

Rev Dr David Mushayavanhu responding to the two presentations at the webinar to mark UPCSA 21 from the Context of Zimbabwe (Personal Observations - Not speaking on behalf of the Presbytery of Zimbabwe)

How has Presbyterianism contributed to disunity and injustices in our context?

Presbyterianism allows elders (*ruling and teaching*) to take on the role of leadership at all levels throughout to General Assembly; it demands that the elders or the church is endowed with the responsibility of taking care of its members within the community from different areas, sections, home-groups or districts. The elders' responsibility over various people of different ethnic backgrounds and ages will be incomplete without mentioning the issues of unity and justice. Presbyterianism is placed at a conducive environment in terms of leadership, and as such Presbyterianism is founded in the ground of unity and justice.

The question then is, how has Presbyterianism contributed to disunity and injustice in Zimbabwe? The two key terms 'disunity and injustice' have variant facets. One can view them in terms of economical, social, political, religious, cultural ethnicity coming into play, because they are so many issues, facets that bring disunity and or injustice. We can look at ethnicity, how the UPCSA is planted within different ethnic communities. In Zimbabwe the church is planted within myriad ethnical values. It is critical that we consider culture and ethnicity when we look at how UPCSA does its work. Ethnicity is at stake. We cannot therefore talk of unity and justice outside the church. The church, within itself, has a lot to answer in terms unity and justice. Are we united as a church in Zimbabwe? Yes! That is why we call ourselves 'Uniting Presbyterian Church', owing to the fact that we are not yet there? I can rephrase the question: Are we uniting as a denomination? How did we as a church contribute to the unity amid such disparities?

If we are not talking about the disparity caused by the languages, cultures and ethnicities, then we are not ready to talk about unity as a church. This diversity can only be appreciated the day we begin to talk about simple aspects just like language and culture as part of tradition.

Presbyterianism has been complicit in disunity and injustice in that its system of reaching critical decisions is laboriously slow, and often marred with loopholes of manipulations. Its processes are excellent on paper but practically easy to be manipulated. This is not peculiar to Zimbabwe, I guess that issues of urgent need in light of justice are overworked and eventually overtaken by circumstances.

Presbyterianism comfortably sits on racial or social inequities or inequalities within its systems without any urgency of addressing it but actually promoting policies that perpetrate such sick images. Rich congregations do not share with poor congregations, blacks against whites, and language barriers exhibit gross hypocrisy and superficiality to our message of oneness reducing it to just a cosmetic gospel.

It has contributed to disunity by giving too much authority to the local church. The minister is just as good as any other employee, who we can hire and fire willingly. Again this is not unique

to PoZ. Congregations would rather work alone rather than with the Presbytery because of disunity. There is nothing that compels the congregations to work together. The system does not cultivate for equity amongst clergy, thereby contributing to disunity.

The “*calling vs appointment*” systems nurture disunity and injustice and widen the inequality and inequity within the presbytery. If this is left to the next generation, Presbyterianism will be swallowed by congregationalism. The system of “*you eat what you kill*” does not and will not foster unity and justice. The church has experienced a great exodus of great brain as both laity and clergy went into green pastures. Those who remain are being what is equivalent to “*farm boy and house girl wage*”. I therefore submit that centralizing our efforts is the best heritage for the future generation. Centralization will curb inequalities currently experienced by those ministering in Zimbabwe. Thanks to the efforts by Central Fund Committee which is working tirelessly to level the ground.

The presence of PoZ in the UPCSА after 21years is considered as still an appendage to the denomination, especially when utterances such as “...our resources are being channeled to Zimbabwe and Zambia”. Putting it in another way, membership in the denomination is problematic in a denomination whose inequalities are as unethically pronounced as currently are in the UPCSА.

Has it pleaded guilty of such contributions?

Yes! Presbyterianism, is found wanting in the sense that we have so much stipulated on paper. We sometimes appear to be a ‘bookish church’, where everything is there in documents, but to loosen the texts to pages to make it practical, there is a problem. We are very good at planning but we are really poor and weak in implementation. In that regard, yes, we plead guilty, to the lack of proper dispatching unity and justice.

