

# **THE RHETORIC OF THE CHURCH IN THE TRANSITION FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA: SOCIO-RHETORICAL CRITICISM AND ECCLESIASTICAL RHETORIC**

**HJ Bernard Combrink**

**University of Stellenbosch**

The identity of the church is closely related to the rhetoric of the different churches in the transition from the Old to the New South Africa. What is endeavoured here is to create some understanding for the recent rhetoric of the churches in the light of the inter-texture of the different traditions present in South Africa. Without going into detail, it may be helpful just quickly to recall the way one's religious response to the social and cultural world can be classified.

It is a great privilege to dedicate this contribution to a friend and valued colleague of many years. The rhetoric of the church and the role of the church in fulfilling its calling have been a very high priority throughout his whole academic career. In this contribution, I endeavour to apply insights from socio-rhetorical criticism to the ecclesiastical rhetoric in the past and in the more recent period of transition in South Africa.

## **1. Listing possible responses of the church to the world**

Here the so-called specific social topics is briefly listed (Robbins 1996b:72ff).

### ***1.1 Introversionist***

In this response the world is seen as basically evil. Believers should only be concerned with spiritual matters. This embodies the typical Anabaptist distance between the church and the world.

### ***1.2 Conversionist***

This response is of the conviction that people can be changed through the transformation of the self. "Give me reborn people!" This is the typical fundamentalist or evangelical position.

### **1.3 Revolutionist**

Here the destruction of the world, in essence by supernatural powers, is expected. Believers may participate, but they are only assisting the supernatural powers.

### **1.4 Gnostic-Manipulationist**

According to this view salvation is possible, yet people must learn the right means to deal with their problems. This may be applicable to aspects of the Roman Catholic approach with its emphasis on reason as the criterion in the secular world of politics and economics. This may also hold true in part for the Lutheran response with its 'two-kingdom' model. The church is reigned by the Gospel and grace, whereas in society God's laws and judgment would apply.

### **1.5 Thaumaturgical**

The emphasis is here on a very personal and local request for help. Salvation is therefore also seen to be very personal.

### **1.6 Reformist**

This view operates from the conviction that corrupt world structures can be changed or at least amended by people who are open to supernatural influence.

### **1.7 Utopian**

This is a radical response aiming at reconstructing the entire corrupt social world. This is more radical than the revolutionist response, and its emphasis on the role of people rather than divine powers also differ from the revolutionist response.

## **2. The inter-texture of statements by churches**

One is here dealing with a field as broad and varied as oral-scribal inter-texture, cultural inter-texture, social inter-texture and historical inter-texture (see Robbins 1996b:40ff).

It is impossible to deal here exhaustively with the whole spectrum, but an effort will be made to create some understanding for the complex situation and the varied factors determining the rhetoric of statements by some of the most heard voices on the church scene in South Africa. These issues have been highlighted often enough

in many ways in the past (see also Walshe 1995), but here the approach is from a socio-rhetorical critical point of view.

### **2.1 The Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*)**

As so much has been written concerning these issues (see e.g. Combrink 1986), no extensive discussion is given here, but only a couple of remarks to highlight the rhetorical implications.

#### 2.1.1 Legitimising separate churches and apartheid

The decision in 1857 to allow separate communion services was based on the "weakness of some" as a reconfiguration of the oral-scribal inter-texture of the reference to the weakness in faith in Rm 14:1ff. Later more positive arguments were used and it was stated that separate churches were to be deemed the best way to evangelise different peoples and nations. This led to the establishment of different churches for different people by the *Dutch Reformed Church* (DRC) since 1881 and the exclusion of members of colour from churches and congregations.

Concerning the injustices resulting from this policy, the DRC for many years only admitted to the existence of certain "practical deficiencies" and "shortcomings" of the system which then had to be alleviated. This is very important terminology and reflects the inter-texture of the high level of involvement in the cultural and political context which was prevalent at that stage.

#### 2.1.2 Critical voices within the DRC

But in the DRC there were always critical voices speaking from a basic reformist position. This is well known and not discussed here in detail. The criticism has, however, often been voiced that these critical voices from within did not really operate from a new paradigm, but were basically only using anti-apartheid arguments within the same old paradigm ( see also Van Wyk 1976; Vorster 1984).

#### 2.1.3 Unity in the DRC family

In the meantime critical voices in the younger churches in the DRC family were becoming much more audible. A shift was taking place from an introversionist position to a more conversionist and reformist and even a revolutionist position. Since 1975 synods started to reject apartheid. Especially the former Dutch Reformed

Mission Church (DRMC – currently the Uniting Reformed Church (URC)) in 1978 very clearly rejected apartheid and went so far as for the first time to define apartheid as "Sin". This was rhetorically a very powerful move and it immediately shifted the debate into a different mode. This eventually led to the declaration of a *status confessionis* and the *Belhar Confession*.

