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REMEMBRANCE AND RENEWAL

Exploring the role of the church as an agent of welfare after 15 years of democracy

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the contributions made by the church in the past towards welfare provision in South Africa, and current challenges faced by the church in acting as a welfare provider after 15 years of democracy. The church is well-placed to affect societal transformation and has played a significant historical role as a welfare agent in South Africa, as evidenced by the establishment of soft infrastructure during colonialism and in the advocacy and the formation of social capital that took place during the apartheid era. In a post-apartheid era, many churches continue to wrestle with issues such as: reconciliation and redistribution in an unequal society; bringing holism to social welfare; redefining their prophetic role; lack of capacity in delivery; and relief mode delivery. This paper, therefore, also proposes paths of renewal for the future, and draws from the WGRIP case study of the town of Paarl, Western Cape, in particular.

INTRODUCTION

It would not be out of place to state that the church has had an intrinsic relationship with welfare delivery in South Africa since colonialism, and continues to play a significant role in our relatively new democracy. Not only did the church (as is the case with many nations) put the first soft infrastructure such as schools and hospitals in place, she also played a significant role in the opposition against apartheid, and is still regarded by state and civil society as a key player in welfare delivery. However, it would also not be out of place to note that the church has not always been a positive agent of change with regard to social transformation. In fact, many churches lent tacit support to the regime and provided the theological justification for apartheid. Today, the church is at times viewed with ambivalence, despite being widely acknowledged as a key contributor to and agent for welfare. It is this tension that this paper will endeavour to navigate by exploring, through remembrance of the role that the church has played and continues to play as a provider of welfare; and by proposing that through renewal

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of both theology and praxis, she may continue to act as an agent of social transformation. The WGRIP study, undertaken in Paarl (a peri-urban town outside of Cape Town in the Western Cape), will serve as a case study and lens through which this tension and the possible creativity that may arise can be viewed.² The findings of this study are based on interviews and focus groups undertaken with church leaders of four mainline denominations, community members, and local government/public authorities.

LOOKING BACK: THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN PRE-DEMOCRACY

Ecclesiastical involvement in social justice and upliftment is not a new phenomenon; social welfare/community development has always accompanied Christian mission as either as an explicit part thereof or an intended by-product of mission (Pierson 1993:8). However, the pre-democracy role of the South African Church with regard to welfare provision and social justice is a complex one – owing to the dividedness of South African society and the complex state-church interactions throughout this period.

The church has been at the forefront of mobilising its resources to support and care for the poor and marginalised in South African society since 1652. Societal reformation for the oppressed and marginalised was also promoted by the church. Several missionaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS) encouraged the Khoikhoi to institute court cases against white farmers and employers at whose hands they'd suffered. Ordinance 50 at the Cape, which gave legal equality to "Hottentots and other free persons of colour", is also credited to the influence of a member of the LMS (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:52-56). The development of soft infrastructure and welfare work in the form of hospitals, orphanages, and schools (as elsewhere in the world), were largely facilitated in the early years by missionaries. However, as the church grew, congregations and denominations began to establish institutions and to care for their neighbours. Kritzinger (1996:4-12) identifies three historical models of social welfare in the South African church: the *versorgingsbenadering* (the care approach directed at relief measures), the *institutionele benadering* (the institutional approach directed at the establishment of social welfare institutions)³ and the *opheffingsbenadering* (the upliftment approach).

One of the most prominent roles played by any denomination in terms of social welfare – a role which eventually led to the development of the government's Department of Welfare – was unfortunately limited to its own racial grouping. This involvement arose in the early

² The WGRIP study was an interdisciplinary study spearheaded by The Unit for Religion and Development Research (URDR) who, together with a Swedish partner, the Centre for the Study of Religion and Society (CSRS) at the University of Uppsala, received a three-year grant (2006-2008) for a research project called "Welfare and Religion in a Global Perspective: theoretical and methodological exchange across the North-South divide" (WRIGP). This project was administered and funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa, the Swedish Research Council (VR) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

