

## **Mandela and the Methodists: Faith, fallacy and fact<sup>1</sup>**

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### *Abstract*

The death of Nelson Mandela has once again focused the spotlight on his religious convictions and faith affiliation. Numerous academics, journalists, and interested members of faith communities have asked what Mr Mandela's faith perspective was. It is clear that faith played a part in his life and this was evidenced in the events surrounding his death and funeral. Faith leaders, and in particular Christian leaders (such as Bishop Ivan Abrahams, Bishop Zipho Siwa, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu), featured prominently in the public and private events surrounding Mr Mandela's death, memorial service and funeral. Numerous media sources reported that the Mandela family, and Nelson Mandela in particular, were members of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. The Chaplain General of the African National Congress is an ordained minister of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, which also played some part in the role accorded to the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in the public and private moments of ministry surrounding Mr Mandela's death. This article considers Nelson Mandela's faith biography in order to answer the following questions: Was Nelson Mandela a member of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa? What was his relationship to the church and the Christian faith? What lessons can we learn from this for the relationship between the church and the state in South Africa?

### **Introduction.**

The death of Nelson Mandela on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2013 has once again focused a spotlight on the Nelson Mandela's life. One of the aspects that received scrutiny in the public discourse was Mandela's faith perspective in

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<sup>1</sup> This work is based on the research supported by the National Research Foundation.

general, and his relationship with the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in particular.<sup>2</sup> In reviewing the media presentation of these two points it soon became clear that there was no real certainty about whether Mr Mandela had any formal relationship with the Christian faith, or with a particular Church or Christian denomination.

What is clear is that faith leaders, and in particular Christian leaders (such as Bishop Ivan Abrahams, Bishop Zipho Siwa, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu), featured prominently in the public and private events surrounding Mr Mandela's death, memorial service and funeral.

Moreover, it is notable that clergy from the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) presided at the public memorial service at the FNB Stadium on 10 December 2013,<sup>3</sup> the official state funeral service in Qunu on 15 December 2013,<sup>4</sup> and also offered pastoral care in private to members of the Mandela family and the members and leadership of the African National Congress.<sup>5</sup> President Jacob Zuma chose to do his first formal public address on the passing of Mr Mandela at the Bryanston Methodist Church on Sunday 8 December 2013, which he declared a "national prayer day in honour of Mandela",<sup>6</sup> drawing links between the importance of faith in the South African nation (and the state), but also between the governing party and the MCSA. The chaplain to the African National Congress, Revd Vukile Mehana, is an ordained minister of the MCSA.<sup>7</sup> No doubt this played some

<sup>2</sup> Winnie Graham, "Mandela Was Ever-Mindful of Church Role in South Africans' Struggle," accessed June 17, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/news/people/mandela-was-ever-mindful-church-role-south-africans-struggle>; "Religious Institutions Gave Mandela Hope, Foundation," 2013; "Methodist-Shaped, Mandela Praised Roles of Religion," *The Christian Century* 131, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>3</sup> "Sermon Transcript for Mandela Memorial Service," accessed June 17, 2014, <http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/sermon-transcript-for-mandela-memorial-service/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Presiding Bishop Zipho Siwa Preaching at Tata Madiba's Funeral," accessed June 17, 2014, <http://www.methodist.org.za/news/12152013-1129>.

<sup>5</sup> President of the World Methodist Council, Bishop Ivan Abrahams and the General Secretary of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa presided at the service at the Mandela home, "World Methodist Council General Secretary, Other Faith Leaders Bring Comfort to Mandela Family," accessed June 17, 2014, <http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/world-methodist-council-and-world-council-of-churches-general-secretary-bring-comfort-to-mandela-family/>; Revd Vukile Mehana, Chaplain General to the ANC and a Methodist Minister, was among the first clergy to offer pastoral care at the Mandela home after Mr Mandela's death, "His Final Moments - Times LIVE," accessed June 17, 2014, <http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/2013/12/08/his-final-moments1>.

<sup>6</sup> Gabara Nthambeleni, "Zuma at Bryanston Methodist Church for Mandela Prayer Day," accessed June 17, 2014, <http://www.sanews.gov.za/world/zuma-bryanston-methodist-church-mandela-prayer-day>; Please see a video recording of the full address at the following location: "Reflect on Madiba's Values: Zuma" (Bryanston, Johannesburg: SABC News, December 8, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diz5WQVCzJs>.

<sup>7</sup> AFP, "Nelson Mandela's Coffin Led through Qunu," StillImage, *ABC News*, (December 15, 2013), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-12-15/mandela-1/5157446>.

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part in the role accorded to the MCSA and its clergy in these public and private moments of ministry.

In the period leading up to Mr Mandela's death, and in the period directly following it, there were a number of media reports stating that Nelson Mandela was a member of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.<sup>8</sup> From the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's side there was also a clear claim on Mandela's membership of the denomination. The MCSA's Presiding Bishop, the Revd Zipho Siwa, had the following to say on the day after Mr Mandela's death:

Madiba remained a committed Methodist throughout his life. As a church, we hail the qualities that confirmed him as a true son of Methodism – a life of faith in God lived in service to others.<sup>9</sup>

In light of these events and statements this article intends to ask, and answer, four questions. First, what was Nelson Mandela's relationship with the MCSA? Second, what was his relationship to the "church"? This term will need some consideration in order to understand how Nelson Mandela related to the Christian church. Third, why was the MCSA so keen to be identified with Mr Mandela? Similarly, why was the state and the governing ANC willing to support, and even encourage, such a public perception of Mandela's church membership? Finally, what lessons can we learn from this for the relationship between the church and the state in South Africa going forward?

This is the first time that a comprehensive faith biography of Nelson Mandela has been attempted. As a point of departure it needs to be noted that critical consideration of historical events was necessary to ascertain how valid the faith and church membership claims were in relation to Mr Mandela's life. Jacques Derrida comments, in relation to the legacy of Nelson Mandela, that such an honest and even critical evaluation is necessary to safeguard the integrity of Mr Mandela's memory. He says,

You can recognize an authentic inheritor in the one who conserves and reproduces, but also in the one who respects the

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<sup>8</sup> Graham, "Mandela Was Ever-Mindful of Church Role in South Africans' Struggle"; "Religious Institutions Gave Mandela Hope, Foundation"; "Methodist-Shaped, Mandela Praised Roles of Religion."

<sup>9</sup> "Bishop: Celebrate Mandela's Life," *News24*, accessed June 17, 2014, <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Bishop-Celebrate-Mandelas-life-20131206>.

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logic of the legacy enough to turn it upon occasion against those who claim to be its guardians.<sup>10</sup>

In order to answer the abovementioned questions the author conducted an extensive survey of available documents (books, speeches, letters, newspaper reports etc.). A series of individual interviews were also conducted for the periods in which very little was written about Mr Mandela's faith life (this period spans from 1962-2013).

