



## The Experience of Indigenous Churches of the Public role in the new Political Dispensation

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The Organizers of this Conference and the Rev. Dr Vuyani Vellem, Director of the Centre for Public Theology;  
Members of the Faculty of Theology, Professors and Other Theologians;  
Guests and Students;  
The Distinguished People of God

Thank you very much for the invitation that would allow me to say the things I am going to say with great anticipation that they will make a contribution towards the realization of the objectives of this Conference.

The organizers of this Conference have asked me to produce in particular some brief working notes on the public role to be played by the Indigenous community of churches within the new democratic dispensation as against their pre-liberation experience and then emerge with what could be the distinct signs and trends useful to strengthen the arm of these institutions post-liberation.

Further the organizers have suggested that in doing so I also draw some parallels with the public role that is being played or supposed to be played by the mainstream Christian churches post-liberation South Africa. Both these subjects find interrelations in so far as what the critical and core message of the Christian church is supposed to be in the public and social space.

By the nature of its formulation this topic already suggests that before the new dispensation there was a particular kind of role and experience reserved only for the indigenous churches; and by implication role and experience that other churches outside the family of the indigenous would ordinarily not have played and acquired.

And indeed it is true that the experience of the African Indigenous Churches pre-liberation period were not the same as those of the others who were of foreign missionary traditions. Both their role and experience were obscured, neglected and demeaned by the attendant social and political systems of the time.

The formulation of this subject may further suggests that the role of the indigenous churches pre this new democratic dispensation is different from the one that these churches now play in the current new dispensation. This suggestion may not be a true reflection of the reality we have and I will shortly show why I make this assertion.

Ordinarily one would think that the universal role of the Christian Church is to present the Lordship of Jesus Christ as Saviour in the world by making more of his disciples - converting non-believers into believers and practitioners of the Word. And whether the dispensation is new or old this role remains a gospel imperative for the Church as was commissioned by the Lord himself.

However, it might have dawned in the minds of the organizers of this Conference to broaden the discussion on this gospel imperative of the Church's role as all Church throughout human history has always found itself ministering within particular and distinct socio-political contexts, systems and dispensations.

My contestation is that more than the role content is the socio-political environment and milieu that often necessitate discussions of this nature. My argument therefore is that whatever role churches play, whether indigenous or otherwise, if truthful to the gospel, remains the same. More than the role, it is the style of expressing the Lordship of Christ which causes those external and foreign to the practice to look the other way.

Ndou argues in his doctoral thesis on Indigenous Churches that African Indigenous churches "*came into being because of the failures of the mainline churches to satisfy the religious needs of their converts*". (p161)

He further argues that, "*the purpose of establishing the new movements by the indigenous people was not a move to ostracize the white missionaries who introduced the Christian religion*". (p162)

The religious needs in this argument refer to cultural rituals that are inherently intended to address the spirituality of the African people, who wanted to remain African practitioners even after receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour. This is where the concept of African inculturation of the Christian faith was born.

Of course this was also in response to the concerted effort by the missionaries of western origin to convert the African people to Christ by also turning them into little Westerners. This ranged from name change to attire, the looks and language, what medical doctor to go to and so on - virtually things that have got no business to define the role of a Christian or Church in any society. In certain instances some of those who resisted this coercion were labeled rebels, backward and uncivilized.

So those who defined others as backward also labeled their form of worship and churches as "sects" without paying attention to the core values that such form of worship and church was teaching.

The role content of the African Indigenous churches has been largely guided by the teachings of the Lord in the midst of the political environment that was characterized by colonialism, later apartheid and all other sorts of segregation practices and policies. And therefore when all these political ideologies collapsed, with the new democratic dispensation setting in, the role content of the African Indigenous Churches in South Africa did not require any redefinition but only to be liberated.

The liberation of the African Indigenous Churches meant that the Lord Jesus Christ could now be worshipped in Sepedi, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, Xitsonga, Tshivhenda, iSindebele, Setswana, Sesotho and so on, because these languages were now liberated and for the first time called, “official” by the constitution governing the new dispensation.

So, the African Indigenous churches’ original role of presenting the Lordship of Jesus Christ as Saviour could then be expressed without the old feeling that the Lord was a Western formulation only to be adored through “piano” and not “moropa”, guitar and not “ditlhwantlhwadi”. This is what the new dispensation brought about - the affirmation of those previously demeaned.

If I were to be asked to speak to certain specific social roles that the Indigenous Churches are known for, I would immediately refer to their firm identification with the rhythm of the African continent, its values for peace and communal living expressed through the values of sharing, caring and respect. These values are all core to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ only to be threatened by those who aspire for competition, materialism and individualism as values. Therefore, in this sense the role of the African Indigenous Church is self-defined and remains in line with what the Lord Jesus Christ taught.

Of great emphasis is their public role in spiritual healing - believing strongly that diseases do attack not only the physical body but the spirit as well. In this regard no believer can be whole unless the spirit is healthy. So, in worship prayer for the sick is a common practice. What I hear these churches say is that only if our nation could be spiritually healthy, the nation will prosper.

Concluding on painting the picture of a South Africa whose society is still unequal and indifferent to issues of social justice, we need to share the experiences of a church that was once oppressed and now liberated - a church that was once demeaned and now affirmed - a church that represents the spiritual aspirations of the poor majority of our population - believers who never questions issues of faith but only believe and trust in the Lord for their salvation.

Much of this role and experience of ensuring that the socio-political and economic freedom is achieved has been played largely by the so-called missionary churches. While playing this role, I have experienced a sense that these churches could not operate in silos to the exclusion of the majority Christians who also belong to the African indigenous family of churches.

As though it is the same as yesterday, the world has taken quite a drastic turn as it globalised. The space has become smaller and there is a lot of unhealthy competition for the world’s natural resources and wealth. In his recent lecture to the Law Society of Limpopo, the former South African President Thabo Mbeki refers to the “recolonisation of Africa” by the powerful nations. This already presents a new challenge for the Church never to allow the second round of oppression to visit the African shores.

The theory of the recolonisation of Africa is based on the battle over much of the natural resources that are found in Africa. It is not an accident that you currently have an Africa that is experiencing a lot of instability as in Libya, Sudan and South Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Egypt and so on. This systematic destabilization of Africa is intended to justify the occupation of Africa by the super powerful nation...and it must be resisted using the gospel of Jesus Christ which liberates all humanity from any form of bondage.

The Church has to work for social justice which will translate into peace and stability in the world.

And it would only pay dividend to the nation, as I said at the beginning of this notes, for both traditions to remain true to the gospel by presenting the Lordship of Christ to the unbelievers. Guided by the experiences and the environment in which this must be achieved, I see no contradiction between those who work for social justice and those who ensure that the nation is spiritually healthy. Both are the liberative approach to the preaching of Jesus Christ's gospel. More than a contradiction, these roles and experiences are complimentary.

Now that there is no longer apartheid and colonialism, both the African Indigenous Churches and those of missionary descend must maximize the Christian space by working together and together liberate Africa from the shackles of its oppressors.

I have said all the things I have said because I hold strong the words of the Apostle Paul that, *"you are all God's children by believing in Christ Jesus. Clearly, all of you who were baptized in Christ's name have clothed yourself with Christ. There are neither Jews nor Greeks, slaves nor free people, males nor females. You are all the same in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:27-29)

I thank you

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The end