

## Philanthropy and Leadership: Hearts and Minds

*Boipontsho Mnguni*

**I** am persuaded to think that philanthropy is born of charity and broadly speaking can only be carried out by a person or group who is driven by a wellspring of love and a mindset that supports and aims to eliminate social problems. I find the following words by Thomas Monson on “Pure religion” inspiring: “We are surrounded by those in need of our attention, our encouragement, our support, our kindness... We are the Lord’s hands here upon the earth, with the mandate to serve and to lift His children. He is dependent upon each of us.”

These quoted words help to explain the importance of compassion and service, and help found in the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. When closely examined, we find specific steps that illustrate what it takes to serve others, like

- ◆ *consciousness* – awareness of your surrounding plight and suffering;
- ◆ *compassion* – love and welfare of fellow people as demonstrated by Christ;
- ◆ *contact* – involvement and action;
- ◆ *care* – aid, facilities, maintenance, and support; and
- ◆ *cost* – financing and donations, e.g., providing a home and funding for students.

I’ve always been fascinated by the work and services of groups and organisations that serve and work in the aftermath of disasters or in areas stricken by poverty and hunger. Our churches, through their guilds or leagues, groups, associations, and individuals also render their help as best as they can in whatever way possible and wherever a need is identified. I also regard the family as a place where we learn to act out our roles of love, charitable, and philanthropic leadership roles.

Some time ago, I was listening to a Radio Talk Show about the sanity of naming babies. Belief systems, culture, circumstances, reasons, and justification of naming the newly born were as varied as the number of callers. Whilst continuing listening to the callers, I took a keen interest in the rationale that was expressed by especially mothers and fathers in naming their bundles of joy. Mind you, there’s nothing sinister about the exercise. It has been done from time immemorial. I’m told that my birth was a special moment and prophetic

in nature and naming me was a crowning moment of the envisioned birth. I remember later in life that the closest we could translate my name from Tswana to English was “Envisioned.” I also remember in my youthful years that I was flattered by the qualities guessed by an app about my name and its meaning. I think of what my father said, something like: “That it says so doesn’t make it so. Look within your heart for your God-given talents and do it.”

I’m told that my story of being brought into the world was that my dad had three days before, without any influence of prior medical professional information, dreamed of my birth which he shared with my mum. He told her of the day and time when she would give birth to a baby girl after friends who had visited had left. As it was in the dream, so it happened, and Mama had to give guidance in spite of her condition. Papa recalls that it was almost like an uninitiated pilot following instructions for an emergency plane landing. Papa says because he could not bring himself to cut the umbilical cord, a nursing sister in the neighbourhood was urgently called. She arrived in time to wrap up the process which ended with the first cry of a baby girl in Mama’s hands and beaming with thankful smiles. Papa named me Boipontsho, which simply means “Envisioned.”

I’ve observed that I have a special bond with my dad and it probably stems from the prophetic dream that came true. On the Radio Talk Show, I listened to a host of callers, while those who sent in their voice-notes were evidently of varied backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicity, and they all seemed to underline the fact that baby naming is associated with events, character, behaviours, heroes and heroines, and a selfless concern for the welfare of others – the list is endless.

Papa and Mama built us a home. There was laughter, music, and healthy relationships with neighbours and families. I grew up in a company of brothers who responsibly cared for their only baby sister and who were always protective and controlling. Whenever my parents were not around, they would become deputy parents. At times when I felt I’ve been pushed around too much, the first person to whom I would lodge my complaint would be my father. I would hear him briefly urging them to treat me nicely. On the other hand, my mother would remind me to be respectful and know or acknowledge my boundaries.

Our home was a meeting place for friends of my brothers and kids in the neighbourhood, especially during weekends and school holidays. The main attraction was the English soccer matches on M-Net, KTV, Gospel and Choral Music, and the American Awards on TV. I remember our Hitachi portable Hi-fi that had a good and powerful sound and Papa would easily lend it out to family

and friends for entertainment for special occasions. These were times when family and friends just enjoyed themselves.

During school holidays, my mother made sure that we cooked enough food for our family and friends. Our favourite meal was usually homemade fish and chips or pap (porridge) and stew. My father made sure that we were never without a bag of potatoes, 5 kg of hake fillets, and oil. It was during these times that Mama devoted her space to teach me cooking and baking skills that were later refined by my sister-in-law.