### **Mandela and the Methodists: A biography**

Cracknell and White have the following to say, in summary, of Nelson Mandela's links to Methodism in their book "An introduction to World Methodism":

If there is one supremely significant South African Methodist, it is Nelson Mandela (b.1918). Although among the first to deny that he is a theologian ("I am just an ordinary person trying to make sense of the mysteries of life"), Nelson Mandela makes it known that he is a Christian, owing his education almost entirely to the Methodist Church. Mandela was cared for by the Methodist Church throughout his long years of exile on Robben Island, receiving Holy Communion regularly from visiting Methodist ministers.<sup>11</sup>

Is this claim valid? Was Nelson Mandela a Methodist? This section of the article will give a biographical overview of Nelson Mandela's life covering 5 broad historical periods. The emphasis of this biographical overview will be to present particular links that Nelson Mandela had to Methodism in South Africa. Thus this section will not give much attention to Mandela's social and political formation, unless it is pertinent to his relationship with Southern African Methodism. A further important caveat that must be noted is that Nelson Mandela was deeply formed by his African cultural heritage, perhaps even more strongly than by his Christian formation.<sup>12</sup> However, that is a broad and complex subject that will need to be considered in another article. I will, however, make some reference to this important informant of his

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, in Admiration," in *For Nelson Mandela*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Mustapha Tili, trans. Marry Ann Caws and Isabelle Lorenz, English Translation (New York, N.Y., 1987), 13-42.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White, *An Introduction to World Methodism* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 77.

<sup>12</sup> Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, 1st Paperback Ed (Back Bay Books, 1995), 23.

identity and life in a later section of the article where I discuss African Christian Humanism.

*Birth and schooling*

Rolihlahla Mandela was born into the Madiba clan on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 1918 at Mvezo in the former Transkei, the son of Nogaphi Nosekeni and Mphakanyiswa Gadla Mandela. He moved to Qunu with his mother in 1920 after his father was deposed as regional chief. Mandela notes that his mother had become a Christian because of the effect of two influential men, George and Ben Mbekela.<sup>13</sup> It was under their guidance that Mandela was baptised as a Christian in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (then called the Wesleyan Church or Wesleyan Mission) and was later sent to Mission schools.

He notes that he did not attend regular services at Qunu (except for his baptism service at the age of 7). However, he became a regular attender of Church services later on at Mqhekezweni<sup>14</sup> when he was sent there to attend the mission school. Here he came under the guidance of Rev Matyholo of the Wesleyan mission who made quite an impact on the young Mandela. He writes,

The two influences that dominated my thoughts and actions during those days were chieftaincy and the church. After all, the only heroes I had heard of at that time had almost all been chiefs ... Equally important was the position of the church, which I associated not so much with the body and doctrine contained in the bible but with the person of Reverend Matyholo. In this circuit he was as popular as the regent, and the fact that in spiritual matters he was the regent's superior and leader, stressed the enormous power of the church. What was even more was that all the progress my people had made – the schools that I attended, the teachers who taught me, the clerks and interpreters in government offices, the agricultural demonstrators and policemen, were all the products of missionary schools.<sup>15</sup>

This quote gives us some insight into how Mandela remembers his early religious formation, and what he deems to be important in the Church; namely, powerful and charismatic individuals, the institution and its contribution towards the development of society.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 18–19.

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It was while attending school at Qunu that his teacher, Miss Mdingane gave him the name Nelson, of which Mandela wrote “Why this particular name I have no idea.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, this was the custom at the time and he adhered to it. As noted earlier, African culture was of equal, if not greater significance to Mandela in his early years. However, reflecting on this period in his life at the time of writing “The long walk to freedom” he says:

I consider myself obliged to pay proper respect to my customs and traditions, provided that such customs and traditions tend to keep us together and do not in any way conflict with the aims and objects of the struggle against racial oppression. But I shall neither impose my own customs on others nor follow any practice which will offend my comrades, especially now that freedom has become so costly.<sup>17</sup>

This perspective would come to epitomise Mandela’s understanding of African tradition, and the Christian religion, in his life as President in a deeply divided nation.<sup>18</sup>

There are a few important historical artefacts that link Mr Mandela to the MCSA in this period of his life. In the Nelson Mandela archives there are copies of Nelson Mandela’s “Class meeting” cards from 1929-1931.<sup>19</sup> A Class meeting card is a certificate of membership given to members of the MCSA as part of the discipline of attending small group meetings in which prayer, Catechism, Bible Study, and discipleship classes took place. Prophetically Mandela’s “Class meeting” card for 1931 bears the following words of Jesus (in isiXhosa), “If any of them want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8.34 NRSV).

In 1935 Rolihlahla was enrolled at the Clarkebury Institute, a Methodist school in Engcobo, by the Regent, Chief Jongintaba Dalindyebo. Mandela credits Clarkebury as, “the alma mater which gave me the benefit of its years of teaching experience and general guidance, and which opened my eyes to the value of scientific knowledge”.<sup>20</sup> From here he moved on to the Methodist preparatory school, Healdtown, in Fort Beaufort in 1937.

It was while he was at Healdtown that he met the Reverend Seth Mokitimi, who was then the boarding master of the hostel in which he stayed. Seth Mokitimi went on to become the first Black African President of the

<sup>16</sup> *Nelson Mandela Mini Biography* (eBios, 2014), Section 1: Early Childhood 1918–1936.

<sup>17</sup> Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 77.

<sup>19</sup> Please follow the following link to view these ‘Methodist Class’ cards: <http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/asset-viewer/personal-papers-church-membership-cards-1/text-asset-cell-8?exhibitId=gRmTCoyE&hl=en>

<sup>20</sup> Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 29.

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Methodist Church of Southern Africa (elected in 1963, serving 1964-1965)<sup>21</sup>. The MCSA's seminary is named after the Revd Seth Mokitimi. Mandela wrote of Mokitimi, "He was gifted and progressive and when I became a prefect in my second year, I found it a pleasure to serve under him."<sup>22</sup>

The intention of his schooling was to prepare him to become a counsellor to the Thembu royal house. Upon completion of his schooling he enrolled for a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree at the University of Fort Hare in Alice (1939).<sup>23</sup> During this period Mandela and Oliver Tambo (also a student at Fort Hare at the time) were members of the Bible Society and are said to have taught Bible Study classes.<sup>24</sup> In a letter addressed to his daughter Maki Mandela while he was still on Robben Island (27 March 1977) Mandela wrote, "I stayed at Wesley House. At Fort Hare I even became a Sunday School teacher."<sup>25</sup> This personal affirmation seems to support the earlier activity of leading Bible Study with Oliver Tambo.

