



ADDRESS BY SELLO HATANG (CEO OF THE NELSON MANDELA FOUNDATION) ON THE OCCASION OF DIAKONIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES ANNUAL LECTURE

“PILGRIMAGE OF HOPE AND JUSTICE”

Let me first congratulate all the award winners. Receiving the same kind of recognition, Madiba once said “I am a simple country boy, and I remain astounded and overawed by the awards and honours that people, for some incomprehensible reason, decide to bestow upon us.”

The Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF) was established in 1999 as the post-presidential office of Nelson Mandela. Since 2007, the NMF has transformed from Nelson Mandela’s post-presidential office into a non-governmental organisation with its core work located in the memory-dialogue nexus. Our vision remains a society which remembers its pasts, listens to all its voices, and pursues social justice. Our mission remains to contribute to the making of a just society by keeping alive the legacy of Nelson Mandela, providing an integrated public information resource on his life and times, and by convening dialogue around critical social issues.

In the invitation letter I was asked to talk about how the **church can contribute to hope and justice in our country**. To be precise, the theme provided was **Pilgrimage of hope and justice**. It got me asking questions like: How do we harness the incredible power of the church as a force for good and for the church to treat not just the symptoms of poverty but also the underlying structures that underpin the system? How does the church become a beacon of hope for the people of the country without losing its way? A pilgrimage! A journey!

The challenge to build South Africa is to reshape a deeply unequal society into an equal one after centuries of systematic inequality. Our constitution is a marvellous blueprint to achieve this but we are in danger of leaving it there on paper and not making it a reality in people's lives. When he signed it into law, Madiba said:

“Let us give practical recognition to the injustices of the past, by building a future based on equality and social justice.”

South Africans are a wonderful people. No matter how bad things are, we keep the hope flag flying. But now, almost 21 years after the constitution became law, we are failing to ensure that those people have access to those wonderful, equal rights. What can the church do to step in and help those people when civil servants fail in their duty to do so?

The church has always been a beacon of hope for millions of our countrywomen and men. The question is how do we keep this hope alive that they will indeed be able to access those rights and that we will indeed become a country where justice prevails. For in order to be the country of our dreams we must be a country where we have social justice and economic justice. Without economic justice millions of our compatriots will never know true equality and is that not, after all, what Madiba and his contemporaries fought for? It is certainly what we are still fighting for. And time is running out.

So, on this journey to justice, I would argue that the church must become a space of decolonisation. Much has been said about this term and it is a difficult concept to understand. It has multiple meanings. Renowned scholar Mahmood Mamdani recently delivered the annual TB Davie Lecture at the University of Cape Town and spoke about decolonisation and the university. While Mamdani spoke about the colonial university his arguments could be extended to the church, which, like the university, was part of the colonial project. For Mamdani to alter the norm, to change the status quo where we see it to be unequal, unjust, we are required to “*subvert the process from within through a series of actions which sift through the historical legacy and*

the contemporary reality discarding some parts and adapting others to a newfound purpose". This process must also happen within the church. The church should seek to break out of the comparative traditions of only looking to the west and instead look both internally and across the globe. The reference point cannot only be the west. It is within this broad paradigm of decolonisation, that new forms of thinking can emerge on what social justice looks like and what a universal humanity looks like. And it is from this that we can build the types of social justice activism required in our broken country. It is also from within this paradigm that we can imagine a truly liberatory future, a future that inspires hope in our people. This is the hope that exists not to placate but to liberate.

This brings me to my next point. Madiba once said

We need religious institutions to continue to be the conscience of society, a moral custodian and a fearless champion of the interests of the weak and downtrodden.

We need religious organisations to be part of a civil society mobilised to campaign for justice and the protection of basic human rights.

Thus the church cannot elevate itself to being above society but is part of the 'nitty gritty' work of democracy and accountability. Yet the church does occupy an elevated position within this grouping of civil society.

In order to do this, accountability within the church must increase. For years, the Catholic Church stood silent, or worse, hid heinous abuses of children and indigenous peoples. Across the world, from Canada to Latin America to Australia and even in South Africa, the church and missionary schools were part of horrific abuses. In South Africa today, we see churches, places which are meant to be safe causing extreme harm with congregants being sprayed with "Doom" or made to drink Dettol and other detergents. Moreover, we see the church being used to make a profit from the downtrodden, offering them the world but taking their last pennies. This is a moral wrong. When the good are silent and when we negotiate over values and principles we will be left with

nothing. We cannot justify the wrongs. Thus the first step is increasing accountability within your space. As a CE, I constantly must remind myself to be accountable to the people that I speak for. Have I made sure that our efforts are really speaking truth to power or changing the system for the better? Are we making sure that we are accountable not only to our funders but to those we entrusted to advocate on their behalf? We must make sure that we are not 'seduced by capital' or by powerful people. And this is a difficult role to play but we must place ethics at the front. Too many wrongs in South Africa have been justified by a utilitarian approach to ethics and morals and we need to reverse this approach. Sometimes the ends do not justify the means.

At the same time, the church has to become a place of human solidarity. Should this be the way of the church? I think we have seen how solidarity among people can be built and the church can become that space, reaching out not only across religious but across ideologies and beliefs. For social justice to take place we must find the humanity in all people, be they Muslim, homosexual, the disabled, the poor or even the wealthy. The church is built on fallible and imperfect humans, imagination and belief. More of the social and political capital of the church should be on building those bridges. For me, our country is doomed if we cannot find connections between people. In turn this means that we have to imagine a future for all. The future, this liberatory future, is something that we hope for and something that we pray before. It is a dream we must maintain and we must collectively build. Individual dreams can no longer be the only types of dreams we have. Instead our dreams and hopes should be collective ones. Within this space, the church, like many in civil society must play a role in facilitating and maintaining these connections between people. Across race, religion, gender, nationality or sexual orientation we have to build a collective future. It is hope that is the spark for this.

Describing hope, Vaclav Havel said that "hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

He went further and said: I am not an optimist, because I am not sure that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist, because I am not sure

that everything ends badly. I just carry hope in my heart. Hope is the feeling that life and work have a meaning. You either have it or you don't, regardless of the state of the world that surrounds you. Life without hope is an empty, boring, and useless life. I cannot imagine that I could strive for something if I did not carry hope in me. I am thankful to God for this gift. It is as big as life itself.

I want to close off with a final quote by Madiba who in a message of healing stated,

Our human compassion binds us the one to the other – not in pity or patronisingly, but as human beings who have learned how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future.

Thank you for your time

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