



In reviewing related news reports it soon became clear that there was no real certainty about whether Nelson Mandela had any formal relationship with the Christian faith, or with a particular church or Christian denomination. The media reported that he was a member of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), and senior clergy from that denomination featured prominently in the public and private pastoral events surrounding his death and burial. Moreover, it was interesting, although not surprising, to see how keen the church (and Christians) were to claim that he was an adherent of the Christian faith. In addition, I was fascinated by how the governing African National Congress (ANC) used the association between Mandela and the Christian faith, (and the MCSA in particular, which is South Africa's largest mainline Christian denomination) to engage the Christian constituency in order to win voter support in the lead up to the 2014 National Elections.

As a public theologian a couple of questions arose in my mind. Firstly, was it true that Nelson Mandela was a Christian (and if so, in what ways was he Christian)? Secondly, was he a member of a specific Christian

# NELSON MANDELA and his faith

## How can it help us to avoid an inappropriate relationship

The death of Nelson Mandela on 5 December 2013 put the spotlight on his religious convictions and faith affiliation. Academics, journalists, and interested members of faith communities asked what his faith perspective was. Was Madiba a Christian? Was he a member of a particular church? Dion Foster elaborates:

denomination as claimed in the media? Thirdly, why were the church and the state so eager to support this association between Mandela and South Africa's largest mainline Christian denomination?

Some may ask why this matters? Sadly, South Africa has a painful history of inappropriate relationships of power, influence and privilege between the church and the state. This has serious implications for aspects of our lives, such as freedom of religion and human

rights. The abuse of any form of power (whether it be religious, political, economic or social) is dangerous and not in the interests of the common good for all. As a result, my final and most important question in this research was: What lessons could we learn from the relationship Nelson Mandela had with his faith and the MCSA to avoid an inappropriate relationship between the church and the state in the future?

I knew that I would need to work through a great deal of historical and biographical material related to Nelson Mandela and the various stages of his life to find the answer. This meant studying his autobiography (*A long walk to freedom*) in various forms, but also considering other authorised and unauthorised biographies, studying his speeches, letters, interviews and formal and non-formal communication. I also conducted interviews (particularly with chaplains and ministers of religion) who served Madiba in the years where he was not able to communicate publically (mainly after his arrest and imprisonment), but I also interviewed those who cared for him in private during his presidency. In that time he could communicate openly, but tended to be measured about his personal faith in the interests of religious freedom and religious equality in South Africa's emerging democracy.

The interviews were extremely enlightening and gave insight into an aspect of his life that was seldom shared in public, and I was able to source documents that shed some light on his personal faith perspective, his church membership and relationship with the church throughout his life.

Two of the more unique documents were his class membership card for the Methodist Church in 1934 which was signed by Nelson Mandela and had the scripture verse Mark 8.34 on it, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (NRSV). The other was a letter to his daughter Maki (Makaziwe) Mandela dated 27 March 1977 (while still on Robben Island), where Mandela reminisced fondly on how he and OR Tambo were members of the Bible Society at Wesley House Fort Hare, and that he was a bible study leader and Sunday school teacher during that period.

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Here follows a summary of the research published in a special edition of the journal of the Church History Society of South Africa in August 2014:

Nelson Mandela's faith played an important role in his life. In addition, it also impacted the way in which the church and the state relate to one another in South Africa at present. Since Nelson Mandela was such a 'good person', the church has at times assumed that all successive national leaders need to be engaged in the same manner. This is a mistake on the part of the church since less moral and reconciling leaders have abused the relationship with their faith and the church for party political aims that are not in the interests of the common good of South Africans.

The research asked, and answered, four questions.

- What was Nelson Mandela's relationship with the MCSA? The conclusion was that he self-identified as a church member of the MCSA and went to some lengths to maintain such ties with the denomination.
- What was his relationship to the 'church'? We saw that his relationship, as with all Christians, was expressed differently with each of the three different 'forms' of church that were considered in the research (denomination, congregation and personal faith expression). His primary identification was however with the church as denomination.
- Why is the MCSA so keen to be identified with Nelson Mandela, moreover, why is the state and the governing ANC willing to support, and even encourage, such a public perception of church membership?

Answers to these questions highlighted the fact that there is a need for further critical reflection on the relationship that exists between the church and the state in South Africa to avoid abuse of freedom of religion.

This presented the final question.

- What should the relationship between the church and the state in South Africa be going forward?

**Less moral and reconciling leaders have abused the relationship with their faith and the church for party political aims that are not in the interests of the common good of South Africans.**

## between the church and the state in South Africa?

The interviews with chaplains who journeyed with Mandela were fascinating. I managed to interview chaplains and ministers from his earliest imprisonment on Robben Island (Revd. Peter Storey), to those who served him during his imprisonment in Polsmoor and Victor Verster prisons (Revd. James Gribble), and those who cared for him during his presidency and marriage (Revd. Mvume Dandala), and ministers from the period of post-presidency to his death (Revd's.

One answer was that we should be careful not to allow historical 'idealism' to cloud our objectivity and wisdom and so compromise the relationship of prophetic distance between the church and the state that is intended for the common good of all South Africans.