The period at Fort Hare was the first time in his life that he recalls experiencing openly racist behaviour. Here he became part of student and social politics – which eventually led to his being expelled from Fort Hare in 1940.<sup>26</sup>

### *Young adulthood and early years in the ANC*

Shortly after the events of Fort Hare Mandela absconded to Johannesburg in order to avoid an arranged marriage that was orchestrated by the Regent, Jongintaba.<sup>27</sup> While in Johannesburg he got involved in the work of the ANC and the Liberation movement in South Africa. In 1942 he formally joined the

<sup>21</sup> Deborah Gaitskell, "South Africa and Beyond: Seth Mokitimi and the 'Kingdom without Barriers', 1939–1964," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 469–90, doi:10.1080/03057070.2012.703403; Simanga Kumalo and Neville Richardson, "Seth Mokitimi and Education for Ministry: What's in a Name?," *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 38, no. 2 (2010): 259–74; Daryl Balia, "The Witness of the Methodist Church in South Africa," *International Review of Mission*, January 1994, Academic OneFile.

<sup>22</sup> Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> J. C. Buthelezi, *Rolihlahla Dalibhunga Nelson Mandela: An Ecological Study* (Trafford Publishing, 2002), 30–31; Elleke Boehmer, *Nelson Mandela* (Sterling Publishing Company, Inc., 2009), 28–29.

<sup>24</sup> Pamela Atkins, "Methodist Influences | Nelson Mandela 1918-2013 | Lay People | People | My Methodist History," accessed June 17, 2014, <http://www.mymethodisthistory.org.uk/page.aspx?id=312>.

<sup>25</sup> Please see, <http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/asset-viewer/personal-papers-church-membership-cards-1/text-asset-cell-6?exhibitId=gRmTCoYE&hl=en>.

<sup>26</sup> Boehmer, *Nelson Mandela*, 30; Buthelezi, *Rolihlahla Dalibhunga Nelson Mandela*, 30–31; Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 40–41; Anthony Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorised Biography* (HarperCollins UK, 2011), 26–27.

<sup>27</sup> Boehmer, *Nelson Mandela*, 30; Buthelezi, *Rolihlahla Dalibhunga Nelson Mandela*, 31.

ANC as a member, in this same year he also passed his final examinations for his BA degree.<sup>28</sup>

A great deal has been written about this period of Mandela's political life and his growing involvement in the ANC. However, very little is known about his involvement with the church at this stage. We do know that he married Evelyn Ntoko Mase in 1944 who was deeply religious (she was not a Methodist, rather she was a Jehova's Witness)<sup>29</sup> and is described as a "devout, a-political" woman.<sup>30</sup> There were several rumours that Mandela was having relationships with other women during the period of his 14 year marriage to Evelyn – in the end she learnt about his intention to divorce her from the press.<sup>31</sup> He met Winnie Madikizela during the time that he was separated from Evelyn. In the same year that he divorced Evelyn he married Winnie Madikizela (Winnie Nomzamo) at the Bizana Methodist Church on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1958.<sup>32</sup>

### *Imprisonment*

Thorough research was unable to find any mention of Mr Mandela's relationship to the church between the period of 1958 and his imprisonment on Robben Island in 1963. However, we do know from various sources, including Mandela's autobiography, that during this period he was deeply influenced by Robert Sobukwe, the founder of the Pan Africanist Congress, who was a Methodist Lay Preacher.<sup>33</sup> His entry into the ANC would also surely have made him aware that the founder of the ANC was a Congregational Minister, Rev John Dube, while the second president was a Methodist Lay Preacher – SM Makgatho, and its third president was a Methodist minister, Rev ZK Mahabane<sup>34</sup> (whose son, Paul Mahabane, was one of Nelson Mandela's boyhood friends, spending holidays with him in the Transkei).<sup>35</sup>

By the time Mandela arrived for the second time on Robben Island after the Rivonia Trial in May 1964, Rev Peter Storey had already been visiting Robert Sobukwe on the island for some months to pray with him and share in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Storey recounted that while he

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<sup>28</sup> Rita Barnard, *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), xxi; Sampson, *Mandela*, 27–28.

<sup>29</sup> Buthelezi, *Rolihlahla Dalibhunga Nelson Mandela*, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Boehmer, *Nelson Mandela*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> Buthelezi, *Rolihlahla Dalibhunga Nelson Mandela*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Limb, *Nelson Mandela: A Biography* (ABC-CLIO, 2008), 67; Mandela refers to Winnie as "Winnie Nomzamo" and to Bizana as Mbizana, "corrupted to Bizana by the whites", Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 331.

<sup>33</sup> Graham Maddox, *Religion and the Rise of Democracy* (Routledge, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 40.



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was a minister at the Camps Bay United Church he had volunteered as a chaplain to Robben Island. It was an arduous task for him to visit the political prisoners since he would have to obtain written permission from the Chief Magistrate each time he wanted to travel to the island. In his interview Storey noted that before Mandela was brought back to Robben Island as one of the 7 sentenced the in the Rivonia trial he would have been a general population prisoner who attended church services with the rest of the inmates on the island at the purpose built church<sup>36</sup>. However, once Mandela returned to the island after the Rivonia trial he was not allowed out of his cell during the church services. Storey recounted how he would walk up and down the aisle in-between the cells speaking with the men, and would then serve communion to each one individually in their cells.<sup>37</sup> In later years the strict isolation was lessened and the Rivonia prisoners were allowed to attend regular church services. However, as Sampson notes, while Mandela was a regular church-goer on Robben Island, he did not confine himself only to his Christian faith. During this period he also studied Islam while on the island.<sup>38</sup>

Storey visited Nelson Mandela numerous times over that period and got to know him well. In later years, after Mr Mandela's release from prison, he and Peter Storey had numerous occasions to meet and share the platform at public events. Mandela regarded the Rev Peter Storey so highly that he used one of his few letter-writing privileges to write to him to congratulate him on being appointed the President of the MCSA. Mandela was only allowed to write 12 letters a year in the 1980's.<sup>39</sup> In a speech to the Methodist conference in 1994 Mandela expressed great appreciation for the pastoral care that was shown to him and his comrades by Methodist clergy during that period. He said,

Methodist leaders were prominent among the prophets who refused to bow to the false god of apartheid. Your ministers also visited us in prison and cared for our families. Some of you were banned [including Peter Storey]. Your Presiding

<sup>36</sup> Peter Storey, Interview with Peter Storey about chaplaincy to Nelson Mandela on Robben Island, Audio, May 27, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> "The Nelson Mandela I Knew...And Loved," accessed June 17, 2014, [http://www.contextwithlornadueck.com/peoples-blog/the-nelson-mandela-i-knewand-loved; Mandela | Apartheid | Robben Island | Rev. Peter Storey | South Africa | 1315 | 1, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v18-ZmSbb9o&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.contextwithlornadueck.com/peoples-blog/the-nelson-mandela-i-knewand-loved; Mandela | Apartheid | Robben Island | Rev. Peter Storey | South Africa | 1315 | 1, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v18-ZmSbb9o&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>38</sup> Sampson, *Mandela*, 232; Storey also noted that Mandela had an open disposition to Islam and other faiths. This is a trait that he would continue to carry into his presidency. "The Nelson Mandela I Knew ... And Loved."

<sup>39</sup> "The Nelson Mandela I Knew...And Loved."

