



**The Methodist Church of Southern Africa**  
*A Christ healed Africa for the healing of nations*

# FREEDOM FROM FEAR METHODISTS AGAINST GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

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**“FEAR NOT,” IS A CONSTANT  
REFRAIN FROM SCRIPTURE. THE  
INTERFAITH ADVOCACY BRIEFS  
HAVE ENABLED US TO TAKE STEPS  
TOWARDS CHALLENGING FEAR  
AND SILENCE IN THE FACE OF  
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

**BISHOP PURITY MALINGA, PRESIDING BISHOP,  
METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA**

## INTRODUCTION

Fear, shame, silence and secrecy often characterise faith-based responses to gender-based violence (GBV). This leads many members of faith communities to suffer in silence. Faith communities are not sufficiently empowered to challenge GBV. Overcoming GBV therefore requires radical action that will enable different actors within the faith community to play their roles effectively.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) serves six countries: Botswana, eSwatini, Lesotho, Namibia, Mozambique and South Africa, where it has over three million adherents. Methodist theology focuses on sanctification and the transforming effect of faith on the character of a Christian. Scripture is considered as a primary authority, but Methodists also look to Christian tradition,

including the historic creeds. Methodists teach that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for all of humanity and that salvation is available for all. In addition to evangelism, Methodism emphasises charity and support for the sick, the poor and the afflicted through the works of mercy.<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is said to have called for social holiness, a call to community, environmental and socio-economic justice driven by a deep desire for radical transformation and the eradication of all harm. This is encapsulated in what Methodists know as the Wesleyan Rule of Life: Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.



In line with the Interfaith Advocacy Briefs on GBV, the Church took a stand against GBV in the form of a seven-week social media campaign between June and August 2020 when governments had imposed movement restrictions to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. The MCSA co-created three interfaith briefs on gender-based violence, teenage pregnancies and sexual and reproductive health and rights in 2019 and has been utilising these actively.

## GRIEF. LAMENT AND CONFESSION

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WE AS METHODIST LEADERS COME TOGETHER IN LAMENT FOR THE ROLE WE HAVE PLAYED AND CONTINUE TO PLAY IN ENTRENCHING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV) IN THE CHURCH AND ULTIMATELY IN OUR COMMUNITIES.

WE GRIEVE THAT WE HAVE BECOME NUMB TO THE OVERWHELMING VIOLENCE AND FEMICIDE PERVASIVE IN OUR COMMUNITIES.

WE CONFESS THAT AS LEADERS WE HAVE NOT DONE ENOUGH TO RID OUR CHURCHES AND COMMUNITIES OF THIS DESTRUCTIVE SCOURGE; THAT WE HAVE TURNED A CURSORY EAR TO THE CRIES OF OUR MOTHERS AND SISTERS AND HAVE CONVENIENTLY BEEN BLIND TO THE EVIDENCE OF ABUSE IN OUR MIDST!

GOD, HAVE MERCY ON US! GOD, FORGIVE US!

**REVEREND PURITY MALINGA, PRESIDING BISHOP, MCSA**

The seven-week campaign was aimed at addressing gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) in the Church, challenging patriarchal values and gender stereotypes and promoting gender justice through scripture re-reading and interpretation. Finally, the campaign sought to enable survivors of GBV within the Church to speak out to get help and healing.

For the first time in the history of the Church all MCSA functions and programmes came to a standstill for the duration of the seven weeks. The Church guidance manual for what must be preached on for that period was suspended and a lectionary<sup>2</sup> focused



on GBV developed. All sermons, youth services, organization<sup>3</sup> services and Bible studies in all the 5,300 churches and numerous preaching places of the MCSA focused on preventing and combating gender-based violence and femicide. For seven weeks all programmes, webinars, discussions, prayers and meetings centred on preventing and fighting GBV. The campaign was a short-term measure to catalyse everyone into acknowledging the severity of the GBVF pandemic (thus named by President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa) as well as to kick-start a more concerted effort towards eradicating GBV and femicide in Southern Africa. The campaign challenged patriarchal norms and taught Bible stories that liberate women and men from patriarchal bonds that lead to gender-based violence.

