

**Address by Hon NN Mapisa-Nqakula, RSA Minister of Defence and
Military Veterans, on the occasion of the Bethesda Methodist
Women's Day celebrations, 2012 August 25.**

Program Director

Leadership of the Church, Reverends and Pastors

Fellow congregants

Friends,

We are now progressively drawing closer to the end of Women's month. Over the past few weeks so many activities were held around the country with a clear demonstration that the idea of celebrating women's month is finally getting a firm foothold in the psyche of our society. It is for this reason that we should thank government for the foresight of bring forth social awareness of the plight of women through the declaration of August as Women's month.

One of the things that have been foremost in my observations throughout this month, is how much time we spent as women talking to other women.

This rare opportunity for sisterly reflections has enabled us to share perspective with each other, not only about issues facing women, but about the national discourse of our society as a whole.

So, you can understand my appreciation and excitement at being invited to another one of these talks as the church also pitches in to mark women's month.

Your invitation asked me to talk about the role of women in post-apartheid South Africa. Let me start by saying, that any discussion about the role of Christian women in society, is essentially a discussion about the role of the church itself within society.

This is because women are the backbone of the church, and may I dare say they represent the vast majority of members of the church.

It is therefore in women, as the backbone, where the responsibility rests to shake the church from its inherent comfort zone, in order for the church to fulfil its intended role in the construction of a post- Apartheid South Africa.

As I had indicated, this comfort zone, which can be viewed as a reluctance, reflects on the church through the inaction of its members, majority of whom are we the women. In other words, as much as women have the responsibility to shake the church from this comfort zone, it is in fact our own comfort zone as members of the church we need to be addressing.

It is already common cause that because the church is part of this society, it cannot remain unaffected or be indifferent to social issues facing our communities.

I believe that the very reason why you wanted to engage this topic today, in the first place, is because the church already recognises this imperative.

Having said that, the most pertinent question we should be asking is not about whether the church is part of this society, the question we need to progress to is WHY the church is within this society?

In answering that question, we need to understand very clearly God's intention for the presence of the church in society, and by extension the role of the women of the church in such a society.

For a perspective about the question " why", we can look to the words of a fellow woman of the Lord, Esther, when she said "for such a time as this you've been called."

Most often than not, most of us in the church, particularly women, have convinced ourselves that "it cannot be for us". Each time we are called upon to contribute, that sense of reluctance and inadequacy always kicks in. "Not Me".

Esther is aware of this as we should, and she challenges us to ask of ourselves "why am I here?"

My fellow women in Christ,

The liberation struggle against Apartheid was long and characterised by much suffering including loss of life. Side by side with our people, the church played its part. In fact we can even go to the extent of saying that we owe our model of reconciliation to the role the church played in the fibre of the struggle for freedom here at home.

We have a whole new set of struggles post Apartheid, and once again the church is called upon to resume the role it is intended within society.

The church has been placed within society for the society, and any role for Christian women should be premised on this basic understanding.

I feel at times that what makes it hard for us to “step out in faith”, is that the belief that the answers that are sought by the world “on the other side”, are beyond us, to the point where we forget our various gifts and calling.

Our own comfort inside the church should not create for us the inability to react to the need that our society have for such gifts and calling. The church is not placed within society by accident, neither is anyone of us. That’s just not how God works, for Him there are no accidents.

If we try to define a purpose for the Christian woman in the reconstruction of a post-Apartheid South Africa, many roles can be identified. But today I want us to specifically address what we can do for the little guy in our communities out there.

Such a role as refer to here, is a role underpinned by the truth that the church and the fight of the righteous is on the side of the vulnerable.

As Christian women we are called upon first and foremost to protect the vulnerable. We live in a country where, despite the many gains of freedom and democracy, many still live in poverty and squalor, children without access to adequate education, housing and healthcare. These are the vulnerables that I want to ask of us, as Christian women, to direct our energies towards.

In this regard the first role of Christian women is in Leadership. Women in the church, as an organised grouping should be part of community organisations and leadership structures in their localities. In this way, as women in the church we can create for ourselves platforms to influence programs and decision making in matters that affect our communities.

Secondly, our women structures in the church should become partners for change.

We need to seek those initiatives where we can partner government or the private sector in providing service to our communities. Where possible, we should initiate new initiatives and invite both government and the private sector to partner with us. These may be in the area of education, skills for unemployed women, health education for young women, housing or a bursary scheme.

Women of the church need to empower themselves using their most valuable asset and best selling point – the power of their numbers.

Ours is not only a calling to provide spiritual support to the our communities. Most of the members of these communities are destitute and impoverished.

It is high time that women in the church start using their numbers for economic benefit, which in turn can be utilised as investment to help the community. Success stories are abound about stockfels that have turned into investment funds. If women in the church were to organise themselves into a Fund with their minimal contributions, such investments may have potential to grow and may support initiatives for community development.

Such initiatives will not only bring relief to the needy, but maybe developed further on a growth path to the point where they can create jobs.

Relevant government departments can be invited to provide advise and necessary support for such initiatives.

Christian women can also play an important role in supporting other women in communities. Many women continue to be victims of abuse and violation of their rights.

The injunction to us from Christ is that we should understand our love for him as a love for fellow beings.

As he said; “whatever you did not do for the least of these, you did not do for me.”

We need to know at all times that there can be no better patriotism than loving your country and loving your people. The rest, as they say, becomes a natural progression.

The country has many other examples of Esthers that have led the struggle in service of our people. These are the women whose legacy we need to take forward. As we celebrate women’s month we remember them:

Charlotte Maxeke, Ray Alexander, Ida Mtwana, Helen Joseph, Lilian Ngoyi, Lily Diedericks, Francis Baard, Rahima Moosa, Florence Matomela, Victoria Mxenge, Motlalepule Chabaku. Many of them were in the church too.

I wish you a great day of celebrating the role of women and the successes that we have achieved together so far in our country.

Malibongwe!