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Bishop [Dr Stanley Mogoba] himself shared imprisonment with us for some years on Robben Island.<sup>40</sup>

Among the other notable Methodist chaplains who cared for Mr Mandela while he was imprisoned on Robben Island are the late Rev Theo Kotze,<sup>41</sup> a significant anti apartheid activist.

In 1982 Mr Mandela was moved from Robben Island to the Polsmoor Prison in Cape Town. It is believed that he and some other senior leaders in the liberation movement were being moved to minimise their influence on younger activists that were being sent to the island during that period.<sup>42</sup> His connection with the Methodist Church grew stronger at this point since he had greater freedom at Polsmoor. It was also easier for ministers to gain permission to visit the prisoners at Polsmoor prison.

One of the more remarkable stories of this time, that speaks more to Mr Mandela's Christian witness and commitment to humanism than to his Methodist identity, is told by the Anglican priest Harry Wiggit in *A time to speak*.<sup>43</sup> In 1982 when Mr Mandela and some of the other prisoners were transferred to Polsmoor prison Harry Wiggit visited them one Sunday to serve the sacrament of the Eucharist.<sup>44</sup> While the group were busy following the liturgy of preparation for the Eucharist, under the watchful eye of a suspicious prison warder, Wiggit was interrupted by Mandela and asked to stop the service. It was just after they had greeted one another with the passing of the peace when Mandela walked over to the warder and asked him if he was a Christian. The warder replied that he was, and so Mandela replied, "Well then ... join us round this table. You cannot sit apart. This is Holy Communion, and we must share and receive it together."<sup>45</sup> Field tells of how the warder drew up a chair and shared in the sacrament with the prisoners and

<sup>40</sup> Nelson Mandela, "Address by President Nelson Mandela to the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church," Speech, (September 18, 1994), <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=3685>.

<sup>41</sup> Please refer to this description of his witness and ministry, Peter Walshe, *Church Versus State in South Africa: The Case of the Christian Institute* (Orbis Books, 1983), 74 Other chaplains during this period included the Revds Sydney Jones, Isaac Harley and Tom Parker.

<sup>42</sup> Sampson, *Mandela*, 340.

<sup>43</sup> Harry Wiggit, *A Time to Speak* (Cape Town: Pretext, 2007), 57; A version of this narrative is available online at, Harry Wiggit, "He Shone with the Light of Christ," *The Church Times*, December 13, 2013, <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2013/13-december/news/world/%E2%80%98he-shone-with-the-light-of-christ%E2%80%99>; For a detailed description and analysis of this event please refer to, David Field, "Remembering Madiba – Communing with Christ: Nelson Mandela and the Praxis of Open Communion" (Unpublished, December 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Mr Mandela is known to have attended regular Christian meetings hosted by a variety of different denominations and clergy.

<sup>45</sup> Wiggit, *A Time to Speak*, 57; Field, "Remembering Madiba – Communing with Christ: Nelson Mandela and the Praxis of Open Communion," 1.

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Wiggitt. He notes that this inclusive behaviour was a common aspect of Mandela's behaviour at that time and in the years that followed.<sup>46</sup>

Another visitor to Mandela during this period at Polsmoor, and later at Victor Verster Prison (after December 1988),<sup>47</sup> was the Revd James Gribble. Revd Gribble was the Bishop of the Cape of Good Hope District of the MCSA. He first visited Mr Mandela at Polsmoor and discovered that his son and Mr Mandela's daughter were in the same class and school. This served to cement a bond between the cleric and Mr Mandela. In an interview with Revd Gribble conducted on 6 June 2014 he indicated that Mr Mandela spoke to him at some length about the MCSA. Mr Mandela was conscious of changes in leadership within the church, and also knew of events surrounding Winnie Mandela and the MCSA. He expressed his concern about some of her activities, including her worsening relationship to the Methodist Church in Soweto<sup>48</sup>. Buthelezi notes that by this time Winnie Mandela had already begun to develop differences of opinion with her family denomination, the MCSA.<sup>49</sup> Sadly, this relationship would grow increasingly strained in the years to follow, particularly as her involvement in the events surrounding the abduction and murder of the youth activist, Stompie Seipei, from the Methodist manse in Orlando West (Soweto) surfaced.<sup>50</sup>

Among the other points of contact with Mandela's Methodist heritage that James Gribble mentioned in his interview were that Mr Mandela expressed his deep admiration and respect for the witness and ministry of Revd Seth Mokitimi.<sup>51</sup> Gribble also shared another incident that took place some years later when he was visiting Mr Mandela in his private quarters at Victor Verster Prison. On that occasion Gribble and Mandela were using the red and white service booklet that contains the liturgies of the MCSA. After the private service was completed Mr Mandela asked Revd Gribble if he could keep the copy of the service book he had been using for his personal devotion and reflection – naturally Gribble agreed.<sup>52</sup>

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 1990 FW de Klerk, then President of South Africa, announced the un-banning of the ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).<sup>53</sup> This formed part of a series of events that would eventually lead to

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<sup>46</sup> Field, "Remembering Madiba – Communing with Christ: Nelson Mandela and the Praxis of Open Communion," 1–4.

<sup>47</sup> Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Chapter 95.

<sup>48</sup> Gribble James, Interview with James Gribble on his ministry to Nelson Mandela, Audio, June 6, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Buthelezi, *Rolihlahla Dalibhunga Nelson Mandela*, 540.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> James, Interview with James Gribble on his ministry to Nelson Mandela; Mr Mandela makes mention of this in, Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 33, 35.

<sup>52</sup> James, Interview with James Gribble on his ministry to Nelson Mandela.

<sup>53</sup> Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Chapter 99.

the release of Mr Mandela from prison, and ultimately the first democratic elections in South Africa on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1994.

Bishop Gribble continued to visit Mr Mandela until his release from prison on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1990.

During this period Mr Mandela had numerous contacts with Methodist ministers and denominational officials. Many of these meetings were to seek advice from these persons, to build relationships and develop trust with this important constituency in anticipation of the 1994 national elections.

On the evening of his release Mr Mandela stayed in the official residence of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in Bishops Court, Cape Town. Gribble commented on this saying that it was most likely Mandela's choice (or that of his aides) because Mandela and Tutu had a longstanding friendship. Moreover, the Presiding Bishop of the MCSA, Revd Dr Stanley Mogoba, was a member of the PAC (and would later resign from the MCSA to represent the PAC in parliament in opposition to Mr Mandela's ANC – on that occasion Mr Mandela spoke of Dr Mogoba as “my Bishop”).<sup>54</sup> Second, Bishop's Court was secure and spacious enough to accommodate such an important guest, whereas the MCSA did not have such facilities in Cape Town.

