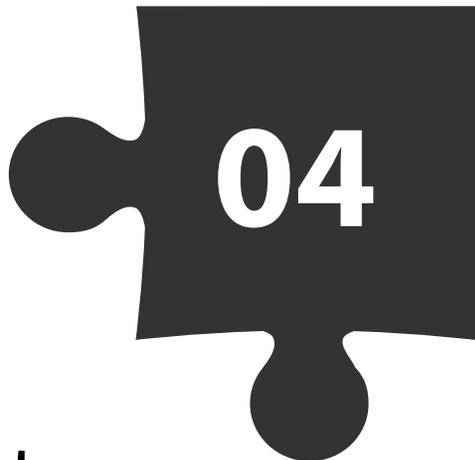


# Unfinished Business?

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Faith Communities and Reconciliation

in a Post-TRC Context



# Witness statement at the re-enactment of TRC Faith Communities' Hearings

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## Introduction

I had the privilege, as a non-South African, to be invited to be part of this revisit of the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] Faith Communities' Hearings and to present some reflections on the contribution of faith communities to reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa. I accepted the invitation realising that 'external eyes' may bring a new perspective, but also in the humble awareness that it may be premature to speak out on a situation that one does not fully understand. My reflection centres on seven points.

## Prophetic words

I have heard many prophetic words during the consultation from the mouths of religious leaders and commissioners. To mention a few of those: the realisation that twenty years into the new democratic South Africa was not a time for

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complacency. The momentum has to be maintained, especially regarding the need for justice (social, economic and redistributive justice), land redistribution, the fight against corruption and accountability, violence against women, and addressing the continued vulnerability of women in general; also the need to speak to power and to address the business community on their social responsibility and potential for contributing to justice. I can only endorse these wise words.

### Religious potential

In one submission, Rev Cassie Aucamp of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika, GKSA) referred to recent research confirming that faith communities are among the most trusted institutions in civil society in South Africa. Coming from secularised Europe, it makes me aware that religions in South Africa and Africa, in general, have enormous potential to contribute to the common good. The flip side of this insight is that if things are not going well in society, well, who is to blame then? Government? Civil society? Or, especially, faith communities? I also heard the comment that people do not listen to religious communities to the same degree as in the past. I cannot judge that opinion, but the fact remains that the potential of religions to influence in the sense that I refer to it here, namely, to contribute to the well-being of civil society, brings with it tremendous responsibilities.

#### i) Reconciliation as an ongoing process

The TRC was a reconciliatory event. Prof Nelus Niemandt witnessed again to the meaning of the event for the NGK. Most of the submissions also recounted the ways churches have made progress internally on the way to reconciliation. Rev Angelo Scheepers updated us extensively on the progress made over a decade within the Baptist Union, with at their last assembly allowing for a full day of discussion on the issue of race. I was also deeply moved by the witness of Rev Fourie, on the painful journey of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (Hervormde Kerk) towards coming to terms with its theological support for apartheid. It reflects the reminder by Pastor Daniel Andrews of the Apostolic Faith Mission of the words of Allan Boesak that reconciliation is a painful process.

## ii) Reconciliation as a religious gift to the nation-state

My secular colleagues and many of the European intellectuals expressed their admiration of what happened in at the TRC, especially for the leadership shown by the archbishop. Although they struggled with his religious message of forgiveness, they fully and easily embraced his explanation of the concept of *ubuntu* over against the Western individualised ways of dealing with crime and punishment. For me, this indicates the direction that reconciliation as a religious gift to South Africa has, since the TRC, captured the attention of a global audience. I observe two aspects of that innovative gesture. First, the offer of the religious concept. The concept of reconciliation in South Africa has been developed from a religious concept used by Christian churches and theologians into a key notion in the political discourse in the transition towards a democratic state structure. It finally became a complex, multi-layered symbol of the new South Africa, a country that tried to come to terms with a violent separated past and aimed to unite toward a common future. Second, the symbolism was not sufficient. The TRC was also a performance, offering the space to perform reconciliation. It was a highly mediatised secular liturgy in which a religious leader – Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu – played an essential role to help the nation come to terms with the past and unite people. Modestly, the TRC effectuated the potential transitional power of reconciliation.