Often whilst my brothers and their friends were glued to the M-Net shows, Papa would call the rest of us to the kitchen and together with him we would start playing a game of eye-contact exercise. He always said he is doing the exercise to remind us to focus and look people straight in the eyes at all times and never fall prey to put-down looks from anybody. This would move over to us reciting the poem *Desiderata* and would end off by reciting Psalm 23.

My mother was much loved by all my friends and neighbourhood kids because of her goodhearted nature and the ability to involve them in whatever she was doing, if anyone of them wished to join her and help out. If she spotted any of them with untidy hair, she would insist on fixing their hair. She taught me to always be helpful and to enjoy doing simple home chores and assist wherever possible and whenever available. Added to this was the “Just do it” attitude that my brother impressed upon me.

In the course of time, I found myself able to raise my hand and stand up to be counted, be it at school, church, or among my peers and friends. During these times, I’ve made friends and lost some, won some fights and lost some, and also let go. I’ve realised that nothing was and is perfect, for I’m forever learning from my life world and experiences.

In growing up, we are influenced by what happens around us, the way we behave and do things and also affect each other – be it at home and in the family, within groups and our community, we are impacted by change and forced to make choices that are good or bad, negative or positive. My dad had a funny way of putting it by saying, “You make choices and decisions of your own. Don’t let it affect me – carry your cross and make it right.” I’ve notice that with the bad choices and decisions I’ve made in life, my first point of call for disclosure and cry for help was usually Mama, while Papa would be told later on.

My Christian faith continues to be an integral part of my life. I used to organise, participate, support, and help out in special activities. One that comes to mind and that always brings about cherished memories is the *Seven Words on*

*the Cross*. With my pleading, Papa had agreed to help prepare a short play for a handful of church youth who would act out the scene on Good Friday. Our practice progress was slow and punctuated by a handful of excuses and as a result the play was called off. I seized the moment and stepped up to make a solo presentation of the *Last Seven Words of Christ on the Cross* in a packed ELCSA Church in Kwa-Thema. The preparations and practices that Papa put me through really helped to underscore the message of the cross and I was humbled by the spirit of appreciation.

In the course of time, we relocated to a nearby suburb and after a year or so, I decided to join the Word of Life Church in Springs where, during my active membership, I was trained and developed to run youth and community projects such as helping out with finances at a local orphanage, and in assisting the fund raising for the church. My pastor, Dr Steve Ward instilled in us the importance of sound knowledge, passion, and commitment in all our undertakings. The orphanage home, among other community projects, enjoyed support from the church.

In one of our visits, I came into contact with a young boy called Siyabonga with whom we bonded at first sight. I remember him saying, “Are you also going to leave me and never come back to visit again like everyone else?” That left a lump in my throat and I never wanted to disappoint him ever since. I was overwhelmed by his observation as a child. I never wanted him to ever feel that way in his life again. So, I made it a point to visit him once a month. Sadly, that commitment did not last very long because Siyabonga was finally taken away from the orphanage to live with a family member.

The experience and voluntary services at the orphanage left me with unforgettable memories that strengthened my resolve to extend a helping hand whenever and wherever I identify a need. The depth of practical exposure at Word of Life was usually a refreshing and inspiring experience, all because Pastor Ward made us understand what it means to be Christ-centred servant leaders. Every role and function had as basis, a biblically based job description that empowered us to execute tasks like being an usher, part of the hospitality team, or woman’s ministry, catering, pre-service prayer, or alter worker. All of these I devotedly did out of love. With a youthful spirit and courage to do this, I found myself also involved in the mercy ministries where we would give Christmas gifts for needy children and help pack, coordinate, and distribute groceries to the needy within the church and communities.

During my employment at Edcon, I had an opportunity to make use of the different CSI initiatives as a middle person tasked with identifying and applying for the children's homes that received donated clothes which were stored at the distribution centre for this purpose. The donations which we received and kept for continued distribution ensured that the children would receive clothing throughout the year. On my numerous visits to assess the impact of Edcon's support of these orphanages, it was satisfying to find children clothed warmly, especially during the wintertime, and appropriately on the alternative seasons of the year.

Time and again, on reflection, I reach the conclusion and resolve that I'll always be deliberate in making a difference in people's lives wherever I am and whenever I can. The empathy and the selfless concern for the welfare of others, the habit of lifting my hand and be available to give a helping hand and assisting organisations and church structures have made me to rethink and learn ways and means of making an impact in small things and not only on the broader scheme of life's community and family.