³ A prominent model of this in South Africa is Lovedale, established by the Glasgow Missionary Society in 1841. It became a multiracial, interdenominational centre of learning in the Eastern Cape and later generated the development of Fort Hare University (an institution which was "to provide education, expertise and confidence to many of those who became leaders in the African National Congress"). See Hofmeyr and Pillay (1994:74).

decades of the twentieth century from what was termed “the poor white problem” – a growing poor white population, the majority of whom spoke Afrikaans, who dwelt or originated in rural areas and had made their living from farming. Therefore, the first Carnegie Commission on the Poor White Problem was launched in 1930, largely based on the involvement of the Dutch Reformed Church. Although the “first commission did note the problems of black poverty as not being any less acute than those of poor whites and would require study on their own”, blacks were excluded from the inquiry (Albertyn & Rothman 1932:xix; see also Wilson & Ramphela 1989:x). Blacks and coloureds were viewed as an economic hindrance to the economic progress of the white population, and population growth in the black and coloured sectors of society was viewed as alarmingly high. Population growth, combined with the acquisition by blacks of skills that were on par with those of many poor whites, was seen as both economically threatening and psychologically demoralising for poor whites. Job reservation, which the inquiry proposed for a set, temporary period, was therefore proposed as the answer to this quandary (Albertyn & Rothman 1932:xx; cf. Maquarrie 1933:28). The success of this first inquiry is evident today.⁴ The poor white problem receded as many of these findings were incorporated into National Party policies, which formed in part the sociological and ideological motivation for apartheid and its subsequent policies which included recommendations such as job reservation (Albertyn & Rothman 1932:xx; cf. Wilson & Ramphela 1989:x).

Poverty in South Africa therefore became not only a socio-economic issue, but a profoundly political issue. Gross inequality was the direct result of the racial policies that flowed from recommendations such as job reservation, resulting in the racially correlated distribution of income that remains our legacy. Sadly, some sectors of the church gave theological justification to the heresy of apartheid. Others, however, in response to the institutionalised discrimination of the apartheid system, were often the voice of the voiceless black masses in the vacuum created by the banning of black political organisations such as the ANC and PAC. While many churches, “given their membership and multiracial nature”, did not welcome this new role, the developments following events such as the Sharpeville massacre left them little choice (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:275-76).⁵ De Gruchy (1996:49), for example, describes Desmond Tutu as a “political leader by default” because of the exile, imprisonment and killing of political leaders. Against the background of a growing African Theology, the Black Consciousness Movement and the Liberation Theology of Latin America, the strongest voice came from a South African theology of resistance that declared that “Liberation involves joining the struggle” – neutrality was not an option (Thomas 1995:195-96).⁶ Llewellyn MacMaster (2008:6), himself a theologian arrested under

4 It is important to note that the expansion of gold mining in the 1930s and industrial developments of the Second World War also contributed to the proposal of job reservation. See Wilson and Ramphela (1989:x).

5 Organisations such as the SACC (known at first as the Christian Council of South Africa) and the Christian Institute “committed themselves to a conscientious struggle for the liberation of blacks” during the apartheid struggle.

6 Sadly, some sectors of the church “either supported apartheid or preached a piety divorced from social injustice”. See Thomas (1995:149).

apartheid, cites Allan Boesak in arguing that for millions of South Africans “the struggle for a free, democratic South Africa ... was based on their religious convictions”.

Patel (quoted by Van der Merwe 2007:3) identifies apartheid as giving rise to the “development of the social welfare sector (which) took place largely along racial lines and was focused on the white population group”. However, this situation also gave rise to the formation of faith-based NGOs that recognised that the government was not caring for the oppressed black masses. In fact, during the early 1980s the church was identified by the Second Carnegie Inquiry as one of the key organisations (together with trade unions and other civil society role players) that could bring about social change. It is interesting that the concept of community development (which was not popular in South Africa because of its “potential for political change”) is seen as only really having “made headway in evangelical missionary circles and the Black Consciousness Movement” (De Beer & Swanepoel 1998:10). In fact, Swart and Venter (2001:486) argue that, particularly in the light of the church’s role as an ally “in the liberation struggles and grassroots socio-economic activities of NGOs”, most South African development-/welfare-orientated NGOs cannot be viewed apart from their religious roots.

