

## STATEMENT AT THE CENTENARY SYNOD OF THE ETHIOPIAN EPISCOPAL CHURCH – UMZI WASE TIYOPIYA/MOTSE WA TOPIA

Port Elizabeth, January 11, 2000

Your Grace, the Rt Rev Siggibo Dwane,  
Leaders and members of the Ethiopian Episcopal Church,  
Brothers and Sisters,  
Ladies and gentlemen:

Twenty years ago, in 1980, the late President of the African National Congress, Oliver Tambo, addressed the World Consultation of the World Council of Churches which was held in Holland.

The Consultation had been convened to consider the issue of the role of the church in the struggle against racism during the 1980's.

In his statement he quoted parts of *Verses 27 and 28 of Chapter 1 of the Book of Genesis*. With your permission, I would like to present these verses in full.

*27: " So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."*

*28: " And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."*

Had he been alive, Oliver Tambo would have drawn great strength and inspiration from your "**Declaration of the faith of this church**" adopted at your Special Conference last year when you yourselves, true to the Holy Scriptures, said:

*" We acknowledge that all humanity is created in the image of the triune God – male and female, black and white, rich and poor. We recognise the historical social tendencies which have denigrated women, black people, and the poor, and we reject these as contrary to that vision of the dignity and worth with which the human person was endowed by God at creation, and which was wonderfully restored in Jesus Christ."*

*" We believe that in the Christian tradition, God has a special concern for the poor and the downtrodden. For this reason, we are not ashamed to claim that our historical roots are among the poor in Africa. Indeed we are a church of the poor, and the life of our founders was one of Ubuntu lived in Apostolic simplicity. We therefore pledge our solidarity with the poor as a divine imperative."*

I say that Oliver Tambo would have drawn great strength and inspiration from these noble words and sentiments because at the Conference in Holland he said:

*" It is ...common cause that in the period of imperialist expansion the church accepted as legitimate the concept of a civilising mission and for that reason justified the imposition of white colonial domination over many peoples throughout the world, including South Africa."*

*" What was arrogantly described as a civilising mission in South Africa was in fact the genocidal destruction of the Khoi and the San people, the land expropriation of the rest of the indigenous people, the obliteration of their culture in all its forms, the application of a consistent policy for the impoverishment of the black people and their transformation into labour units for the enrichment of the coloniser and the political domination of the majority by a white settler minority."*

Your Grace,  
Sisters and Brothers:

We are here today to convey the heartfelt congratulations of the Government and people of South Africa on the occasion of the Year of the Centenary of this church.

All of us draw great pride from the struggle you waged for a century, in defence not only of the independent African identity of your church but also in furtherance of the vision of Ethiopianism among the Christian masses of our country.

That Ethiopianism constituted the assertion of the dignity of the African. It was a revolt against the arrogance of others who came from outside our Continent and pretended that as Africans we were devoid of any sense of spirituality; who claimed that their sense of God was superior to our own sense of God.

That Ethiopianism was a struggle to reassert the truth of the Holy Scriptures that "all humanity is created in the image of the triune God".

After many days, that struggle, during which many cast their bread upon the waters, has brought you to the position where His Grace, Bishop Dwane could correctly say of last year's inaugural service of the Ethiopian Episcopal Church:

*" This then was the inaugural service of the Ethiopian Episcopal Church, a kind of Pentecost from which people rose and went their different ways rejoicing. The vision for the appointed time had come. It testified to the destined hour and did not prove false."*

We are therefore truly moved that we can be with you today, even briefly, to celebrate a great victory both that you are a hundred years old and that you begin your second centenary as Umzi wase Tiyopiya/Motse wa Topia/the Ethiopian Episcopal Church.

This is a most fitting outcome to the struggle that was pioneered by such great heroes and heroines of our people as Tiyo Soga, Nehemiah Tile, Mangena Mokone, James Mata Dwane and Charlotte Maxeke.

All these occupy an honoured place as those who laid the foundations for the emergence of the African National Congress, the leader of our people in the continuing struggle for genuine liberation.

In the speech in Holland to which we have already referred, Oliver Tambo quoted a resolution passed in 1906 by the South African Native Congress, the predecessor of the ANC.