The rhetoric was now squarely on the one side in the court of confessional language, while on the other side this was not accepted as a legitimate mode of discourse. This was judicial rhetoric where on the one hand faith was confessed, and on the other error condemned.

In the current discussions on the unity process between the URC and the DRC, one of the most controversial issues seems to be the Belhar confession and its status. This is a good example of the same text functioning differently in the respective communities. It appears to be that for many readers in the DRC certain words and phrases in the *Confession of Belhar* (e.g. He is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged) function as an echo evoking concepts from the cultural inter-texture of liberation theology. It is typical of cultural echoes that one person hears it while another does not. This is obviously also related to the ideological texture of the text and the ideological location of an individual or a group reading the Confession.

Another issue was whether presbyteries and regional synods could remain the same as at present, or whether the unification process should take place already at the level of presbyteries. The rhetoric being used here is the issue of language that recalls the social location of the readers as part of ideological texture.

#### 2.1.4 Ecumenical contacts in South Africa

In 1936 the *Christian Council of South Africa* (CCSA) was formed. But the DRC of the former Transvaal resigned in 1941 from this body. When in 1940 a decision was taken to resign from the CCSA it was because the DRC would have had only 10 members out of 45 on the Council to defend our policy (Meiring 1996:322). Unfortunately, this was the terms in which people so often talked about ecumenical relationships - almost in political terms. The issue of the *language* used at

ecumenical meetings was also a sensitive issue and it is evident that Afrikaner nationalism still played an important role in the sentiments of the Afrikaner DRC. The other issue was the different views concerning the role of the church in society. So often the response of the DRC in declining invitations by the CCSA or the later South African Council of Churches (SACC) was that the DRC wanted to discuss ecclesiastical issues and not race relations or politics. It is clear how an introversionist response as well as the social and cultural inter-textures of Afrikaner politics was operative in such a response, but also a certain type of rhetoric in the terminology used.

In 1968 the *South African Council of Churches* was formed. Time and again (1963, 1975 and 1986) the DRC was invited to talks by the CCSA and the later SACC, but in these years declined the invitation in typical introversionist fashion as it was repeatedly stated that even talking to these bodies were deemed not to be fruitful.

In 1986 contact was renewed again. In 1990 the DRC decided to apply again for observer status of the SACC. In 1991 this request was not granted. But in 1995 it was another story. The Rev Sam Buti, vice-chair of the URC and the person who in 1991 opposed the application of the DRC, proposed that it should be accepted. He said: "You must know quite well of which church I am talking today: this is the church who legitimised apartheid all these years. But it is also the church who had the courage to say: 'Brothers and sisters, we were wrong, forgive us!'" (Meiring 1996:311). After 54 years the DRC was back in the circle of the ecumenical churches in South Africa.

#### 2.1.5 Ecumenical contacts with other churches

The DRC was a member of the *World Council of Churches* (WCC) since 1949. Due to the growing opposition to the policies of the DRC and the South African State, the DRC broke its ties with the WCC in 1961. This can be seen as part of an introversionist response which would grow even stronger in the coming years. This tendency persisted in decisions by the DRC, even as late as the 1994 General Synod where it was proposed that the DRC should withdraw from the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (WARC). But as this decision was not carried with a two-thirds majority (as is required in such matters), it was not accepted.

### 2.1.6 The situation of DRC in the new SA

There can be no doubt that the DRC has lost its former position of power. In the past it had an inappropriate degree of influence with the government. In many ways the DRC at present finds itself in a completely new and even in certain respects isolated social and cultural location. This entails a completely new rhetorical and ideological situation that calls for conscious adaptation. The question is whether the rhetoric of the DRC will change from a rhetoric which was in many ways a dominant culture rhetoric to a subculture, counterculture or even contra-cultural rhetoric. The challenge will be for the DRC to find its place together with the other churches in South Africa in the new social and cultural scene that is challenging all the churches in South Africa in a fundamental manner.

### **2.2 *Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk (NHK)***

This *Dutch Reformed Church* (originating from 1853) is well known for *Article III* of its Church Law, dealing with the formation of national churches. It has often claimed that forming national churches is the best way to execute the mission command of Mt 28:19. It has to be noted that there have also been debate and internal differences of opinion concerning these issues in the past.