#### *Release and presidency*

Of course Methodist clergy played a role, alongside other faith leaders, at the inauguration of Mr Mandela as President of South Africa on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1994.<sup>55</sup> In that same year, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1994, Nelson Mandela was the guest of honour that addressed the Annual Conference (General SYNOD) of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in Umtata.<sup>56</sup> Among other things he said, “My joy at being in this conference is multiplied many-fold by the fact that this is for me also a personal home-coming, both in the physical and spiritual sense ...” With reference to his upbringing and schooling at Methodist institutions he said, “Although the dark night of apartheid sought to obliterate many of these institutions, the impact of their academic and moral teachings could not be trampled on. We who passed through them will not forget the excellent standards of teaching and the spiritual values which were imparted to us.” Finally, with regard to the role and importance of the church in general, and the MCSA in particular, he noted,

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<sup>54</sup> Stanley Mogoba, “Tears of Hope: Remembering Madiba,” *Nelson Mandela Foundation*, December 11, 2013, <http://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/tears-of-hope-remembering-madiba>.

<sup>55</sup> Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 77.

<sup>56</sup> Please see a full transcript of his address to the Conference of the MCSA here, Nelson Mandela, “Address by President Nelson Mandela to the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church.”

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[t]he sense of social responsibility that the religious community has always upheld found expression in your immense contribution to the efforts to rid our country of the scourge of racism and apartheid. When pronouncements and actions against the powers-that-be meant persecution and even death, you dared to stand up to the tyrants ... The Methodist Church was the only Church to be declared an illegal organisation under apartheid, and for ten long years you were forbidden to operate *naat e Transkei bantustan* [here in the Transkei]... The Church, like all other institutions of civil society, must help all South Africans to rise to the challenge of freedom. As South Africa moves from resistance to reconstruction and from confrontation to reconciliation, the energy that was once dedicated to breaking apartheid must be harnessed to the task of building the nation.<sup>57</sup>

The next significant point of contact with the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was the marriage of Mr Mandela to Mrs Graça Machel on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1998.<sup>58</sup> Revd Dr Mvume Dandala was interviewed on 10 June 2014 to gather information on this period of Mr Mandela's life. Dr Dandala was the Presiding Bishop of the MCSA between 1996 and 2003. He invited Mr Mandela to address the first Tri-Annual Conference of the MCSA on the day before his wedding, 17 July 1998.<sup>59</sup> In the interview Dr Dandala said that Mr Mandela had made contact with him early in 1998, around February, to discuss his intention to marry Mrs Machel, asking both for his pastoral counsel and also for him to officiate at the ceremony.<sup>60</sup> Dr Dandala suggested that he ask Archbishop Tutu since Mr Mandela and Bishop Tutu were close friends. However, Mr Mandela said that he wanted a minister of "his church" to marry them – he said Dr Dandala could involve Bishop Tutu in the service if he chose to do so, but that it was to be a Methodist wedding. In his address to the Conference on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July he was much more 'sober' about South Africa and the challenges that nation faced. With relation to the Methodist church he once again remembered his early formation by Methodists fondly, noting,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Martin Meredith, *Mandela: A Biography* (Simon and Schuster, 2010), ch.33.

<sup>59</sup> Please see the following website for a full transcript of Mr Mandela's address, Nelson Mandela, "Address by President Nelson Mandela at the First Triennial Conference of the Methodist Church of South Africa," *SA History*, July 17, 1998, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/address-president-nelson-mandela-first-triennial-conference-methodist-church-south-africa>.

<sup>60</sup> Mvume Dandala, Interview with Mvume Dandala on Nelson Mandela, Audio, June 10, 2014.

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[t]he values I was taught at these [Methodist] institutions have served me well throughout my life. These values were strengthened during our years of incarceration when this church, along with other religious communities, cared for us. Not only did you send chaplains to encourage us, but you also assisted us materially within your means. You helped our families at a time when we could not help them ourselves.<sup>61</sup>

He ended that speech with the following words that show his sense of belonging to the MCSA (i.e., “my church”):

Finally, please allow me to congratulate you on the mission stalls you are displaying here. It is heart-warming to see the efforts my church is making to touch the lives of our people, particularly the poor.<sup>62</sup>

One final point that Dr Dandala shared about, what transpired during this period, was that on the day in which Mr Mandela spoke at the Methodist Conference he asked Dr Dandala where his Church Membership was held? Dr Dandala reminded him of the requisite that a member of the MCSA should attend to the sacrament of Holy Communion at least once every three months to retain formal membership. Understanding how difficult it would be for someone of his popularity and stature to adhere to this particular requirement Dr Dandala set it aside and asked Mr Mandela where he would like his membership to be held, to which Mr Mandela replied Mqhekezweni circuit (which was the circuit in which he was baptised). He was duly recorded as a member of that circuit by the District Bishop and Dr Dandala. As such Dr Dandala recalls that Mr Mandela and Mrs Machel<sup>63</sup> were married as fully-fledged members, in good standing, of the Methodist Church on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>64</sup>

#### *Post presidency and death*

The next prominent link between Nelson Mandela and the MCSA was after his presidency when he was awarded the Methodist Peace Award in 2000 in

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<sup>61</sup> Mandela, “Address by President Nelson Mandela at the First Triennial Conference of the Methodist Church of South Africa.”

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Mrs Graça Machel is a member of the Methodist Church Mozambique Meredith, *Mandela*, ch.33. She has been a prominent voice in global Methodism, particularly in relation to Methodist women’s movements.

<sup>64</sup> Dandala, Interview with Mvume Dandala on Nelson Mandela.

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recognition of his commitment to “freedom, justice and peace”.<sup>65</sup> When the MCSA planned to build a new Seminary to train its ministers and laity in Pietermaritzburg, named Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary, Mr Mandela was willing to offer a video interview and endorsement to encourage South African and overseas funders to support the venture. By this stage Mr Mandela was already elderly and frail and was frequently visited by Methodist clergy offering pastoral care.

The final stage of Mr Mandela’s life, as well as his death and burial in December 2013, have already been discussed in this article.

In conclusion it can be concluded that Nelson Mandela was a Methodist – throughout his life he maintained a strong association with the denomination and acknowledged the role that it played in the forming of his values. In his own words,

[m]y joy at being in this conference is multiplied many-fold by the fact that this is for me also a personal home-coming, both in the physical and spiritual sense. The environs of Umtata are not only my humble origins. It is here that my spiritual association with this great Church started. And I cannot over-emphasise the role that the Methodist Church has played in my own life.<sup>66</sup>

**Why the claims on Nelson Mandela’s Methodist church membership?**

The question that many journalists and commentators were keen to answer with certain was this: Was Nelson Mandela a member of the Methodist Church? The answer is yes – Mr Mandela regarded himself as a member of that denomination throughout his life, and as was shown in the previous section, he expressed this allegiance clearly in various informal and formal ways in a variety of social and religious settings.

However, it is important to note that he was not a member of the MCSA in the way in which the ‘average’ member holds her or his membership. It was already noted that Dr Dandala made a special concession regarding the requirement of attending the sacrament once every three months. In addition to that event, thorough research did not find any evidence that Mr Mandela was ever Confirmed into Membership in the MCSA (this “right of passage” normally takes place in early adulthood or late teenage years). Of course it would have been nearly impossible for him to meet the regular membership requirements after 1958. Before that date Mr Mandela

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<sup>65</sup> “Mandela’s Methodist Ties,” *The United Methodist Church*, accessed June 18, 2014, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/mandelas-methodist-ties>.