That resolution said:

*" Congress believes that Ethiopianism is a symptom of progress, brought about by the contact of the natives of Africa with European civilisation, making itself felt in all departments of the social, religious and economic structure."*

Even earlier, as Oliver Tambo pointed out, at the formation in 1882 of Imbumba yama Afrika, S.W. Mvambo had said that:

*" In fighting for national rights, we must fight together (regardless of the denominations to which we belong)."*

It was in response to this that many leaders of the Ethiopian movement became official chaplains of the African National Congress.

Oliver Tambo also made the point that:

*" It is part of the proud history of the African National Congress that among its founders and early leaders are to be found such true Christians as:*

- *Rev John Dube, first President of the ANC, minister of the Congregational Church;*
- *S. M. Makgatho, second President of the ANC, Methodist leader and lay preacher;*
- *Rev Z.R. Mahabane, third President of the ANC, Minister of the Methodist Church and President of the then Interdenominational African Ministers Federation;*
- *Rev W.B. Rubusana, one of the four original vice-presidents of the ANC, co-translator of the Xhosa Bible and Vice-Chairman of the Congregational Union of South Africa."*

Today and together, we celebrate a distinguished century of Ethiopianism, consummation both by the birth of the Ethiopian Episcopal Church and the fact that, for us as South Africans, the Year 2000 starts as part of the beginning of the second half of our first decade of freedom.

When that eminent child of Ethiopianism, the African National Congress, marked its own 88<sup>th</sup> Anniversary three days ago on January 8<sup>th</sup>, it proclaimed this Centenary Year of the Ethiopian Episcopal Church as the Year of the Dawn of the African Century.

It referred to the fact that as the Order of Ethiopia was formed in Grahamstown in 1900, the leaders of the Africans peoples met in London at the first Pan African Congress.

At the close of this Congress, in a message "**To the Nations of the World**", the leaders of our peoples proclaimed that:

*" In the metropolis of the modern world, in this closing year of the nineteenth century, there has been assembled a congress of men and women of African blood, to deliberate solemnly upon the present situation and outlook of the darker races of mankind...The problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is the problem of the colour line, the question as to how far differences of race...are going to be made, hereafter, the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilisation."*

In 1904, a comment on Ethiopianism in South Africa was that it demonstrated that:

*" A great race hitherto content to grovel has at last begun to aspire."*

For his part, an early leader of the Ethiopian movement, the Rev J.G. Xaba, had said in 1897 that:

*" ...the aim of the Ethiopian Church is to promote Christianity and unity in the whole continent of Africa."*

The accumulation of the struggles from these early days to where we are today, led the ANC, both a product and a champion of these struggles, to declare on its own birthday three days ago that:

*" The challenge facing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the solution of the problem of the colour line!"*

And so, Your Grace and Sisters and Brothers, we come back to the commitments to which we have remained true for a century:

*"...our historical roots are among the poor in Africa...We are a church of the poor...The life of our founders was one of Ubuntu lived in Apostolic simplicity. We therefore pledge our solidarity with the poor as a divine imperative."*

We have no choice but to respond to the appeal that Oliver Tambo made to the universal Church two decades ago, that the Church must act to ensure that "the great race...that has begun to aspire", whose unity Rev Xaba sought to achieve, should, as The Creator directed, together with the rest of all humanity:

*"Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it."*

But it must be clear to all of us that as South Africans, together with our fellow citizens on the Mother Continent of Africa, we are a good distance away from the realisation of God's will that those He created in Africa in his Image should:

*" Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it."*

Accordingly, we have no choice but to "fight together", as S.W. Mvambo of Imbumba yama Afrika said in 1883, to ensure that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century does indeed become the African Century and does indeed become the Century of the solution of the problem of the colour line!