At this stage it is very interesting that in the light of this history, a new debate has recently taken place concerning Article III. It is remarkable to see that the policy of separate churches for people of colour in the old *South African Republic* (ZAR in the later Transvaal) is now depicted not as racism, but in essence as liberation theology (Van Wyk 1994a:757). This resulted from a very close identification of the church and the people/nation. It should also be noted that Article 9 of the ZAR decreed that there should be no equality of coloureds and whites in church or in state. It is therefore maintained that the NHK sees their Article III as an article to guarantee the freedom of religion. This might be seen as a rhetorical move of great significance that might come as a big surprise for proponents of liberation theology or black theology in South Africa.

Since 1986 the debate about this has been re-opened in earnest. There is apparently a growing recognition that this article is not acceptable any more. It is now been argued that if one wants to retain Article III, one is actually denying the

traditional contextual theological thinking which is typical of the NHK (Van Wyk 1994b:1086).

In a very interesting article Van Staden (1994a:726f) actually points out that if one takes as point of departure Articles I and II of the Church Law of the NHK, a couple of syllogisms would then logically show that all services and the membership of the NHK should really be open to anybody.

1a. The one, holy and catholic church is open to people from all races, nations, peoples and cultures.

1b. The NHK is a concrete manifestation of the holy, catholic church.

1c. Therefore the NHK is open to anyone.

2a. The NHK is open to anyone.

2b. The congregations are concrete manifestation of the NHK.

2c. Therefore the congregations of the NHK are open to anyone.

3a. The congregations of the NHK are open to anyone.

3b. The worship service is a gathering of the congregation.

3c. Therefore the worship services of the NHK are open to anyone.

In the mean time the NHK has adopted a new church order in which Article III does not function anymore. It seems as if the issue is returning again on the agenda of their General Church Meeting in October 1998.

### **2.3 Gereformeerde Kerk (Reformed Church – GK )**

Here critical conversionist and reformist rhetorical voices were dissenting throughout the years, as was evident in the publication *Woord en Daad* with its clear criticism of reigning policies, based on Scriptural arguments and arguments from the broader Reformed tradition as inter-texture. In this respect the critical *Koinonia declaration* in 1977 was also a very important signpost.

Concerning church unity, the GK has had already for many years one General Synod for all its constituting churches. Nevertheless, in many ways the same rhetoric as in the rest of the Afrikaans speaking Reformed tradition was often heard with an emphasis on the priority of language and culture as important values.

## **2.4 Black voices**

For many years many of the black Christians basically had an introversionist response to the political and ecclesiastical situation in the country. This even went to the extreme of forming Ethiopian separatist churches and other independent churches emphasising their withdrawal from the white oppressive world.

But more and more black Christian leaders were taking up political matters when the government silenced all political parties and leaders. It is also noteworthy that with the establishment of the *Black Consciousness Movement* and *Black Theology* in the late 1960s, black leaders began turning their backs on "white liberals". Here a different rhetoric began to emerge.

Desmond Tutu talks about being forced to take up the position of interim leadership, and this was true for many black church leaders. This led to church leaders voicing political claims such as the basic requirement of the creation of a single and undivided state when the government at that stage (1980) still tried to persuade people to accept the discourse of diversity and separation.

## **2.5 Conservative evangelical churches**

This would include the *Church of England in South Africa*, the *Baptist Union*, *Free Methodists*, *Free Lutherans*, *African Evangelical Church* and the *Church of the Nazarene*, as well as the *Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM)* and the *Pentecostal Churches*. The discourse here would emphasise that all that is needed in South Africa is born-again people. These churches would on the whole have had mostly an a-political and introversionist response to the situation in the country.

It must be said that the AFM has now also moved to a form of structural unity of their church and their rhetoric is now in some ways moving closer to a reformist position. There is definitely also a thaumaturgical response discernible here.

## **2.6 African Independent Churches**

This group already amounts to 30.9% of the population, with almost 6 million members. (The Zionist Christian Church alone amounts to 6.5% of the population, with its approximately 1¼ million members.) This would include the Ethiopian



churches that emerged as a reaction to the *Black Land Act of 1913* which at that stage made black ownership of land almost impossible. This is again an example of a typical introversionist reaction, although there would also be thaumaturgical dimensions present.

### **3. How are the churches responding to the challenge of the new dispensation in South Africa?**

#### **3.1 Challenge by Pres Mandela**

It is interesting to note the challenge by Mr Nelson Mandela as President of the African National Congress (ANC) in a speech at Potchefstroom on 14/12/92 delivered to the Free Ethiopian Church of Southern Africa where he said:

"One thing that we must say unequivocally is that the church in South Africa cannot afford to retreat to the coziness of the sanctuary tempting as it may be in these confusing and challenging times. The church in our country has no option but to join other agents of change and transformation in the difficult task of acting as a midwife to the birth of our democracy and acting as one of the institutions that will nurture and entrench it on our society." (See De Gruchy 1994:14; Walshe 1995:145).