<sup>66</sup> Nelson Mandela, “Address by President Nelson Mandela to the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church.”

certainly regarded himself as both as an African Christian and as member of the MCSA. After that date he did not do anything to deliberately distance himself from the denomination. Rather his social and political commitment appears to have kept him from regular church attendance. It was shown above that he welcomed pastoral care and expressed his sense of belonging to the Church in private and in public (as gained from the interviews with Storey<sup>67</sup>, Gribble<sup>68</sup> and Dandala).<sup>69</sup>

Another important question that needs to be answered is why the Methodist Church (in South Africa and abroad) is so keen to draw such strong links with Nelson Mandela? Of course there are a variety of answers that can be given to this question.

- Mr Mandela regarded himself as a Methodist and there is no reason why the Church would or should say otherwise.
- He is a well-regarded and highly respected person in society. The church certainly benefits from his association with it, and particularly his positive recollection of his formation in the church and the care and support offered to him and his family in the years following.
- Many of his family, friends and comrades are members of the MCSA.
- He is a powerful figure in South African politics and was an important person to be connected to in the early years of South Africa's participative democracy.

No doubt many other answers could be given which could be a research project on its own. Next, we need to consider why the state and the governing ANC are comfortable, at times even keen, to uphold and even support the perception of membership of the MCSA?

- South Africa is a largely religious population. It was certainly important to build a strong relationship with this significant constituency in South African society. The ANC understands that the church has a significant role to play in the future of South Africa, if not simply by its sheer numbers in the population. Nieman comments that, "the 23 main religious groupings, with a membership of 37,157,820 in 2001 (84% of the population) represent a potentially powerful voice and resource"<sup>70</sup> for political parties.

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<sup>67</sup> Storey, Interview with Peter Storey about chaplaincy to Nelson Mandela on Robben Island.

<sup>68</sup> James, Interview with James Gribble on his ministry to Nelson Mandela.

<sup>69</sup> Dandala, Interview with Mvume Dandala on Nelson Mandela.

<sup>70</sup> Anna Nieman, "Churches and Social Development in South Africa," in *Religion and Social Development in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, ed. Ignatius (Naas) W. Swart et al. (Stellenbosch, South Africa: SUN Press, 2010), 37.



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- Many of the leaders of the liberation struggle, including founding members of the ANC and its later members, were members of the same church, the MCSA.
- In the lead up to the 2014 election there was increasing rhetoric of a religious character in the speeches and pronouncement of ANC politicians. Linking Nelson Mandela to the largest mainline denomination in South Africa was very useful in strengthening and entrenching this rhetoric. The most public display around this were the activities of the Revd Vukile Mehana, the Chaplain General to the African National Congress, who defended President Jacob Zuma's statement that persons who voted for the ANC would go to heaven, while those who voted for other parties would go to hell<sup>71</sup>. More recently Revd Mehana came in the spotlight for encouraging pastors in Cape Town to solicit votes for the ANC where he said, "You cannot have church leaders that speak as if they are in opposition to government ... God will liberate the people through this (ANC) government"<sup>72</sup>.
- Of course there are also less sinister reasons. In times of hardship and struggle Mr Mandela and his family required pastoral care, it would make sense for the ANC to broker such care from the church that Mr Mandela identified himself with. Moreover, when Mr Mandela personally sought, or encouraged such care by the church for himself or his family, there would have been no good reason for the party to block it.

Again, there could be many other reasons given why the ANC is keen to maintain the image of Nelson Mandela's relationship with the MCSA. However, the answers given above express some possibilities for the reasons why the ANC supported ties between Mr Mandela and the MCSA.

In conclusion, it appears that it seems socially and politically expedient for both the MCSA and the ANC to support such claims of Church membership. The merit and demerits of this will be considered briefly in a later section.

**Of which "church" was Nelson Mandela a member?**

We have already concluded that Nelson Mandela was a member of the MCSA. However, of which aspect or expression of church within the MCSA was he a member? The real question is what do we mean by the expression

<sup>71</sup> Vukile Mehana, "Zuma's Remarks Explained - ANC Chaplain General," February 7, 2011, <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71639?oid=220386&sn=Detail&pid=71639>.

<sup>72</sup> Bekezela Phakathi, "Pastors Will Not Help ANC Win Votes, Says DA," February 6, 2014, <http://www.bdlive.co.za/national/politics/2014/02/06/pastors-will-not-help-anc-win-votes-says-da>.

“church”? Dirkie Smit<sup>73</sup> suggests that there are three general forms of being “the church”.<sup>74</sup> I shall briefly present these below.

*The local congregation*

For many Christians this is most likely to be their primary perspective of the church, a localised community of Christians, organised around regular common worship. Philander points out that this is the physical place, and social group, that people often think of when they answer the question of where they “go to church”, or what church they are members of.<sup>75</sup> Certainly from what we have already established Nelson Mandela was a member of this form of church in his early life (up to 1958). However, we could not say that he remained a member of a local congregation in the years that followed that. As has already been suggested this would simply not have been possible, considering his imprisonment, and later public profile.

*The institutional, denominational and ecumenical Church*

Smit further points out that for many people the term “church” refers primarily to the organisational or institutional structures.<sup>76</sup> When some people hear the word “church” they may think of the confessional community that they are a part of (e.g., Catholic, Orthodox or Methodist). Philander notes that often this expression of church is what people would point to in answer to the question “what does the church say about unemployment in South Africa”.<sup>77</sup> It could also refer to collective groupings such as Evangelical Christians, or even more formal groupings such as ecumenical bodies (like the World Council of Churches, or the World Communion of Reformed Churches). From what was discussed above one could conclude that Nelson Mandela held his strongest link to this understanding of church – he was a member of a denomination. This type of understanding of the church is often the point at which members engage with issues of social concern and engage policy. Mandela certainly sought to identify with, and engage, the MCSA as a deno-

<sup>73</sup> Dirk Smit presented a more nuanced perspective on the Church sighting six variation forms, “gestaltes”, in Dirk J. Smit, “Oor Die Kerk as 'N Unieke Samelewingsverband,” *Tydskrif Vir Geesteswetenskappe* 2, no. 36 (1996): 119–29.

<sup>74</sup> Dirk J. Smit, *Essays in Public Theology: Collected Essays 1* (AFRICAN SUN MEDIA, 2007), 61–68.

<sup>75</sup> N. C. Philander, “Die Rol van Die Kerk as Een van Die Instellings in Die Samelewing Wat Mense Moreel Vorm,” *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal / Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 52, no. 1 & 2 (2011): 177.

<sup>76</sup> Smit, “Oor Die Kerk as 'N Unieke Samelewingsverband.”