## iii) Reconciliation as a request from the nation-state to the faith communities

In turn, the South African nation-state requested religious communities to become reconciled communities themselves via the TRC Faith Communities' Hearings. The best analysis that captures what was wrong with the faith communities under the apartheid era is found in the Report on the TRC Faith Hearings.<sup>2</sup>

In most cases, faith communities claimed to cut across divisions of race, gender, class and ethnicity. As such, their very existence would seem to have been in opposition to the policies of the apartheid state and, in pursuing their norms and values, to have constituted a direct challenge to apartheid policies. That this was not the case lies behind many of the faith communities' apologies to the South African people at the TRC hearings. Indeed, contrary to their deepest traditions, many faith communities mirrored apartheid society. Contrary to their deepest principles, many faith communities reflected apartheid society, putting question marks behind

2 RSA (Republic of South Africa). 1998. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, 4, paragraph 29. Cape Town: TRC.

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their profession of loyalty that transcends social divisions. They thus not only failed South African society, but they failed their faith traditions.

The language of the TRC Report in terms of 'norms, values and principles' suggests ethical failures of faith communities concerning the apartheid past. However, the original and substantially more comprehensive report, *Faith Communities and Apartheid: A Report prepared for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by the Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa*, on which the Commission's Final Report was based, described the failings of the faith communities in even more far-reaching terms. So, what the state was asking of faith communities was to clean their houses, not just for the sake of the common good, but to be true to their callings.

### Embodying reconciliation

World religions are a treasure trove and archive of wisdom that people have recognise as a gift to societies and humanity over many centuries. The insight, for example, that we are all together for humanity, is one of these gifts. Recently, a representative of the Baha'i Faith opened the Peace Lecture in Cape Town with a prayer, after reminding the audience of the fact that we are one humanity because all humans have their origin in one Creator. All Abrahamic religions share this insight. But other inclusive concepts can be added. Islam has, for example, the concept of the *Ummah*, the one community of the faithful. Christianity has the concept of one Saviour for all people, and of one, catholic church, that is one community that encompasses members from all the peoples, from all the nations on earth. So are religious communities living up to their identity, are they embodying this identity? It struck me during this consultation how often unity was referred to. Prof Jerry Pillay explained how uniting into the Uniting Presbyterian Church was an instrument of reconciliation, in itself. I heard the same message from the Anglicans, the Methodists and the Lutherans. The NGK indicated that the uniting process with the other member of the NGK family is still not entirely on track. Rev Peter Grove placed the finger on the wound: How to unify a racially-segregated church? The Baptist Union was aware that its congregational structure presented challenges in terms of unity. Traditionally, unity is discussed in the context of confessional disagreements. The South African faith communities made the global community aware that the main challenge is not confessional disagreement, but how to cross racial, ethnic or national lines of separation. In this context, it is striking that the ecumenical text always tends to reduce the unity question to confessional disagreement, clearly expressing a Western agenda. Only

once the eyes are opened to the challenge of crossing socio-cultural borders, does one become aware of how often it is the main issue or challenge.

In recent weeks, the Baptist Church in Ukraine and the Baptist Church in Russia have cut their confessional ties. They are no longer on speaking terms. The reason seems evident in the context of the developments in Ukraine during the last year. A majority of the Ukrainian citizens, especially in the western part of their country, want to re-orientate their country more towards the West, more specifically toward the European Union, while a majority in the eastern districts want to keep close links with Russia, with whom they have been linked for many decades as part of the former Soviet Union. The issue of Ukrainian identity already caused a split in the main Christian denomination, the Orthodox Church, linked to the Moscow patriarchate, in 1992, with the support of the Ukrainian state.

In the case of the Orthodox churches with their traditional links with the state, one could still suspect to find the manipulating hand of politicians in these churches. But for Baptists, this does not hold. As part of the free church tradition, for Baptists, the separation between church and state is part of their confessional identity. Apparently, in the context of a developing civil war in the eastern parts of the country and the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula, the Baptists in Ukraine and Russia both have become aware of the power of belonging to a different national identity, even if they keep their distance from the government in their respective countries. They are one by confession but divided along the lines of nationality.

## Instruments of religious reconciliation

I conclude with some of what I call instruments of religious reconciliation that I observed and that were attested to in the submissions during this consultation:

- The call for the conversion of the heart.
- To have feet on the ground: grassroots existence. Bishop Kevin Dowling of the Roman Catholic Church had a strong message on this.
- Change in the language in liturgy mentioned among others by the Baptists.
- Improved structures of accountability within faith communities
- To choose leadership that has the courage, the wisdom, and the ability to lead in change.

With that, I wish to thank the organisers of this consultation for the opportunity to share some of my thoughts on the importance of the re-enactment of the TRC Faith Communities' Hearings and my realisations during this valuable and enlightening experience.