One can see that it is a serious problem that the church is not unified in its reaction to social and other issues in the country, and that she does not speak with one prophetic voice. This has been shown in the survey of the different types of oral-scribal inter-textures and the social and cultural textures of the different churches above.

Since February 2, 1990 numerous conferences, seminars, and consultations on the role of the church in the New South Africa have been taking place, and this has generated a large amount of documents, declarations and other material. Some stick to the old familiar rhetoric of well-known and fashionable phrases without taking into consideration the radically new context. Others list a number of general challenges without being clear about what these challenges really entail. The tragic fact is that after so many years of apartheid we have really become total strangers to one

another, because we lived for so long in two worlds - a black world and a white world.

### **3.2 Rustenburg 5-9 November 1991**

Even before Pres Mandela's challenge, the church conference in Rustenburg took place. One of the most remarkable things that happened there was the confession by Prof Willie Jonker of Stellenbosch for the wrongs of apartheid on behalf of the DRC and the Afrikaans people as a whole. This confession was welcomed and accepted by Archbishop Tutu. At the end of the conference a declaration was made with a detailed confession of guilt for the sins of apartheid and emphasizing the need for justice, especially economic justice, employment, ownership of land and continued attention to church-state relations.

One has to admit that Rustenburg did not deal with gender issues; and that some may feel that certain decisions were compromises that watered down some demands of radical Christianity. However, it is important that for the first time the reformist and more radical groups entered into direct dialogue with one another.

### **3.3 Reactionary Christianity**

But in the New South Africa other voices are still to be heard. The rhetoric of right wing Christianity was (and even is) "Barriers bring peace". Here the spectrum of terms still operating are such as "the other", "the stranger", "the enemy". This is rooted in a dyadic view of personality where the group and one's relation to the group are almost all-encompassing (See Malina 1996:38, 41).

This kind of view is related to what was previously called "state theology" in the *Kairos Document*. This reaction tries to maintain racism, tribalism, gender discrimination and patriarchalism (De Gruchy 1994:16). These are not really conservative Christians, as they are even prepared to resort to violence. One could here probably detect a mixture of conversionist, introversionist and revolutionist responses and even a reaction almost approaching the utopian response in an effort to maintain the previous status quo.

### **3.4 *The call to a common critical solidarity***

A very important dimension of the evolving reaction of churches, is the emphasis on the continuing need to remain critical of all that is unjust and false, whether as a remnant from the previous dispensation or in the form of a fruit of the new South Africa. While he was still bishop in Johannesburg, Desmond Tutu already affirmed that he (and his church) would always remain critical of any government or political leadership. And he has been true to his word so far. As General Secretary of the SACC, Frank Chikane had said already back in 1992:

"I am calling on the Church that we all stand up and say we will go to prison again, we will die again if any person gets victimised because of colour, or for any other reason that contradicts our commitments to justice. And so our taking sides is vital, and I will go back to cell No. 20 in John Vorster square if the ANC take over and practice injustice against other people ...It is important that the Church of Christ says it now - we stood for justice and we will continue to do so in the new era that is coming. Even if we eventually have a legitimate system in South Africa the struggle for the ideals of the reign of God will not stop." (quoted in De Gruchy 1994:17).

This is strong language, epideictic rhetoric celebrating the cause of the struggle. It is also deliberative rhetoric calling on the church to take a stand in future with all who remain oppressed due to superficial changes or new forms of discrimination and to affirm the rights of all people, especially of minority religious and cultural groups.

### **3.5 *Cape Town October 1992***

The South African members of the *World Council of Churches* (WCC) held a conference here in the light of the important changes that had already taken place, but also in the light of the escalating violence and threatening instability at that time. The Statement adopted by the Conference listed the following five dimensions of the task of the church:

- ◆ the eradication of all persisting forms of apartheid
- ◆ to liberate church and society from the obsession with apartheid
- ◆ to participate in the reconstruction of society
- ◆ solidarity with those who suffer elsewhere in the world
- ◆ to transform the structures of the churches themselves

As more specific challenges the following were discussed:

- ◆ the spiraling violence
- ◆ the need for reconciliation
- ◆ justice for women
- ◆ the participation of youth in democratic process
- ◆ a call for general amnesty for political prisoners and exiles
- ◆ that sanctions should remain in place till an agreement on interim government was reached
- ◆ a more just and democratic order
- ◆ the need for renewal of the church

### ***3.6 The primary task of the church: preaching the Word***

In the meantime the typical conversionist and almost introversionist response that the church must now return to its basic calling of preaching the Word, is being heard more and more in the new situation. This view is held by a wide diversity of people. Even church leaders and theologians, who formerly were politically involved, now maintain that the church must simply be the church.