This means that within our own country:

- we must work together to educate all our citizens that each one of us has a responsibility to work for a better life for all our people, especially the poor;
- together, we must rebuild the moral fibre of our society to restore the understanding that each one of us is made in God's image;
- we must work to ensure that all our people re-learn the truths that murder, violence against the person, rape, abuse of women and children, robbery and theft are offensive to our very concept of ourselves as Africans;
- we must cultivate among all our people the same spirit of a new patriotism, so that, through its results, we all seek to achieve what His Grace, the Rt Rev Siggibo Dwane, sought to describe when he wrote of "a kind of Pentecost from which people rose and went their different ways rejoicing";
- we have to work to wipe out the use of violence in the competition for political office and any other position of authority as well as the abuse of such office to accumulate wealth by corrupt means;
- we must join in a common struggle to restore the pride of all our people, regardless of race, ethnicity and gender, in their common and proud African origins, as Tiyo Soga, Mangena Mokone and Mata Dwane did;
- we have to come together to wipe out the scourge of racism which continues to blight all our lives;
- together, we must declare a war against poverty and the inequitable distribution of wealth that condemns millions in our country and billions in the world to sub-human lives;
- we have to join hands with our brothers and sisters throughout our Continent of Africa to ensure that by the end of this centenary year of the Ethiopian Episcopal Church no part of Africa is subject to the destructive fury of war;
- as Africans throughout the Continent, we must also work to ensure that by the year's end, no African should be forced into a position of subservience by the terror of the guns of a military regime;

- we must work in partnership to conduct a united offensive against AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, sexually transmitted diseases and other ills that prematurely take away the lives of millions of Africans;
- we must organise to ensure that we bring all the peoples of our Continent into a united and powerful movement for the achievement of the objectives of the African Century, for the realisation of the African Renaissance.

This African church gathered here today, the Ethiopian Episcopal Church, needs no introduction to the African cause which all of us must serve.

It owes its very existence to its understanding that this noble cause needs its own advocates and its militants.

It owes its survival and growth during a turbulent century to its own realisation that the purposes it pursues do not allow for despair in the face of temporary defeats.

This is the Ethiopian Church, which associated itself with the ancient name of Ethiopia because it sought to put on a high pedestal the reality, the originality and the nobility of African spirituality; because it sought to reaffirm that Africa's people are among those whom Nkulunkulu, Modimo, Dal'ubom, Xikwembu, Qamata and Jehovah blessed and enjoined to be fruitful and to multiply.

As the year 1999 was winding towards its close, my wife and I, as well as friends of ours, took time to discover our own country and to add to what we already knew.

In this little corner of God's infinite creation is to be found an extraordinary story of human history.

Part of that story is told by such national and global treasures as the Sterkfontein Caves, the Tsitsikama Forest, the Addo, the Khahlamba Mountains, the Mngazi Mangrove Forest, Plettenberg Bay, Bird Island, the Dolphin Coast and the Hogsback.

Attached to these names and others we have not mentioned, is a remarkable story stretching from the origins of humanity, through ancient human settlements, creative thought and work, the black Jews who are part of our being and the accomplishment of the goal to replenish the earth and subdue it.

We live and work in the midst of a splendid actuality which we insult because perhaps we know not what we do.

The time has come that we, as Africans, must say that – we cannot be the inheritors of this marvel of natural and human evolution and continue to behave as though we are other than the sacred creatures that were intended, when we were created in God's image.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church was the first organised Christian Church established by the descendants themselves of the African slaves in the United States.

Remarkably, for the time, as they struggled to create the Ethiopian movement in our own country, James Mata Dwane and others, travelled to the United States to establish contact with the AME.

It will therefore not come as a surprise that we close by citing the outstanding leader of the Pan African Movement, the African-American W.E.B. du Bois, who presented the 1900 call "To the Nations of the World" which identified the colour line as the problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Together with our own John Tengo Jabavu, du Bois attended the Universal Races Congress in 1911, again in London, which represented African, European, Asian, Caribbean and American nations.

At this Congress, du Bois cried out:

*" Truce of God! And primal meeting of the sons of man,  
Foreshadowing the union of the World!  
From all the ends of the earth we come!*

...

*Grant us that war and hatred cease,  
Reveal our souls in every race and hue!  
Help us, O Human God, in this Thy Truce  
To make Humanity divine!"*

To which cry you have responded on behalf of all of us:

*" We therefore pledge our solidarity with the poor as a divine imperative."*

It is to this imperative that we must respond urgently, in our own interest as Africans.

If we acted thus, as we must, true to everything we value in our history, which encompasses more than a few millennia, we may do the extraordinary thing, "to make humanity divine" – by our deeds, to acknowledge that all humanity is created in the image of the triune God!

Be fruitful and multiply!  
Ukwanda kwaliwa ngumthakathi!  
Nikhule nikhokhobe!