But I would also say NO! The Manual of Faith and Order (MoFO) is a very excellent document. The way in we have inculcated the issues of justice and unity is so amazing, even when we express, profess our faith, even when we declare before ordination. There is a key statement that is made, the need to maintain the unity and the peace of the church. So, that is the primary statement which has been promoted for years even prior to the birth of UPCSА, 21 years past. The church has been held united by the fact that she keeps asking, how the arising issues (disputes) were fostering unity and peace of the church. Whether it was successful or not is another question. The very fact that we release unanimity and peace is essential component of our faith and has put it as a credal statement of declaration, is a plus to Presbyterianism.

Is it the system then that lets down the society or, conveniently people may use it to hide behind a finger and not take up responsibility to speak truth to power in the local context, should the need arise? Does the church, in the name of Presbyterianism conveniently ride on ‘procedure’ over responding to the ills in the context?

In my view, it is difficult to gauge whether there has been a plea of guilt. To plead guilty would be an admission that there is a problem and that the church has failed to play its role in contributing to unity and justice. Burying the head in the sand like an ostrich may be the case.

How does the Presbyterian polity enable the accomplishment of the UPCSA mission?

This I have answered briefly, that polity on its own is found wanting. We need to realise that the way in which the church is governed places us as leaders at a grave point where we are the curator of unity and justice. It is up to the leaders therefore, to take their roles or to just ignore it. Presbyterianism is placed strategically but in most cases it decides to take a very silent role when it comes to issues of injustice.

Let's talk of political injustices in Zimbabwe; how many a times, has Presbyterianism questioned political injustices. We have victims of ethnic, socio-political and economic injustices and violence. Several denominations the likes of those in the Episcopal sector, (*the Catholics Bishops, Anglicans, and Lutherans* etc) have taken up strides to put the leadership, the politician, the government to book, raising alarm against the negative elements of the prevailing ruling. The Presbyterian Church is not amongst the list. One may say we have written statements, we have been in solidarity with other bodies. We in these times come up hiding behind other organizations.

To speak about unity and justice, corruption, vote rigging, electoral reforms, abductions and hell lot of injustices in the country. We need to see at list the evidence of where the church has voiced out in such a polarized nation; thus the begging of speaking of unity and justice in the church. It has consequences, by the way, and we cannot avoid such, it is inevitable. This also answers the question whether Presbyterianism has the ability to emancipate the colonized and the oppressed? Yes, it does. As a church we are mandated with the mission of God, *Missio-Dei*. The *Missio-Dei* stipulates that the mission of God is for the emancipation for the people of God so that they must be united with God and themselves. So, the mission of God can be realized, from how God from the beginning is willing to unite his people with Him, as the very reason why God is willing to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, and with the primary goal that when they are released they shall worship God, on this mountain.

So the *Missio-Dei* has to do with the liberation of His people. So if the church fails to carry forward this mission-Dei, there is a problem. And again the Mission of God is also enacted in the mission of Jesus the Christ, where he begins by claiming that '*the spirit of God is upon me, for he mandated, sent, enabled me to set free the captives*' - the Jesus' manifesto. So, the church cannot fold hands and say she does not have the prowess to do so.

But on the other hand I would say there is a reason why the church would remain silent and inactive; there is victimization. If you speak out against the governing authorities you risk being treated like a traitor. For fear of speaking out the church remained numb for so long, in many areas where the church should have said something. We will continue having colonization and oppressions, within Africa and Zimbabwe in particular.

Colonization in today's language does not have color; it depends on who is in power and who is in authority. We can no longer talk of colonization in relation to color of the skin pigment. We talk of it as the rich colonizing the poor and those with powerful against the weak. Not the whites against the black, but simply the issues of privilege and power.

What needs to be done is for the church to wake up and realise that within the church itself unity needs to be addressed. Because the church that is not united cannot go out and talk about disunity in the world. We need to start taking of justice from within before we talk of it outside. We need

to appreciate the role of women within the church before we seek to address gender issues in the world. Put as many women in leadership positions as possible. Because if we deal with women as the minority yet they form the bigger part of our membership, then we have not started addressing or talking of our role in the society. We need to realise that there are so many women in the church, +/- 80% of every congregation are women; but the leadership structure says 90% are men in terms of ordained ministers. What are we doing? How are we able to talk about gender justice in Zimbabwe? We cannot talk of asking Zimbabwe government to balance gender.