Dr Manas Buthelezi (former president of the SACC) said in 1990 that churches had to redirect their attention to their true mission. The church must have a new vision. She should return from the unusual role that she had to fulfill in a political vacuum, when the church in fact played a vicarious role, to her primary role. This was also said on occasion by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

"On the day that Mr. De Klerk lifted the ban on our organizations and announced the release of our detained leaders, I said that I would give up my position as an interim leader. The real leadership has returned to do their work (text translated)" (Smit 1993:10).

But people traditionally on the other side of the spectrum take up similar positions. The DRC and many of its leaders have been claiming that the church must be careful not to repeat the mistakes of the past again, admitting that she has been involved politically too much although under the guise of not practicing politics. There

is, however, the danger that this may not be far from a relapse into an introversionist kind of response to the world.

### ***3.7 A definite socio-political responsibility***

Despite this call to simply be the church again, voices are still heard calling the church to accept her definite socio-political responsibility. This may be called a reformist-response and it previously was sometimes called "church theology". They believe the structures can and must be changed. Some are more supportive of liberal and multi-party democratic and capitalist transformation, while others are rather inclined to a more economically just and non-sexist order. According to these views the church would then in fact support both liberal and social democratic approaches (De Gruchy 1994:16).

### ***3.8 Direct involvement***

At the same time, the rhetoric of the more radical Christians, previously called "prophetic theology", can still be heard. They insist not only on political reform, but very definitely also on radical economic changes. The lines between reformist and radical responses may here be somewhat blurred. The people themselves can type radical Christians as reformist or even utopian, with an emphasis on a complete replacement of structures.

## **4. What should the common agenda of the church be?**

From the above mentioned the urgent need for a common agenda and a common rhetoric for the church in South Africa is clear. Some indicators will be given here.

### ***4.1 The need for a Common language***

D Smit (1993) made the very important observation that what we really are in need of, is a common language. We talk past each other, we use different discourses, because there was a complete breakdown in communication. What is more, so often there is a completely different understanding of certain words such as peace, reconciliation or even love. Above mention has already been made of the possibility that the same text can evoke different cultural inter-textual echoes from different readers. There must be a greater realisation of the dynamics of these processes.

For example: in the past some white Christians interpreted a call for justice in the discourse of certain churches as nothing but politics. This call must now be heard from the pulpit of those white churches, while the call for neighbourly love, which was interpreted by black Christians as a device by whites to perpetuate the status quo, must now be preached in black churches. There is a great need for really sharing a common contextual hermeneutics that according to some in the past was seen just to be typical liberation theology (Dreyer 1996).

Just as important as the need for a common language, is the need for shared collective myths. It is a tragic fact that we have no common myths, no common heroes, no common stories, creating a shared identity, but rather the memories of the scars we have inflicted on each other ( see Nkuhlu in Smit 1993:8). This underlines again the crucial need for unity among Christians and the importance of improved ecumenical relations between churches. Sadly enough this has apparently deteriorated to a certain degree amongst the former members of the SACC since the disappearance of apartheid as the common enemy, as is witnessed to by the disintegration of the ecumenical theological training at the Federal Theological Seminary.

#### ***4.2 The need for a common commitment: Leading the people in confessing guilt***

Churches should still continue what happened at Rustenburg. There are obviously great differences in guilt and responsibility for what went wrong in the past, but it is not only the DRC who has to confess. A factor, which has to be added to the agenda, is also our own inter-faith intolerance. It is therefore significant that the South African chapter of the *World Conference on Religion and Peace* produced a *Declaration on Religious rights and responsibilities*. Here not only the freedom to exercise one's own faith, but also the freedom to be critical and challenge the state in terms of the teachings of each religion, is claimed and affirmed.

#### ***4.3 The urgent need for reconciliation***

Since the acceptance of the new Constitution there is a completely new situation in South Africa with the inception of a new secular state. While nobody denies that the church must continue to witness also to the state, it is interesting that the state

witnessed to the church in a certain manner by setting up the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC). Is reconciliation after all not extremely central to the calling of the church?

It may be no surprise that the mediating role of the church was not so self-evident before 1990. Among blacks in their social location and solidarity with specific groups the call to reconciliation was often treated with suspicion that this was nothing more but an attempt to pacify, to persuade people to accept an unjust dispensation under the guise of improved human relations. The *Kairos Document* even discredited in a radical manner all calls for reconciliation.

