alan Rycroft, “Citizenship and Rights,” in *Race and the Law in South Africa*, edited by Alan Rycroft (Cape Town: Juta & Co., 1987), 209.

Hypocritically, the fabricators of apartheid were convinced that they were doing the will of God.⁶ It is, therefore, important to pay attention to the response of the church in this regard, since it also claims to be the mouthpiece of God. The MCSA was among the first Christian bodies to respond to this segregation. The Methodist Conference of 1948—that met in Cape Town—drafted a declaration concerning race relations, which emphasised that:

No person of any race should be deprived of constitutional rights or privileges merely on the grounds of race ... this Conference respectfully appeals to the government to reconsider its intention to exclude the Native Representatives from the House of Assembly...⁷

In the 1950s, numerous segregation laws were passed by the government. Among many were the Group Areas Act (1950) that perpetuated segregated communities, churches, schools and hospitals. This law separated people of different racial groups into controlled areas where a black person could not dwell among the whites. The MCSA, as a denomination with people of different racial groups, was affected by this law because this predestined the impossibility of blacks and whites to worship together in one church. Although the church was never completely united, this law exacerbated the division. All racial groups were bound to worship separately. Moreover, there were European circuits and African circuits in one church—the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

It was in 1951 when the Rev. Allison Garret stood in front of Conference and stated: “The most effective contribution we can make as a church and its individuals to the removal of the disorders that are in our midst, is to make love our aim.”⁸ In this regard, the President of Conference called upon the Methodist people of South Africa to embrace each other, despite what the political authorities supposed. This means that the MCSA was vocal in disputing the apartheid rule in South Africa, but it harboured the most racists because there was nothing done practically.

1958 “One and Undivided” Statement

It was the Conference that met in Pietermaritzburg in 1958—within a context where the government separated people of different racial and tribal groups—where a statement was declared by the MCSA:

6 John De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1986), 32.

7 Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), *Minutes of the sixty-sixth Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 1948), 143–144.

8 MCSA, *Minutes of the sixty-ninth Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 1951), 160.

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.⁹

We should not assume that this statement was agreed upon easily. The credit of this policy goes to the black clergy and laity who were robustly “vocal at synods and Conferences attacking the conformity of the church to apartheid regulations.”¹⁰ This Conference was dominated by white men who were undoubtedly beneficiaries of the apartheid regime by virtue of being white in skin colour. As a result, it took the MCSA a whole 10 years to adopt this statement since the existence of the apartheid government in 1948. Therefore, it is highly probable that this statement was adopted after vigorous deliberations. It is important to note that this was brave for the Methodist Church to adopt such a statement at the peak of apartheid. It was brave for the Methodist people to refuse to be separated by the apartheid law, while acknowledging that in God we are one. The MCSA took it upon itself to challenge the dividing authorities.

This statement does not necessarily mean the MCSA was blameless. The church was also guilty of propagating segregation. The same church that adopted this statement was led by white folks with black ministers as passengers. Moreover, there was a wide gap in the stipends of black and white ministers, where an ordained black minister earned less than a probationer white minister. In his address to Conference 2017, the Presiding Bishop, Rev. Ziphozihle Siwa, mentioned that the same Conference that had adopted this statement “recorded the number of candidates for ministry as 19 Europeans, 24 non-Europeans with eight deceased ministers—with two European ministers mentioned by name and non-European ministers by number.”¹¹ This simply means the church was influenced by the segregation that was applied in the country.

John Wesley, in his sermon on Christian Perfection, emphasised that “we are not perfect but we always strive for perfection.”¹² However, that does not necessarily mean that the church should not advocate for the people of God because it is not perfect enough. The most important question is: What does it mean to be a “One and Undivided” church in a divided society? Was this policy applied at grassroots level of the church, or was it just an abstract idea? The following sections of this paper seek to evaluate the implementation of this policy.

9 MCSA, *Minutes of the seventy-sixth Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 1958), 65.

10 Simon Gqubule, *Meet the Brown Bomber: An Account of Life and Work of the Rev. Seth Molefi Mokitimi* (Alice: Lovedale Press, 1996), 112.