MOVING FORWARD: THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACING THE CHURCH TODAY

Fostering civic life

In a post-apartheid state, the importance of the church’s partnership in welfare provision appears to be recognised and sought by a state that, according to Swart (2009:75), appears to be struggling to meet the awaited “social and infrastructural needs of its citizens”. One of the most telling early statements made with regard to the role of faith in fostering civic life is that of former President Nelson Mandela in his statement on ethical transformation:

[I]n our striving for political and economic development, the ANC recognises that social transformation cannot be separated from spiritual transformation (ANC 1998:2).

This positive view of the role of religion in affecting social change appears to have been shared by his successor. Both Thabo Mbeki and the former Minister of Social Development, Zola Skweyiya, recognised the role that the church has played historically in the development of soft infrastructure, and encouraged partnership between the public and private sector largely through national religious bodies, such as the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF) and the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD).

This is certainly also evident at grassroots level in Paarl. Views held by the public/government authorities in the Paarl area were unanimous in their conviction that the church had a positive role to play in social welfare. The church was seen to be “in contact with people on the ground and knows best what the needs of the communities are and it also knows before anybody else” (Erasmus 2008:18). Those interviewed as part of the WGRIP study felt that the church could play a significant role in moral formation, in counselling and

relief work, and saw the possibility of the church's involvement in welfare as being able to bridge societal gaps. This is confirmed by several recent studies regarding the importance of the role of the church in social welfare and development in South Africa, which note that the church is able to mobilise far more people than any other social movement, and to reach all sectors of society. It is also better positioned than the state to address issues of moral decay, has the greatest level of trust than any other institution in society, and contributes more than the state to social welfare (Krige 2008:17). However, when asked to comment on the church's post-1994 role, many felt that the churches' role had diminished in comparison to "the activist role of the churches before 1994 and how this helped to oppose and in the end, topple the Apartheid government". These respondents felt that the church could be playing the same role of mobilising people as they did in the past, but now to address the welfare problems communities face currently (see Erasmus 2008:53). Some respondents felt that the church was becoming almost invisible, "afraid to voice their opinions on certain issues and this makes them seem weak to the public" (Erasmus 2008:53). Academics have echoed the same concern and have even gone so far as to state that the church has "moved to the margins" (MacMaster 2008:3). This presents a definite challenge to the church, which is perceived as being able to play a vital role and yet appears to be failing to do so. During the apartheid era, mobilisation was used to great effect and so a remobilisation of the laity in a post-apartheid context is, in my opinion, perhaps one of the ways in which the church can again revitalise its involvement in civic life. For a while now, congregations have also been identified as effective generators of "social capital" – "those connections of communication and trust that make the organisation of the complex society possible" (Ammerman 1997:362). One study undertaken in the USA, for example, has noted that African American churchgoers were more likely to be actively involved in civic life "due to the development and fostering of social trust and a sense of mutual obligation that exists within these [*sic*] churches" (Brown & Brown 2003:618). Furthermore, although Putnum states that, in his opinion, "altruism (doing good for other people) is not part of the definition of social capital", he does acknowledge that "it turns out empirically, at least in the United States and probably elsewhere, that a very strong predictor of altruism is social connectedness" (Putnum 2001:7). Besides giving financially towards social welfare, altruism, through the volunteering of time and services, is one of the things the church is good at. The culture of volunteerism is inherent to the church's inner organisation and mission mandate and so it is unsurprising that recent South African studies affirm the Christian faith as an important factor in shaping and motivating volunteerism in our country. In fact, several community volunteers express the roots of their involvement as stemming from "their calling as Christians" (Green 2009:35). There appear to be many opportunities for greater volunteerism. Women, children and the disabled were just some of the vulnerable groups, mentioned by the WGRIP report, which require the mobilisation of volunteers. Crime prevention was also an issue in which congregants as concerned community members could play a role, and home-based HIV/Aids care is also an important avenue for volunteerism. Perhaps the most interesting response to the perceived silence and lack of mobilisation of the church came from the public authorities, who stated that, due to the strong moral- or value-

orientated basis of the church, the church should be more involved in the moral debate on welfare issues such as women and child abuse, substance abuse and crime (Erasmus 2008:52). This of course highlights again the need for the church to take its place in the public arena both through the mobilisation of its congregants and through public theology.