But a remarkable change in rhetoric occurred after February 2, 1990. Since then even former radical theologians made pleas for tolerance, patience and concessions. It is now acknowledged that the church also has a calling to be an agent of reconciliation between men. In some cases the church has been effective to call conflicting parties together (ANC, PAC & Inkatha FP). In order to be effective in this respect, the *Church of the Province (Anglican)* declared in 1990 that no priest might be a member of any political party or organisation. This was not meant as a withdrawal from politics, but in order to be able to act as mediator in situation of conflict.

One can also recall the contribution of various churches in the *National and Regional Peace Structures*, as well as the role of the EMPSA (*Ecumenical Monitors for Peace in SA*). The civic role of churches to prepare the people for fair and free elections should also be noted.

Reconciliation also has to do with the need to nurture people from fear to hope. The realities of white fears have to be taken into consideration, but nothing will change unless black fears are also recognised and effectively addressed and dealt with.

#### **4.4 The Commission for Truth and Reconciliation**

However disputed the TRC may have been, and for some may still be, it is a very important vehicle instituted by the new government in an effort to deal with the past in a way that will enable South Africans to proceed to the future. What has been

happening so far is that through the many sad and heart-wrenching stories being told, something of the common language that is needed so dearly, may be born. This occurs when people who are really willing to listen to one another start to share something of a common vocabulary and story. Some today even say that if there had been such a process after the Anglo-Boer war at the turn of the century, South Africa could have looked much different in the first half of the 20th century.

The crucial question remains what is the task of the church in such a situation? Is it identifying with the process, or is it critical and skeptical.

An interesting parallel has been drawn between the reactions of people to the TRC with the description of the different phases in the life of people in crisis as described by Kübler-Ross. Note the consecutive phases of denial, anger, negotiation, depression, and acceptance. This may help to understand the way many people are reacting to what they hear and do not want to hear (Meiring 1997).

Especially in the DRC, the whole issue of the TRC has been hotly debated. Although the *Plenary Executive Broad Moderamen of the General Synod of the DRC* (PEBM) has assured the TRC of its intercession and close interest, the rhetoric concerning the TRC in the DRC was on the whole very critical.

There are, however, many in the DRC who felt that this was such an important opportunity central to the church's calling to be involved in reconciliation, that it could not be missed. Therefore the *Presbytery of Stellenbosch* submitted a statement during 1996 to the TRC. In this they shared something of the history of lost opportunities and important decisions taken on the local level. It tried to give its own members as well as the public a perspective on the role of a local presbytery. There was a stage when it was strongly propagating issues which later become government policies. But at a later stage it also strained hard against church polity, ecclesiastical and political constraints to witness to the changed convictions in the presbytery of Stellenbosch. This was also the result of listening together with the presbytery of the former *Dutch Reformed Mission Church* (DRMC) as one combined presbytery to the calling of God in the troubled context of Stellenbosch.



It is noteworthy that the chair of the TRC, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, at that stage responded to the submission of the presbytery of Stellenbosch by asking why no other churches like the *Methodist Church* and his own *Anglican Church* had up to that point made submissions to the Commission.

The question of a submission to the TRC by the DRC as a whole could not be evaded. After a long debate the PEBM decided in November 1996 with a small majority not to make a submission to the TRC. In a letter which was published on the 10th of February 1997 in the official weekly of the DRC (*Die Kerkbode*) and signed by 49 of its ministers, the DRC was challenged to support the work of the TRC more openly and constructively. The Western Cape Synod subsequently decided to make a submission, and to the end of 1997 Ds Freek Swanepoel used an opportunity at the TRC to give a testimony (though not a formal submission) on behalf of the DRC together with a number of other churches of SA.

In looking at some of the reservations against getting involved in the work of the TRC, interesting rhetorical issues were raised. It has been said that the TRC would not be impartial due to its ideological point of departure. Reference has been made to statements by the Minister of Justice, Mr. Dullah Omar, that offences committed in defense of the apartheid regime are morally not on a par with offences committed by the liberation struggle, or that these offences may just be ignored. Another reservation is that the contextuality of the truth would not be adequately taken into account by the TRC.