11 MCSA, *Yearbook 2018* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2018), 13.

12 Edward Sugden, *John Wesley's Fifty-Three Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 508.

Praxis: Implementation of the Policies

Black Leadership

In 1958, a small number of black ministers had already attained the position of superintendent in the church. However, they were only superintendents of African circuits while white ministers were superintendents of both European and African circuits. Again, the positions of power in the Districts (chairman and secretary), were all held by white ministers. If the Methodist people really wanted to be “One and Undivided,” the first step was to give non-European clergy a platform in leadership positions. It was under the influence of black ministers, such as the radical Rev. Walter Gcabashe, that the 1958 Conference made the following resolution on clerical appointments at Conference and synods:

Conference resolves that in making appointments to the respective Secretariats, Conference and Synods would carefully consider the eligibility of all suitable persons.¹³

Moreover:

Conference resolves that in making appointments to Connexional Offices, the eligibility of all suitable persons would be carefully considered.¹⁴

These resolutions were in sustenance of the “One and Undivided” missionary policy. Through these resolutions, everyone—regardless of skin colour—was eligible for leadership positions in the MCSA. The Conference that adopted these resolutions was dominated by white delegates. Does this mean that white people in the MCSA were ready for black leadership?

In the year of 1960, the winds of change were visible when Rev. Mahlasela was appointed by Conference to the office of Synod Secretary of the Clarkebury District, becoming the first black minister to hold this position. This was a milestone, since Clarkebury was the biggest District in the Connexion with approximately 163 979 members, including adherents.¹⁵ Rev. Mahlasela held this position for six years, from 1961 to 1966.

In 1959, a new office of District Deputy Chairman was created, which was occupied by mostly black clergy in the majority of the districts. This article contends that this office was there only to make blacks feel good about themselves. It was a useless office that had very limited powers. Deputy Chairmen were not even members of Conference. The most annoying part is that the office had no official duties in the presence of the district chairman. The deputy chairman could function only when delegated by the chairman.

13 MCSA, Minutes of the seventy-sixth Annual Conference, 66.

14 MCSA, Minutes of the seventy-sixth Annual Conference, 66.

15 MCSA. *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 1961), 30.

Therefore, if not delegated, the deputy chairman was useless. It is for that reason that I regard this office as an insult to the black clergy, because most of them were never considered for the office of the district chairman.

However, it must be noted that the MCSA was bold enough to elect a black minister to be the President of Conference in 1964, namely Rev. Seth Mokitimi. He became the first black minister to hold this position in the MCSA. This move was an implementation of the move of 1958, and upheld the “One and Undivided” mission policy. Gqubule records: “Mr Mokitimi was elected with an overwhelming majority on the first ballot, which is unusual in the Presidential elections of the Methodist Church. He received 73 votes, and the next candidate, the Rev. W.W. Hartley, received 18 votes.”¹⁶ It is important to note that the voting representation at the 1963 Conference was 60 Europeans, 44 Africans, 10 coloureds and one Indian.¹⁷ Whites had a majority, but they chose to vote for a black minister over a white minister. This simply means that the MCSA had realised by 1963 that good leadership was not determined by skin colour. It is also important to note that the law prohibited a native to be in a position of authority over whites. However, the MCSA broke the barriers in order to achieve its mission policy of a “One and Undivided” church.

The appointment of a black President of Conference 1964 did not mean the end of discrimination within the MCSA. Black ministers were still treated as inferior in the church. As a result, a Black Ministers’ Consultation (BMC) was formed in 1975. A meeting held on 12 May 1976 in Bloemfontein was attended by over 100 black ministers of the MCSA. One of the important things that were discussed was the issue of stipend augmentation. In 1976, white ministers earned double the stipend of black ministers in the same category. The worst part is that black ministers with 31 years or more ordination, earned less than a white probationer minister.¹⁸ Therefore, this meeting resolved to move synods to recommend Conference to equalise stipends.¹⁹

The BMC became a platform for black ministers to engage on matters that concerned the black clergy and the black church. It was after the formation of the BMC that black ministers were elected to crucial positions of the church. Of course, it was a result of the unity and lobbying of the BMC. In 1981, Rev. Dr Stanley Mogoba was elected for the office of Secretary of Conference, the first black person to hold this office. There were other black ministers who were elected to the office of the President.

The greatest division in the MCSA during the apartheid era was the Transkei schism. In 1978, the Prime Minister of Transkei, Chief Matanzima, banned the MCSA in Transkei. The reason for this is that the Conference of 1977 did not send a message of greetings

16 Gqubule, *Meet the Brown Bomber*, 127.

17 Gqubule, *Meet the Brown Bomber*, 130.

18 MCSA, *Minutes of the ninety-third Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 1975), 98.

19 Minutes of the Black Ministers’ Consultation held in Bloemfontein on 12 May 1976, 6.

to the Transkei President. This was regarded as an insult to the integrity and dignity of the head of state, government and the people of Transkei. Therefore, the Methodist Church of Transkei was established.