<sup>77</sup> Philander, “Die Rol van Die Kerk as Een van Die Instellings in Die Samelewing Wat Mense Moreel Vorm,” 177.

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mination (as was clearly shown in the 1994 and 1998 addresses he delivered to the Methodist Conference).

#### *The church as believers, salt and light in the world*

Smit points out that the third way in which people think of the church, is as individual believers who are salt and light in the world, each involved in living out their faith on a daily basis in their own particular ways.<sup>78</sup> This is a very important way in which the church can participate in being an agent and bearer of hope in society. In reading Nelson Mandela's speeches and writings one can credibly maintain that he saw himself as a person of faith who lived out his particular understanding of his task in the world in this manner. He often refers, as was shown above, to the fact that he "formed" for his work in early life (both through African culture and the ministry of the church).

#### **In what way could we say that Nelson Mandela was a person of faith?**

The next important question that needs to be answered is: In what way could we say that Nelson Mandela was a person of faith? This section considers two of the dominant discourses around Nelson Mandela's faith framework. These are civil religion and African Christian humanism.

#### *Civil religion*

Some have suggested that Nelson Mandela is a prophet, or an icon, of civil religion.<sup>79</sup> In considering this point it is important to understand that in general civil religion is not dependent on the faith of the individual, Nelson Mandela in this case, rather it is expressed in the religious undertones associated with an individual in broader society.<sup>80</sup> Dirkie Smit's groundbreaking article, *Civil Religion in South Africa*,<sup>81</sup> discussed this understanding of Nelson Mandela in some depth and at length. He points to John

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<sup>78</sup> Smit, *Essays in Public Theology*, 68.

<sup>79</sup> Prof Schieder presented a very helpful paper on this topic at the Summer School of Humboldt, UKZN and Stellenbosch University in February 2014. Please see, Rolf Schieder, "Nelson Mandela as Prophet of a Global Civil Religion," in *Empire Religions, Theologies and Indigenous Knowledge Systems* (presented at the Programme of Summer school hosted by the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University as part of the Humboldt – Stellenbosch – UKZN collaboration, Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2014).

<sup>80</sup> Please refer to Bellah's groundbreaking article on American Civil Religion, Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus*, 1967, 1–21; Don E. Eberly et al., *The Essential Civil Society Reader: The Classic Essays* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

<sup>81</sup> Smit, *Essays in Public Theology*, 101–123.

de Gruchy's 1994 article *Waving the flag: Civil rights, South African style*<sup>82</sup> and Robin Petersen's 1996 *Parable of the Kingdom: Rugby and grace*<sup>83</sup> as two important sources that highlight the consideration of Nelson Mandela as a prophet of the civil religion. Both of these authors point to the fact that Nelson Mandela is idolised as a prophet of a new civil religion in South Africa, and even elsewhere in the world. Words such as forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope, are commonly associated with this larger than life figure. John de Gruchy mentions, that he never thought he would be seduced by civil religion. However, with the inauguration of Nelson Mandela in 1994 he was filled with such hope and patriotism for the new South Africa, considering where it had come from, that he had to guard against being swept up into the civil religion of the time.<sup>84</sup> Smit, however, says that he does not agree that Mandela is a prophet of the civil religion in the sense in which Bellah presents it civil religion. Simply stated, Mandela's deference to his faith, and the clear link that he makes to the church (the MCSA in particular) and Christianity, shows that he does not see himself as a prophet of a civil religion. Rather, Mandela viewed himself as a human person who fostered forgiveness and reconciliation because of his formation through African culture<sup>85</sup> and the Christian faith.<sup>86</sup> For Bellah civil religion is precisely not a Christian phenomenon, but rather a general religiosity that is linked to national identity.<sup>87</sup> Thus others may well regard him as a prophet of a civil religion, but according to the criteria discussed above Mr Mandela would not have regarded himself as such.

#### *African Christian humanism*

In reviewing Mr Mandela's speeches, writings, and in conducting interviews with a number of persons for the purposes of this research it became increasingly clear that Mandela ascribed to a form of African Christian humanism. As has already been said, he was deeply influenced by African culture and also by the Christian faith and its witness (both in what he saw in others

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<sup>82</sup> John W De Gruchy, "Waving Flag: Civil Rights, South African Style," *The Christian Century*, June 15, 1994.

<sup>83</sup> Robin Petersen, "Parable of the Kingdom: Rugby and Grace," *The Christian Century*, January 17, 1996.

<sup>84</sup> De Gruchy, "Waving Flag: Civil Rights, South African Style"; For a detailed discussion of this please see, Smit, *Essays in Public Theology*, 109.

<sup>85</sup> Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 23.

<sup>86</sup> Mandela, "Address by President Nelson Mandela at the First Triennial Conference of the Methodist Church of South Africa."

<sup>87</sup> Michele Dillon, *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 354; Douglas A. Hicks, *Religion and the Workplace: Pluralism, Spirituality, Leadership* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 117; Please see Smit's detailed and extremely helpful discussion of the characteristics of civil religion in, Smit, *Essays in Public Theology*, ch.6, esp. 101–103.

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such as the founders and leaders of the ANC, as well as church leaders such as Seth Mokitimi and Desmond Tutu). However, a close reading of his oeuvre does show that he was much more strongly influenced by a form of African humanism than Christian theology. In fact, as Cracknell and White point out, Mandela did not see himself as a theologian but rather as, “an ordinary person trying to make sense of the mysteries of life”.<sup>88</sup> Concepts such as reconciliation, forgiveness and hope were informed and adopted from African culture and Christian theology as necessary aspects for the establishment of a functional and just human society, rather than as theological ideals that are developed in order to please God.

John de Gruchy delivered a plenary address entitled *Transforming traditions: Doing theology in South Africa today* on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2009 at the Joint Conferences on Religion and Theology at Stellenbosch University.<sup>89</sup> In his address he highlighted six affirmations towards what he calls a new “Christian humanism”. These affirmations are:

- Christian humanism is inclusive. Our primary identity is derived from the fact that we are human.
- Christian humanism affirms the dignity of all persons as bearers of the image of God, and as such emphasises shared responsibility for all humanity. To deny the dignity of another person is to deny one’s own dignity, since we share in a common humanity.
- Christian humanism is open to learning about what it means to be human from a wide variety of sources, some of which may not ordinarily be considered as primary sources in Christian theology.
- Christian humanism understands that one cannot truly love God without loving all human beings, since all persons are created by God.
- Christian humanism subscribes and presents a notion of justice that transcends mere physical or material well-being.
- Christian humanism understands goodness is closely linked to truth and beauty.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Mandela quoted in, Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 77.

<sup>89</sup> This address was reworked and later published as: John W De Gruchy, “Transforming Traditions: Doing Theology in South Africa Today,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 7, no. 17 (July 1, 2009): 139–41.

<sup>90</sup> Please see Stephen Martin’s superb discussion of John de Gruchy’s public lecture on Christian Humanism at <http://swmartin.blogspot.com/2009/07/john-de-gruchy-christian-humanism.html>.

