

Nelson Mandela: A Methodist on a Mission

By Rev. Kelvin Sauls, Holman United Methodist Church

As we continue to lift up Nelson Mandela, his family, and South Africa in prayer during this time of challenge, I cannot help but reflect on his impact on my life, and undoubtedly the lives of many around the world. Growing up in South Africa, Nelson Mandela was a mystery man to many of us. The apartheid government did all in its assumed power to either erase him from, and/or reinterpret him in the second-hand pedagogical discourse we had access to. Moreover, the government took an extreme revisionist disposition towards the movement for freedom and dignity for all South Africans. However, for many of us, there was education in the classrooms, and education in the room called life. Education for us in the room called life was characterized by discrimination and dehumanization, and enforced by oppression and marginalization. The education in the room called life had us going from the shacks we lived and worshiped in, to the backyards we laughed, cried and sought safety in, to the dusty streets and soccer fields we played on.

Through banned books, outlawed curriculum and whispering voices, Nelson Mandela transitioned from a mystery man to a man on a mission – a mission that was informed by a movement to restore dignity and equality to everyone, and Ubuntu in all the land. His mission was informed and shaped by both his cultural and religious roots. Before he was an activist or a freedom fighter, prisoner of hope, and President, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was a Methodist. Born in the small village of Mvezo, in the district of Umtata in Transkei, South Africa, his father named him Rolihlahla, which means "pulling the branch of the tree," or more collo-

quially "troublemaker." Mandela's mother was a Methodist, and Mandela followed in her footsteps, attending a Methodist missionary school, where he was known by the name Nelson on his first day at school.

This mission – informed by a movement to restore dignity and equality to everyone, and Ubuntu in all the land – has infected and affected my life in unexpected and unexplained ways. Moreover, as I find myself in the classroom of life located at the intersection of South Joburg and South Los Angeles, I am persuaded that the life and legacy of Nelson Mandela must continue to inspire voice and vision, connect hearts and hands, and fortify feet towards the beloved community.

Nelson Mandela envisioned such a community as one where supremacy has no place. He connected this vision upon entering prison in 1964, and when he walked out of prison in 1990. His defense statement became his statement of freedom, "I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for, and to see realized. But my Lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die." Hence, Mandela the Methodist claimed his God-given mission by resisting the barbaric and evil manifestation of supremacy in all its institutionalized and internalized forms – manifestations that provide roots and sustenance for inequality.

Equality for all was an integral aspect of Nelson Mandela's mission in life. He had a sense that equality was an inextricable thread connecting humanity into a poly-cultural garment of destiny. Ending stigma was another unapologetic aspect of Nelson Mandela's mission in life. Stigmatization in general, but in particular towards people living with HIV/

AIDS was a behaviour that Mandela described as inexcusable and deplorable. Announcing to the world that his grandson died of HIV/AIDS was a decision to educate and advocate. His personal tragedy became a national and international teachable moment to mobilize against the atrocity of stigmatization

Always seeking a more excellent way, Nelson Mandela believed in the power and purpose of forgiveness. He embodied the collective consequences of fear grounded in ignorance and indifference for the uniquely "other." Having seen and experienced such inhumanity, he believed that forgiveness is a path to wholeness. Having tasted the disempowerment of bitterness, Mandela wrote, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies." Grounded in accountability with dignity, reconciliation with truth, Mandela promoted forgiveness and goodness as paths leading towards the restoration of inner and outer beauty.

Given these tumultuous and consequential times, how can the global impact of Mandela's mission inform us as Methodists for such a time as this? What has our commitment been to the eradication of supremacy and stigmatization? How are we involved in the restoration of equality and human dignity? Though no easy walk to such a freedom, we can reach our collective destiny of wholeness through forgiveness, humanity through equality, by developing a courageous faith, audacious hope, and bodacious love for the long haul.

S a w i b o n a * M a n d e l a ! ! !

*(Though a general greeting in South Africa, it literally means "I see you")

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