The reconciliation and restitution agenda

In a post-apartheid context, South Africa's inequality ratio remains one of the highest in the world, with income distribution still largely skewed along racial lines. Widespread inequality continues to exist today and, while the radical political power shift has already taken place peacefully, empowerment of the poor who are powerless against the ravages of economic, social, and even political poverty remains a challenge (Roberts 2006:116). Apartheid also served to fragment society, so that according to Villa-Vicencio and Doxtader (2004:77): "viable communal reparations, which focus on economic growth and the restoration of human dignity, are not easy to realise". It is within this context that the church has an opportunity to embody an ethic of sharing and redistribution. Furthermore, the provision of social welfare by the church cannot be looked at without acknowledging that the ethic of sharing and redistribution has not only socio-economic significance, but also a deep theological significance. As the authors of the book, *Facing the Truth*, that deals with the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), note: "religious notions of reconciliation expect from perpetrators an ethical commitment to making redress, restitution and reparation" (De Gruchy *et al.* 1999:130). While in Christian theology there are no simplistic inferences to be drawn from biblical examples of equality, the "implication within the biblical text is sharing and possibly restitution for those oppressed, is one that addresses unjust structural relationships and power dynamics" (Bragg 1987:42).

It is not insignificant, therefore, that in WGRIP interviews with several church leaders from different denominations, the importance of economic "sharing" is mentioned (Bowers-Du Toit 2009:103-104). However, due to the divisive nature of apartheid town planning, "white, black and coloured neighbours in areas such as Paarl remain fairly isolated both geographically and socio-economically" (Bowers-Du Toit 2009:107). Furthermore, the legacy of denominational divides along racial lines (i.e. Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church) continues to raise issues of trust between local congregations. A regional partnership initiative between the Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church has resulted in the formation of a joint NGO, Badisa. However, this partnership does not appear to be happening at congregational level. One of the ways in which this division may be addressed is through an inter-congregational model, which "twins" wealthier (usually white) congregations with poorer congregations in areas such as Paarl (cf. Hammet 2000:204-205). Such "twinning" will possibly create the space for the creation of a pool of voluntary professional expertise from which poorer congregations can draw for technical services. Such a model could in essence thus promote redistribution through sharing of resources – whether they be financial, technical or material. In fact, some church leaders interviewed mentioned this as a possible model, and greater cooperation between churches

regarding welfare issues was also noted as being needed in what is regarded by most church leaders as a divided community (Erasmus 2008:40).

How such relationships will be defined and created by the church in an area such as Paarl will be interesting to observe should they seek to implement such an initiative, because such models also raise issues of power and paternalism. The latter issues are of course fresh in the minds of many black and coloured South Africans. The latter could, however, go a long way towards bridging social divides. A study undertaken in the USA in 2005 documented the success of one such program which “twinning” poorer African American congregations and wealthy white suburban congregations, and claims that whites reported that they “gain as much if not more than they give in these programs” (Lockhart 2005:55).

Following our team’s feedback of the data and papers to leaders of the community, it was found that churches were beginning to take steps towards healing wounds of the past. Some white ministers in the area were, for example, playing a role in facilitating socio-economic justice through economic advocacy for farm workers employed by their white congregants. Should such opportunities not be grasped now and taken to the next level, it may lead to a loss of community witness and may continue to feed the divisions which exist in many such communities. It is hoped that such initiatives will spread into fully fledged creative partnerships that may address some of the welfare challenges faced by Paarl.

More effective delivery

Church, state and “more comprehensive delivery”

It is clear from the WGRIP study that a greater need for partnership is not only confined to “intra-church” partnerships. There is a definite need for local congregations and Faith-based Organisations (FBOs) to cooperate to a greater extent with government welfare services. Partnership between the public and voluntary sectors through a community-based approach is one of the cornerstones of our current welfare system. However, it appears as if some of the church representatives interviewed felt that there needed to be greater co-ordination between government and the church, and that the former should liaise with churches at grassroots level because “they are more sensitive to the problems of the community” (Green 2009:31). Patel further adds that

... given the limited institutional capacity of the new democratic government to deliver the services itself, collaboration with the voluntary sector is imperative if the government is to achieve its ambitious social development outcomes (Patel 2003:1).