Another argument is that reconciliation is primarily a moral and religious matter that cannot and should not be the objective of a legal instrument of the state such as the TRC. Although reconciliation is primarily a religious matter between God and individual believers, this is not the sole dimension of reconciliation. The peace that Jesus Christ brought about by reconciling us with God is of a comprehensive nature. To quote from the report on *The peace task of the church in South Africa* that was adopted at the *General Synod of the DRC* in 1990:

"The peace that Jesus brings, is nothing less than the comprehensive *shalom* expected by the Old Testament. It should be realised in every dimension of human existence.... It comprises harmony and fulfillment in all the

relationships of human beings. It relates to the individual and to the community, to the church and to society" (Agenda, pp 89 and 90; translated from Afrikaans). (See De Villiers 1996).

In striving to attain a common language, it is important that the DRC should tell in public of her involvement in the legitimising of the policies of the past. It is just as important to tell the story of her own soul-searching and struggling to come to change her own decisions especially in the synods of 1986, 1990 and 1994. She owes it to her own members as well to the rest of the fellow citizens whose lives were so directly influenced by the policies which had for so long the moral backing of the church. It is especially appropriate that the leadership of the church should do this, as it was the church leaders who for so many years led ordinary believers to believe that this was the correct position for the church and ordinary believers to adopt. As the TRC is especially concerned with *context* and *motif*, such a submission would have been very appropriate with a view to the TRC's task to document what had been happening in South Africa in the apartheid era.

There is, however, another perspective often heard in the DRC. Some people are saying that the TRC as a political body is not the appropriate forum for the church to make such a submission. Mention is then also made that the decisions of the General Synod confessing to sin in its support of apartheid is now public knowledge and has not to be repeated in a political context. This sounds very much like the typical *introversionist* language of a church which expects the world to take note of her decisions, but who does not want to use every opportunity to give a much broader and contextualised statement clearing the air for her own members and the general public. It is also necessary that the DRC and other churches work towards a common language of accountability. To be involved in such an endeavour implies to be willing to own up with a Christian humility on a public forum as a witness to the world.

#### **4.5 Bringing about peace and justice**

It has to be acknowledged that not only common language and rhetoric, but also a common commitment by the churches is needed very urgently in this country

In the past the concept *peace* was ideologically unacceptable for many in anti-apartheid circles as being an echo of an unacceptable cultural and social inter-text. The slogan often heard was "No peace without justice". It was felt that the word *peace* was used rhetorically to obscure the issue of justice.

In struggling with the reasons for the continuing violence, it is illuminating to note Dom Helder Camara's scheme of *oppressive violence* giving birth to *reactive violence* leading in turn to *repressive violence*. In South Africa we have been experiencing a new phase: *destructive violence*. This is simply destructive, senseless, blind and anarchic violence born out of frustration, loss of hope, anger, fear, bitterness, and revenge (Smit 1993:13). In the past most churches – on both sides of the struggle - have unfortunately played a role in legitimizing various forms of violence. The challenge the churches are facing now is how to deal with the current wave of destructive violence that no one seems able to curb.

To call for the realising of justice, is perhaps more closely related to what has just been dealt with than is often perceived. The issues are rather more complex because we have to ask, which justice, whose justice? This entails being sensitive to issues of political justice, juridical justice, economical justice, social justice ... (Smit 1993). This will require a long process. This will also require caring for the people who are suffering, the poor.

The *Belhar Confession* states quite clearly: "We believe that in a world full of injustice and hatred God is particularly near to the suffering, the poor and the disadvantaged, and that he calls his church to follow him in this". Initially the DRC was strongly opposed to this. But eventually the DRC has now formulated the same concern even stronger and less ambiguously in *Church and society* #149:

"When in this way God's people intercede for the 'rights' of the wronged, they follow the example set by God Himself. He is above all, the One who espouses the cause of the destitute and the wronged".

This is a lasting command to the people of God. So approaching a common language may be attainable after all.

#### ***4.6 Is the church prepared and able to talk about democracy?***

Smit (1993) draws attention to the fact that South African churches are totally unprepared for the discourse concerning democracy and to answer the basic questions in this regard. No church has really studied and reported on issues such as nation building, national reconciliation, democratic culture and multi-culturality. The lifestyle of democracy is something that many South Africans still have to learn. We have not really learnt to interact with tolerance and often are captives of our images of the past and perceptions of the other as our enemy and the struggle rhetoric or the rhetoric of the total onslaught (see Smit 1993).

The politicians seem to have progressed much in acquiring new skills and a rhetoric suited to the new democratic context while interacting with one another at CODESA (the convention for drawing up the draft Constitution for a democratic South Africa). This was followed by the complex process of writing a new Constitution and the interaction in the Government of National Unity. At a later stage the return to more traditional opposition politics in South Africa also followed. The question remains whether the churches are really able to guide their members in this new phase of civil life in South Africa.