My grandfather used to tell me many stories, but my favourite was his 1c story of rental arrears at the time when he was employed by Mr Truter for almost 20 years. He would still relate the story in disbelief in spite of it having occurred almost 20 years to my birthday because the threat of losing his house was real.

In his distress, he spoke to his employer, PJ Truter who wrote to the council, submitting that my grandfather worked for him for 30 years and has never failed to pay his rent. He was the horticulturist in Kwa-Thema and has won a number of garden competitions for years. He described my grandfather as a respectable man and resident, and that a street was named More Street, after his brother. Mr Truter then in turn wrote a cheque of 1c to the administrative office, which meant that it would cost the municipality more to write off the debt.

My grandfather was a man of his word, loved working with his hands, and had a passion for gardening – a love that he shared with my mom. He would always teach me lessons about planting seeds and how that would result in a harvest – the joy that comes with it when you see how the seedlings are growing. He taught me about honour, respect, and integrity, how it would fight for you in the darkest of times. He would always say, *Tlhompha motho, o tlhomphe mosebetsi* (Respect people around you and respect your work). He was also an established barber and many of his customers came on Saturday afternoons and would be listening to the radio soccer matches or rugby. However, as times

went on, he went back to his favourite hobby – vegetables and flower gardens that won him unforgettable accolades. My grandfather was principled. When the occasion arose that he had to ask my father for some money, he would make sure to repay him and would be against any attempt to cancel the debt, insisting that the money was lent to him, and he must therefore repay it. He used to say there's a difference between "lend me money" and "please give me money" and would never pretend he had forgotten.

"A rolling stone gathers no moss," is said of a person who is always on the move and perceived to be unproductive and unreliable. I've always wondered why this was followed like a gospel because it is also true that working in different jobs at different institutions and places can enrich one with vital hands-on skills and knowledge. Today there are better tools to measure a person's productivity and reliability.

I've worked at different places and enjoyed top of the drawer employee training and skills development. At Nedbank, I found that the company is dedicated to making an impact on communities. For this reason, employee community involvement and voluntary participation were encouraged, and we all gave of our time and talents to exploit available resources in order to make an impact in people's lives. The volunteerism programme offered tangible ways for employees to be involved in dealing with the social, economic, and environmental issues in order to alleviate the plight in our communities and country, e.g., Nedbank Children's Affinity accounts platform and caring for communities and WESSA (the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa).

The following proverbs will always act as differentiators in relation to the things I give my time to, and where I make my voice heard:

- ◆ Surround yourself with people that challenge you.
- ◆ Learn and learn quickly.
- ◆ Be open-minded and embrace diversity to learn from everyone.
- ◆ Be unapologetically yourself.

There is still a purpose for my life and a place in the society for me to make a difference. I strive not to settle for less but to do the best that I can, even at times that I struggle with my own confidence, when I am consumed with fear and not want to take the glory. That can be good for just a little while, but don't let that fool you that you don't go for what you are good at. With all the lessons that I learnt throughout my life journey, I want to highlight the following:

- ◆ My parents taught me the value of work and consistency.

- ◆ My grandfather taught me the value of respect for self and one's work.
- ◆ My pastor taught me the value of leading with Jesus' principles and love for his people.

In whatever I do, my efforts are always honest, and in the event of the lack of success, I exploit failure as a stimulating ingredient that prompts me to relook, to revisit, and redo in order to get rewarding outcomes. I've learnt that being a leader starts with one's own conviction of making a difference and having influence wherever you are.



BOIPONTSHO MABOTSHE MNGUNI is a passionate Human Resources professional with 13 years of working experience in the FMCG and Banking industry. My career started as a sales consultant at Edgars Stores. My HR Generalist experience includes Talent management, Consulting, Employee Engagement, Succession Planning, Industrial Relations representation at CCMA, Performance, Talent and People management. I am a strong believer in the power of community, and I care about the wellbeing of people beyond my walls. I spend my time being involved in giving back to the communities around me and enabling others to grow by being involved in programmes such as the Cell C take a girl child to work, Nedbank women's forum, Church and Masimong Foundation. When I am not being mother, wife, sister, daughter and friend. I am pursuing my studies, choosing to be a voice for the voiceless by being an agent of change and a better future.