However, she also adds that this might come at the cost of the “autonomy and independence of such voluntary organizations as they struggle for survival in a public management milieu” (2003:1). This is confirmed by Davids, who also notes that within the South African context NGOs “do not operate in a political vacuum. Government policy can limit or advance NGO activities” (Davids 2002:71).

This challenge will certainly apply to local congregations that wish to actively respond to the felt needs in their grassroots communities. It is interesting to note that while most

respondents felt that such cooperation would be advantageous as the common vision is the good of the community, others felt that there would be a tension between the church's identity and calling and the state's approach:

There are also disadvantages. Church and government operate differently; the church is a place of service and involvement, while the government is seen as only serving self-interest. Risks for such cooperation are: if "politics" creeps into the cooperation, if government is too prescriptive, wrong priorities are tackled and one group's interest is put before those of others (Erasmus 2008:45).

Still others went on to comment that the church nevertheless needed to be sensitive to the process and structures of the state welfare system and to work through these channels. Findings indicate that there are not many existing examples of cooperation between churches and NGOs, government and business.

FBOs (there are several in the Paarl community), however, are viewed by public/government officials as doing good work, particularly in assisting "the cases that were not catered for by the state" (Erasmus 2008:51-52). All but one of the denominations that were included in the WGRIP study (Anglican, Dutch Reformed and Roman Catholic) had professionalised their welfare services through the development of institutions such as old age homes, community centres and orphanages, rather than to focus on congregational action (Erasmus 2008:38). It is interesting that two FBOs were identified by members of the population as being the most involved with welfare in the Paarl area, and this perhaps highlights a need for FBOs to assist local congregations in capacity building with regard to government structures and policies – so that they can better engage with government structures (Erasmus 2008:46).

However, one public official noted that congregations appeared reluctant to join government-funded projects, because they were not faith-based projects. The case study also suggests that currently the majority of welfare work done by congregations in Paarl is largely relief work in the form of soup kitchens and the distribution of food parcels and clothing – all forms of welfare that do not require the church to necessarily engage directly with the welfare system (Erasmus 2008:36). This certainly poses a challenge to local congregations who have the potential to be more responsive in terms of addressing felt needs more rapidly and contextually than government structures.⁷ Large numbers of the population interviewed felt that government welfare offices were inaccessible to those who were most vulnerable (children, pensioners, HIV orphans) and that social grants were not sufficient to "uplift people" (Erasmus 2008:46). It also poses a challenge to congregations and FBOs to continue to engage government and possibly partner with other stakeholders in order to ensure what Green identifies as "more comprehensive delivery" to the needy and vulnerable (Green 2009:31).

⁷ Korten (1991:98) suggests, for example, that the "small size, independence and focused value commitments" of voluntary organisations such as the church "give them the capacity for social and institutional innovation seldom found in either government or business".

Moving beyond charity and relief

Relief work, while well-meaning and legitimate in many contexts, focuses more on the symptoms than causes of poverty and implies a “charity” approach to welfare and development, rather than the community development approach (based on tenets such as empowerment, self-reliance and participation) advocated by the South African government (Lombaard 2009). This approach, most famously identified by David Korten as a “Generation One” approach

... involves the direct delivery of services to meet an immediate deficiency or shortage experienced by the beneficiary population, such as needs for food, health care or shelter (Korten 1991:115).

Religious organisations have long been at the forefront of such efforts and therefore it is not surprising that most congregations and FBOs in Paarl are operating within this paradigm.