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When one considers these affirmations, it would be plausible to conclude that Nelson Mandela's life and work was informed by a type Christian humanism. In Nelson Mandela's case it would be a African Christian Humanism since he valued and included many elements of African culture (that resonated with elements of Christian humanism) in his moral framework, for example the dignity of all human persons, the importance of shared responsibility for one another, and learning about the human condition from African traditional sources.

### **Lessons on the relationship between church and state going forward**

Nelson Mandela summed up his understanding of the role of the church in relation to contributing to national development when he addressed the Methodist Conference in 1998:

Religious communities have a vital role to play in this regard [nation building]. Just as you took leading roles in the struggle against apartheid, so too you should be at the forefront of helping to deliver a better life to all our people. Amongst other things you are well placed to assist in building capacity within communities for effective delivery of a better life.<sup>91</sup>

Clearly, he believed that the church has an important role to play in South Africa. However, this raises a final critical question: What should the relationship be between the church and the state?

Research shows that Christians tend to give similar answers to this question.<sup>92</sup> Most Christians naively believe that having Christian persons in power in their country would have positive results for the nation – this is not necessarily the case as can be seen from South Africa's own apartheid past. Regardless of this, such a naïve assumption was expressed by various media sources that reflected on the role that Nelson Mandela's faith played in relation to his presidency and public office.<sup>93</sup> While it is clear that Mandela allowed the values of his faith to influence his public life, it is also clear that he was careful to ensure that the state remained impartial and just, protecting the rights and privileges of all of its citizens, in spite of his own faith convic-

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<sup>91</sup> Mandela, "Address by President Nelson Mandela at the First Triennial Conference of the Methodist Church of South Africa."

<sup>92</sup> Cf., Wessel Bentley, Dion A. Forster, and Dion A. Forster, *Between Capital and Cathedral: Essays on Church-State Relationships* (Research Institute for Theology and Religion, 2012), 77.

<sup>93</sup> Cf., "Religious Institutions Gave Mandela Hope, Foundation"; Graham, "Mandela Was Ever-Mindful of Church Role in South Africans' Struggle"; "Mandela's Methodist Ties."

tions. This once again shows the strong, and important, influence of Christian humanism in his life.

There are some lessons that can be learnt from this for South Africa going forward. At present there are some alarming indicators that the separation between church and state in South Africa is once again under threat.<sup>94</sup>

Martin Prozesky suggests that a type of secular state, that recognises and respects the place and role of religion in society, is the most desirable form of state since it advocates, "... freedom of belief and associated practice for all belief systems, such as all the country's religions and that none of them has preferential status in law".<sup>95</sup> He further points out that it is a mistake to equate this type of secular state with atheism or anti-religious sentiments.<sup>96</sup> Since, in this form, the state seeks to secure freedom of belief and religious practice for all of its citizens. Thus it will neither support, nor suppress, religious belief and the associated religious practice. Rather, the purposes and intentions of religious persons, and religious groupings, are protected as long as they do not impinge of the rights and freedoms of others in society. This allows for religion to make a positive contribution to both individuals and society at large. The opening quote from Nelson Mandela in this section shows that he had such a view and expectation for the church in society. He had benefited from the church's witness and work in shaping his values and morals, in offering him education, pastoral care, and spiritual support. It was his desire that there should be place in society for the church to continue to make such a contribution for the common good of all.

This argument relies on two important considerations. First, that the state should be just, seeking the good of its citizens by protecting their rights. Second, that the church (religion), and not the state, has responsibility for religious matters in society. It is not the responsibility of the state, or its officers, to further the aims of any religion<sup>97</sup> – evangelism and mission are functions of the church. One of the great hindrances to the proper functioning of the secular state is a weak and ineffective church. Where the church fulfils

<sup>94</sup> Cf., the following sampling of recent media reports, Mehana, "Zuma's Remarks Explained - ANC Chaplain General"; Phakathi, "Pastors Will Not Help ANC Win Votes, Says DA"; Thalia Holmes, "Satanic Panic: God Votes ANC - the Rest Can Go to Hell," *The M&G Online*, March 14, 2014, <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-03-13-satanic-panic-god-votes-anc-the-rest-can-go-to-hell/>.

<sup>95</sup> Martin Prozesky, "Is the Secular State the Root of Our Moral Problems in South Africa?," *Alternation* 3 (2009): 239.

<sup>96</sup> Prozesky, *Is the secular state the root of our moral problems in South Africa?*, 243.

<sup>97</sup> Cf., the following articles reflecting on Chief Justice Mogoeng's concerning views on the relationship between law and religion, Murray Williams, "Law Must Frown on Divorce, Adultery," *Cape Argus*, May 29, 2014, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/law-must-frown-on-divorce-adultery-1.1695674#.U-fRTYCSzT8>; Murray Williams, "Mogoeng: Why Law, Religion Should Mix," *Cape Argus*, May 28, 2014, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/mogoeng-why-law-religion-should-mix-1.1695216#.U-fQmYCSzT8>.

its mission effectively and consistently it will not only evangelise the population of the nation, thus bringing about spiritual and moral transformation, it will also hold the state accountable for just and ethical governance for the good of all of the citizens of the nation. There is clear evidence of the positive effects of a functional and effective church in the life of Nelson Mandela.

The concern at present is that both the church and the state seem to seek to misuse the relationship that Nelson Mandela had with the different “forms” of church in order to engage one another for undesirable ends. From the side of the church it could be to build relationships with power and wealth. From the side of the state it could be to co-opt the church, and in so doing negate its witness and work in the world.

We learn from Nelson Mandela that what he appreciated about the church was precisely that it was engaged in the work of ministry and mission. In this sense the church was deeply political and a significant force for moral and spiritual formation that contributed towards the transition from apartheid to participative democracy in South Africa. Stanley Hauerwas’ perspective serves us well in this regard when he says that “the church does not so much have a political mission as her very existence is a political mission; it provides an alternative to the politics of the world”.<sup>98</sup>

### Conclusion

Nelson Mandela’s faith played an important role in his life. In addition to this it also impacted the way in which the church and the state relate to one another in South Africa at present. This article asked, and answered, four questions. First, what was Nelson Mandela’s relationship with the MCSA? The conclusion that was reached was that he saw himself as a member of the MCSA. Second, what was his relationship to the “church”? We saw that his relationship, as with all Christians, was differently expressed with each of the three different “forms” of church that were discussed in the article. His primary identification was however with the church as denomination. Third, why is the MCSA so keen to be identified with Mr Mandela, moreover, why is the state and the governing ANC willing to support, and even encourage, such a public perception of church membership? Numerous answers were given to these questions – some were encouraging and some were worrying. What this highlighted is that there is a need for further critical reflection on the relationship that exists between the church and the state in South Africa. This presented the final question. What should the relationship between the church and the state in South Africa be going forward? One answer was that

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<sup>98</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life*, 2013, xii.



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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 for the benefit of all South Africans.

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