Twenty-one years now, the church has been burning but not consumed (Exodus 3:16). Prior to the birth of the UPCS, the church was mainly in town, serving the white community and a few pockets of their domestic workers, mainly of foreign origins (Malawians and Zambians). The dawn of UPCS saw many natives of Zimbabwe membership growing and taking up leadership in the church. The one church which had on the forefront in perpetrating division in the nation has changed its mission into bringing unity and justice. The exodus of many white members during the farm invasions brought many blacks into the then whites community residential areas and thereby giving them space into the pews formally occupied by the whites alone. Strides have been made to having cross-cultural appointments and inductions, though not fully there. The Zimbabwean church is yet to have a white minister serving in a purely black community.

Do women find themselves in Presbyterianism?

Undeniably, PoZ embraces the participation of women in all its levels. Nevertheless, women's status remains the same in the system— unequal to men. Women are treated as subordinate to men e.g. convenorship of certain 'powerful' committees or officers of the different councils of the church. Equality seems to be more theoretical than practical.

Presbyterianism in the UPCS is very much patriarchal at the moment because it is a church that is firmly entrenched in a context I term *inonzi matare ndeana baba* (courts are for the men) and our system is a system conciliar principle. The church needs to repent of this sin of thinking that women cannot lead; yet the strongest associations in Zimbabwe are those led by women and the best programs in the church today are women driven.

How does the Presbyterian polity enable the accomplishment of this mission?

Strides in the right direction are being made e.g. trainings of leadership at all levels. Evangelistic efforts are being done to overturn the history that "Presbyterian church" is town oriented. More women are being ordained and taking key leadership position with the support from male counterparts. These are not overnight exercises and may not be achieved in this generation. What may be important is to sow the seeds for future generations to inherit a system that profoundly and deliberately promotes equality and equity. The church alone cannot achieve that because it has to challenge patriarchy in the society and must be seen leading in that front.

What can be done to change the narrative and the picture?

It could be the need to strive to go back and do the basics of 'church.' Sometimes people may be busy or seen as busy and yet doing nothing that contributes to its mission, values and vision. The other challenge may be having no idea or failing to keep the main thing. The church's existence has one purpose i.e. the mandate entrusted to her by the Lord and head of the Church, Jesus Christ. Sometimes purpose may be lost when the pursuit of positions and power overshadows or

overrides the purpose of the church. In such a scenario, the view of the church is blurred and she becomes oblivious to the need and task of changing the narrative and the picture.

What are the essential traits of Presbyterianism that should be carried on to the next generations?

Presbyterian theology typically emphasizes the sovereignty of God, the authority of the Scriptures, and the necessity of grace through faith in Christ. The Manual of Faith and Order provides invaluable guidelines, teaching on how God's church can exist in faith and practice i.e. decently and in order. It, however, needs to be put in the layperson's terms and be easily accessed by everyone.

The laity is overshadowed by the clergy. A deliberate move is to be made that the laity should be accorded more voice in debates. The church should stand-up for justice as legacy for the coming generation.

Furthermore, the church should be prophetic in nature and desist from being priestly where it deals with inward issues of faith apart from responding to greater issues of matter. The gospel can never be relevant if it does not respond to matters of political injustices and poverty that has bedeviled our society. We cannot guarantee a future of justice if we do not practice it now.

Presbyterianism worldwide has never been a space for the poor and its approach to theology sits comfortably well with the powerful oppressive elites of the society.

The Presbyterian System must create genuine mechanisms that facilitate practical solidarity. It must close caste gaps where in one Church color are powerful bars, financial status determines value and variance.

Polity and Practice that respect consensus, collective discernment and decision making process is a gem for the next generation especially if it has to positively influence the autocratic political space in Zimbabwe.

The aspect of common unity and multiculturalism is a positive note for the next generation such that we create a society that judges no one on basis of race, pigment, status, age, sex and gender.

Disclaimer:

This production personifies the self of Rev. David Mushayavanhu's view point regarding the UPCS in Zimbabwe. It is his reflection without chauvinism or in lieu of anyone or body of persons.