However, this approach has been criticised by those wanting to promote holistic development – not as with this paradigm where the NGO/agency/church is the doer of development and the people the passive recipients.⁸ The church as “doer” of development, according to sociological analysis, results in dependency, not holistic development. Kritzinger and Swart appear to agree that this is tantamount to paternalism, where things are done for the people and not with them, and which thus presupposes inequality. This then results – in the case of the church – in acting as a dividing agent between the poor on the one hand and the church on the other, or perhaps in terms of a handout from above (the church) to the poor below (Kritzinger 1996:6; Swart & Venter 2000:27). Dennis (in Jacosen 2001:42) makes the point that richer suburban congregations often prefer to donate money and emergency food rather than become involved in holistic development that empowers the poor as they “draw their sense of self-worth from the dependency of the needy upon them”. This is a danger which white churches in South Africa need to be particularly aware of in light of South Africa’s divided past.

The church, nevertheless, has definite potential to enable those in need to help themselves – both through local congregations and FBOs. As far back as the late 1980s, Wilson and Ramphela regarded “empowerment” as one of the South African church’s most powerful tools, a tool that helps people to “become critically aware of the reasons for their poverty ... with a view to controlling their own destinies” (Wilson & Ramphela 1989:302).

Theology as “friend” or “foe” of praxis?⁹

Yet, one of the hindrances identified with regard to churches engaging in a more holistic approach to welfare and moving beyond a charity paradigm, has been that of their theology.

⁸ A study undertaken by Swart and Venter – making use of Korten’s generations – found that despite national attempts at deliberate institutional transformation in the Methodist Church of South Africa (MCSA), their findings indicate that of the 22 programmes investigated only one was not a first generation project. See Swart and Venter (2001:287). In the case of the Dutch Reformed Church, Swart’s analysis reveals that its social welfare work remains firmly within a social welfare (first generation) approach. See Swart (1997:85).

⁹ It should be noted that this section makes reference to and is drawn from an article which appeared in the *JTSA* March 2009 special edition.

In analysing the theological themes which emerge from interviews with clergy and other church leaders in the Paarl WRIGP project, it becomes evident that theology:

... has a significant impact on the way the church engages with poverty and vulnerable groups both for “better” and for “worse”. As “friends”, praxis has the potentiality to be more effective as it engages with theologies that challenge the church to be more incarnational and address issues of self-worth and vocation. As “foes” biblical motivation that is valid, yet remains unexamined, may hinder the church in exercising the kind of praxis that moves beyond charity or the boundaries of their own community or congregation (Bowers-Du Toit 2009:110).

It is also interesting to note, for instance, that the Report highlights the fact that within the context of the various denominations, welfare (or in the SA paradigm, “social development”) is often referred to as “caring or charity”. Such designations may in fact be further pointing to a lack of theological engagement with the welfare/social development discourse, and may be contributing to the current relief mode of welfare dominantly employed by congregations.

There currently exists a vacuum with regard to a theological mode of discourse which moves beyond the liberation paradigm or the current pragmatic debates in South Africa. This may be ascribed as largely due to the late onset in South Africa of formal training on “theology and development”. Possible recommendations for the cultivation of more engaged congregations is that all theological training institutions introduce such studies for prospective clergy. For grassroots-level work, training workshops or conferences that explore a biblical basis for development could be run for clergy and laity. Possible texts pertaining to God’s justice and concern for the poor, oppressed, and marginalised could be consulted, with the view to promoting their usage in church liturgy, sermons, and bible studies. Such training could help clergy and laity to think theologically regarding the socio-economic challenges they face, thereby imbuing hope and possibly revitalising praxis. Informal training workshops conducted for clergy and laity in an area such as Paarl could also form a rallying point for greater partnership between various sectors of the local church.

CONCLUSION

In remembering the role the church has played within the development of social welfare in South Africa and in seeking ways toward the renewal of its praxis, it becomes evident that within a society in transition, religious organisations such as the church can create space for the voices of the poor to be heard and addressed. The respondents interviewed certainly felt that the church has a significant role to play in engaging poverty, and certainly the administration acknowledged its role. A re-examination of its internal dynamics of welfare delivery, theology and the reconciliation agenda, therefore beckon the church to more effective mobilisation against the scourge of poverty. The church’s response will be telling in the years to come and may go on to either “make or break” the effectivity of welfare delivery to the poor in the next fifteen years.

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KEYWORDS / TREFWOORDE

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