Geographic Circuits

The 1958 Conference of the MCSA accepted the “One and Undivided” mission policy. The Conference of 1976 came up with the strategy of implementing the mission policy, which was “uniting of our people in multi-racial circuits and societies.”²⁰ This was the beginning of the geographical circuits. The MCSA believed that a dynamic way to unite the people called Methodists, was to integrate their circuits. The following year, in 1977, Rev. Cresswell Mkhize was stationed in Pietermaritzburg Metropolitan Circuit. He became the first black minister to be stationed at a white society/circuit; thus the implementation of the cross-cultural ministry. In the year of 1979, Eshowe Circuit 716 had integrated into a geographic circuit.

Although geographic circuits seemed to be a solution in response to racial divisions in the church, it was a nightmare to integrate societies and circuits, let alone to maintain a geographic society/circuit. Rev. Davis Schooling²¹ outlined the challenges he faced as a minister in a geographic circuit. Firstly, his argument was that the MCSA encourages societies and circuits at grassroots to integrate, but it is doing very little to guide the local ministers on how to achieve this mission. Secondly, geographic circuits bring together people who have totally different backgrounds and traditions. He states: “In a multi-racial society like Eshowe we have not found one thing that both black and white members like doing together.”²² Thirdly, there is always a group that will dominate over the other.

These three challenges outlined by Schooling were evident in the Central Methodist Church in Durban. Kumalo narrates the struggle of Rev. Geveza and Rev. Cooper in creating a geographic circuit in Durban, while the superintendent sits back and the MCSA does nothing at all to guide them. Secondly, Rev. Sangweni, while pastoring in that geographic society, did everything to balance the worship so that it accommodates all races, but all were unsatisfied.²³ Lastly, the whites left the society when the blacks increased and dominated the society.

Although there were many challenges in establishing and maintaining geographic circuits, the idea reflected oneness. The idea of geographic circuits was essential for reconciliation among blacks and whites. Through geographic circuits, the MCSA

20 MCSA, *Minutes of the ninety-fourth Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 1976), 79.

21 David Schooling, “Geographic Circuits: Are we Papering over the Cracks,” *Dimension*, May/June (1992): 5.

22 Schooling, “Geographic Circuits,” 5.

23 Raymond Kumalo, *Methodists with a White History and a Black Future* (Eikenhof: Africa Upper Room Ministries, 2009), 170.

created a non-racial society from the church to the community. This was the implementation of the “One and Undivided” policy of the MCSA made in 1958.

Post-apartheid challenges of divisions in the MCSA

Ethnicity

According to Cashmore: “The actual term derives from the Greek *ethnikos*, the adjective of *ethnos*. This refers to a people or nations.”²⁴ He further adds that an ethnic group consists of people who share the common roots and interests. These are often people of the same racial group. Sanou²⁵ maintains that ethnicity creates a social division whereby a particular ethnical group distinguishes itself from another. On the other hand, Rashe notes: “A particular ethnic group can be differentiated from the other by the language, history, religion and style of dress.”²⁶

Monoametsi²⁷ notes that ethnicity is an old problem in the MCSA. Therefore, this paper is not attempting something new but it is a contribution to what others have done. He argues that, as far as ethnicity is concerned, Methodists tend to represent the kingdom of their ethnical groupings rather than the kingdom of God. He adds: “The greatest struggle of the MCSA family is that of being a Sotho, Tswana, Xhosa, Ndebele, Venda, Swati, and so forth, and being sons, daughters, followers and disciples of Jesus.”²⁸

Hankela interviewed some congregants at the Johannesburg Central Methodist Mission in 2009, Johannesburg. One of the interviewees by the name of Khwezi, said: “If the amaXhosa did not want something to happen, it was unlikely to take place.”²⁹ This is because they were the majority. That means the decisions and leadership roles, including the language of worship, were determined by the majority ethnic group and “other congregants of different ethnic groups felt excluded by this practice.”³⁰ Kumalo³¹ writes about the Central Methodist Mission in Durban where the Zulus began to feel the Xhosa domination in the church. There is a feeling among some congregants from minority groups in the church that the Xhosa people think the church belongs to them.

24 Ellis Cashmore, *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations* (London: Routledge, 1994), 102.

25 B. Sanou, “Ethnicity, Tribalism and Racism: A Global Challenge for the Christian Church and its Mission,” *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 9 (10) (2015): 95.

26 R. Rashe, “Ethnicity Challenges in African Communities, the Ghost of the Past. What shall we say to this? A Theological-Ethical Approach,” *Pharos Journal of Theology* 98 (2017): 1.

27 Kamogelo Monoametsi, “An Elephant in the Room,” *The New Dimension*, February 2017a: 7.

28 Kamogelo Monoametsi, “The Elephant in the Room: Which Kingdom are you representing?” *The New Dimension*, January 2017b: 9.