It is, however, interesting that often in similar contexts in other countries, the churches have served as places where people were indirectly acquiring certain civic skills which they were deprived of elsewhere (Ammerman 1997). Especially if the church is also true to her calling - reflecting the pluralism of society - she can really be instrumental in furnishing people with a common rhetoric and the skills to communicate.

#### ***4.7 The need to be credible and sincere***

In South Africa people are just sick and tired of all the lies and deceit and continuing corruption. South Africa needs a credible church. In a poll a time ago, it was found that Justice Goldstone was the most popular person in South Africa, and that he could even have been elected as President. If one asks what the reason for his popularity could be, it has to be remembered that at that stage he was the chairperson of the Commission investigating the causes of violence in South Africa and for many people he had become a symbol of the truth.

For the churches to become credible again we need each other. We need a rhetoric of humility and of acknowledging our guilt and our need of one another. We cannot do this alone and on our own. This is what the Presbytery of Stellenbosch said:

"As people who are broken ourselves we have to be in a broken world one with all who are suffering. To be able to do this we need the admonition and consolation of the DR church family as well as the ecumenical church in South Africa... We need each other, we need the often opposite views of our brothers and sisters in order to be able to come closer to the truth in South Africa".

We further need a common memory. So we have to confess our guilt to one another. We have to learn to build on the past as a reality and to move on from there, without denying it. In the *past* we often had our own private and cherished memories and grievances as our ideological inter-texture. We also have to accept the realities of the *present*. We must therefore accept one another. We must learn a new kind of language, to say "we" and "us" (Smit 1993). We must also accept the *future* as our common challenge. We have to take responsibility for our common future. We have to resist the temptation of saying, "Now I want some peace, just let us alone, we just want to be the church again!" This is *introversionist* language. As the church of the Living Lord, we must also be able to proclaim hope to our members.

#### **4.8 The need to be self-critical of the structures of the church**

The church should serve as model and laboratory. The church has failed to overcome its own racial, cultural and gender divisions. Yet it also has to acknowledge the diversity of cultures and to celebrate it and to experience unity in diversity (D Tutu). This can in the end only be done if the church is living in close communion with its living Lord and in obedience to His calling.

Despite the fact that it remains a difficult process, there are promising signs in the rhetoric of the churches that Christians of different backgrounds and persuasions are starting together to learn a common language.

- Ammerman, N 1997. *Congregation & community*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Combrink, HJB 1986. Perspektiewe uit die Skrif, in Kinghorn, J (ed), *Die NG Kerk en apartheid*, 211-234, 260-263. Johannesburg: Macmillan.
- De Gruchy, J 1994. Midwives of democracy: The role of the churches in democratic transition in South Africa. *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa* (86), 14-25.
- De Villiers, DE 1996. The challenge to the Afrikaans churches, in Botman, HR & Petersen, NR (eds), *To remember and to heal: Theological and Psychological reflections on truth and reconciliation*, 140-153. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.
- Dreyer, T 1996. Praktiese kerkwees in die nuwe Suid-Afrika. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 52 (1), 179-189.
- Malina, B 1996. *The social world of Jesus and the Gospels*. London: Routledge.
- Meiring, P 1996. Die Suid-Afrikaanse Raad van Kerke en die Ned Geref Kerk: Die ervaring van 'n halfeeu. *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 37 (2), 310-325.
- Meiring, P 1997. Verskillende reaksies op die Waarheidskommissie. *Die Beeld, Godsdiensaktueel*.
- Robbins, V 1996b. *Exploring the texture of texts: A guide to socio-rhetorical interpretation*. Valley Forge: Trinity Press International.
- Smit, D 1993. Revisioning during reconstruction? Contemporary challenges for the churches in South Africa. *Apologia* 8 (1 & 2), 5-20.
- Van Staden, P 1994a. Mag 'slegs blankes!' hier aanbid? *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 50 (3), 713-729.
- Van Wyk, I 1994a. Nog geslote eredienste? Deel I. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 50 (3), 755-799.
- Van Wyk, I 1994b. Nog geslote eredienste? Deel II. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 50 (4), 1070-1093.
- Van Wyk, J 1976. Latente motiewe in die verklaring van die NG Kerk oor: Ras, volk en nasie en volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif. *NGTT* 17, 98-108.
- Vorster, W 1984. The use of Scripture and the NG Kerk: a shift of paradigm or of values?, in Hofmeyr, J & Vorster, W (eds), *New faces of Africa. Essays in honour of Ben (Barend Jacobus) Marais*, 204-219. Pretoria: Unisa.

Walshe, P 1995. *Prophetic Christianity and the liberation movement in South Africa*.  
Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.