## SPEAKING SCRIPTURE INTO LIVED EXPERIENCES

By addressing GBVF-relevant themes with supporting scriptures every week, senior Church leaders demonstrated their stance against GBVF which motivated those at the grassroots to do the

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THE CONVERSATIONS AND “WORKSHOPS” TOOK THE CAMPAIGN BEYOND THE PULPITS AND INVITED BROADER ENGAGEMENT AT ALL LEVELS OF THE CHURCH

**SIYABULELA TONONO, MEMBER OF THE MCSA**

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THE ADVOCACY USING BIBLICAL TEXT HELPED TO SHOW THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE ATTITUDES, BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOURS THAT GROW VIOLENCE IN OUR COMMUNITIES

**NANCY HERON, JUSTICE AND SERVICE DESK, MCSA**

same and take the Church's resolve seriously. Each theme was launched by a sermon preached by one of the Bishops. Resource materials, including the three Interfaith Briefs were shared with the public on the MCSA website and all the approximately 800 ministers/reverends. During the campaign the Church directed all members to the MCSA Harassment Policy and the Church disciplinary processes contained in the Book of Order, the constitution of the MCSA. Victims of GBV were also urged to seek legal recourse, especially in cases considered crimes.

## WE LEARN AS WE DO



Unfortunately, it was noted that most of the conversations and sermons were led by men, which tended to reinforce male dominance in both church and society. The COVID-19 restrictions did not allow for the implementation of concrete actions to address GBV cases. Social media engagement rendered the campaign somewhat elitist and excluded the less privileged members of the Church. However, webinars and online seminars enabled broader community engagement without the added costs of travel and accommodation.

## LOOKING INWARDS TOWARDS DEEPER OUT-REACH AND ACTION



The campaign was successful due to several factors: It was an honest acknowledgement that there is a serious GBV problem both in the Church and in the society. This is an important step towards healing and transformation. The themes enabled day-to-day conversations and space for reflection on issues ordinarily considered taboo. The campaign united the Church and enabled everyone to “sing from the same hymn sheet”. All the arms of the Church including the youth, women and men's organizations, preachers, and children's work were kept focused and in reflection on GBV. Diverse views were expressed and discussed. Safe spaces, whether physical in churches or virtual, were created for survivors to tell their stories and opportunities were provided for the Church to listen to the pain and cries of the survivors. Referral paths were utilised to link survivors with qualified counsellors, legal aid and medical assistance where such was required. Space was also created for members of the church to critique the Church's internal disciplinary processes in dealing with GBV within the MCSA.

The MCSA has utilised the Interfaith Advocacy Briefs on SRHR to engage in in-reach (internal advocacy). It is hoped that by strengthening its own capacity, the MCSA will be more effective as it engages with external institutions such as governments and collaborates with civil society. An adequately resourced faith movement is a powerful resource in promoting access to SRHR in the broader society.

## REFERENCES

- 1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wesleyan\\_theology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wesleyan_theology)
- 2 A lectionary is a list that contains a collection of scripture readings appointed for worship in the Methodist Church for any given day/week or occasion on the church calendar
- 3 The MCSA has youth, men's and women's organisation's including the Women's Manyano, Young Women's Manyano, Women's Auxilliary, Women's Association; Young Men's Guild and the Wesley Guild

The MCSA participated in a series of interfaith dialogues on women's rights and gender equality facilitated by Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano. On that occasion, 12 faith organisations from seven countries in Southern African countries declared "We can no longer be silent as we are called to uphold human dignity for all creation." Coming from Bahai, Christian, Muslim, and Traditionalist faiths, they developed three Interfaith briefs on sexual and reproductive

health and rights; Interfaith brief on gender-based violence; and Interfaith brief on teenage pregnancy. They also identified opportunities in engaging more effectively within their faith communities. Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano supported their action plans through micro-grants and technical assistance, contributing to the inspiring results documented in this case study.

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