29 Elina Hankela, “Towards Liberationist Engagement with Ethnicity: A Case Study of the Politics of Ethnicity in a Methodist Church,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72 (1) (2016): 6.

30 Hankela, “Towards Liberationist Engagement,” 4.

31 Kumalo, *Methodists with a White History and a Black Future*, 177–181.

Racism

Racism is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capabilities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.”³² Mtshiselwa understands racism as: “The system of privilege that is based on race which adversely impacts the entire race group.”³³ According to Mbali,³⁴ in the case of South Africa, whites were perceived to be superior and blacks as inferior in the apartheid era. Although South Africa celebrates (at the time of writing) 24 years of democracy, racism is still alive, even in churches.

The MCSA’s resolution on racism is:

Conference, in denouncing racism, calls on all Methodists to continue striving against all forms of racism in Church and Society and commits the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to co-operate with all agencies working towards similar objectives.³⁵

According to this statement, the MCSA is in a process of gradually getting rid of the bondages of racism. This was the impact of the Group Areas Act, as Berggren states that the Athlone Methodist Church was a congregation of coloured people: “The area was designated for the coloured population before democratisation.”³⁶ Although black people are the majority, the MCSA had been a white-dominated church in the past. However, white Methodists also experience racism in the MCSA, as Pete Grassow, a white Methodist minister, states:

I am wondering if the BMC has been too successful in the work it has already done. What I am seeing emerge is not a black-led church. I am seeing a black Methodist Church. White members of the MCSA are a dying breed—literally! We are getting older and greyer, with our younger white membership dwindling to insignificance. Some of this attrition is a reflection of the general ageing of Christian Churches in our country: in general, we as the MCSA are becoming older. But in addition to this, younger white members are leaving—some to other churches, and some to no church at all. Simply put: white people do not feel like they belong. They feel excluded from the MCSA, because the ethos of the MCSA has become black.³⁷

32 Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster’s dictionary and Thesaurus (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 2014).

33 Ndikho Mtshiselwa, “The Emergence of the Black Methodist Consultation and its Possible Prophetic Voice in Post-apartheid South Africa,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71 (3) (2015): 7.

34 Zolile Mbali, *The Churches and Racism: A Black South African Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 7.

35 Methodist Church of Southern Africa, *Methodist Book of Order* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 230.

36 Erik Berggren, *Catholicity Challenging Ethnicity: An Ecclesiological Study of Congregations and Churches in Post-apartheid South Africa*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 179.

37 Peter Grassow, “The Black Methodist Consultation—from a White Perspective,” *Rock in the Grass*, July 14, 2015. Accessed February 27, 2018. <http://rockinthegrass.blogspot.co.za/2015/07/the-black-methodist-consultation-from.html>.

This is the reflection of a white minister on the Black Methodist Consultation (BMC) in the MCSA. However, the MCSA is attempting to end racism; as a result, a resolution on cross-cultural stationing was passed in the 2017 Conference: “Conference directs EMMU and CE to be intentional in stationing Ministers leaving Seminary in cross-cultural contexts. Furthermore, Conference directs the General Secretary to include a progress report on cross-cultural stationing at every Conference.”³⁸ Although this resolution seems to apply only to black seminarians since no white seminarian is stationed in a township, this resolution helps to direct the church and its people to embrace each other in order to achieve the goal of oneness. I believe that the idea that there is a black or white skin is an illusion. Those who are perceived to be black are never as black as their hair; and those perceived to be white are never as white as snow. Therefore, skin has no colour. All Methodist people have one skin colour, which is human colour.

Conclusion

This article evaluated the implementation of the 1958 “One and Undivided” mission policy of the MCSA. Although, when the policy was adopted, the MCSA had no idea at all on how it would transform itself to a “One and Undivided” church, but the vision of a “One and Undivided” church at the peak of the apartheid era was historic and mesmeric. The inclusion of black clergy into critical positions in the church and the idea of geographic circuits in the MCSA were the forces driving the implementation of the “One and Undivided” mission policy. Sixty years later, it is clear that the MCSA is still divided in terms of race and ethnicity. However, the Methodist people have learnt to gradually accept each other, worship together and allow leadership to eligible persons, regardless of skin colour. The most important thing to note in this study is that the “One and Undivided” mission policy is a vision the MCSA strives to achieve. It is like perfection as understood by Wesleyans, we are never perfect, but we strive for perfection. This article concludes that Methodists are not “One and Undivided.” This statement was a desire of the Methodist people. The Methodist people live in a divided society, which then influences the divisions in the church. However, the MCSA is still one church because of its people who strive towards oneness.

Autobiographic Details

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