

The Role of the Church in Promoting Reconciliation in Post-TRC South Africa

by

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The Church fought for liberation and after that we were confused. We did not know what to do. The enemy was gone. We could not pinpoint the enemy.¹

Social divisions are what necessitate reconciliation. The apartheid era presented the church with the challenge of fighting the fundamental source of this division – apartheid. In many respects, this battle for justice was one that built the legitimacy of the church as a political actor with real power to promote social change. It is therefore not surprising that the task of overcoming social divisions and (re)building relationships in a democratic South Africa is something that is now seen by society and by church leaders as a key part of the church's role. This paper uses the interviews conducted by Bernard Spong (alongside previous research by the author) to examine the way the church interacted with the TRC and how this has affected the approach of the church in addressing the challenge of reconciliation after the closure of the TRC.

Reconciliation as a Religious Calling

As reflected in the interviews of the church leaders, they generally see reconciliation as a task for which the church is uniquely qualified.² They claim to understand it better (or at least more deeply) than other actors in society, and feel that they are well situated to address this concern.

I also believe that the term reconciliation is a very Christian or a biblical term. I do not think it belongs to the secular world. At the same time, I am not advocating a position that reconciliation is (to be clearly monopolised by the churches) only a religious concept but I think that the depth of it could be missed if it is not looked at from its roots.³

What specifically the churches can contribute is however still not spelled out in the interviews. What new understanding they bring to the subject (beyond what is found in social sciences) is not clear, and the practical strategies for engaging society are clearly still in their infancy.⁴ The church is, it would seem, still at a very early stage of converting their potential into reality. It would appear that the churches' sense of self-righteousness as inherent gatekeeper of true reconciliation is one serious obstacle to pursuing this task, as there is much in secular society to draw from in developing new strategies. Some respondents, however took a more integrated approach to religious-secular divisions.

... I am convinced legal processes can only go so far. They are very important because they provide a framework in which interaction can happen in society. So much of our work, religious work, is attitudinal. It is about values and it is about committing yourself to something that is not often easily definable.⁵

The distinction drawn by most interviewees between religious and secular approaches to reconciliation (and their pejorative view of the latter) would reduce their ability to learn from other civil society initiatives to build reconciliation.⁶ This distinction is generally simplistically understood as between idealistic and pragmatic approaches, or as between social-psychological and political-legal conceptions of behavioural change. In practice these are different sides of the same coin rather than contending approaches to social change. They also interact in complex ways that need to be further explored rather than contrasted and rejected.

Non-religious civil society initiatives in South Africa see their linkages with religion, spirituality and church structures as an additional resource from which to draw. This conversation and cross-fertilisation between religious, political, social and psychological approaches is clearly needed to strengthen the church's role in promoting reconciliation. A more positive approach is conveyed by Dr Farid Essack, a Muslim theologian, "... I am not sure about this neat distinction between religious and secular. I think there are spiritual elements in all human activity." This view is also reflected by a number of other respondents who draw a strong link between their religious understanding of reconciliation and their African cultural roots. Rev Wesley Mabuza, Director of the Institute for Contextual Theology, explains:

But I need to say that this idea that there is secular on one side and religious on the other is a western approach. For us it is an *ubuntu* situation. Whether you are religious or not, what is the human thing to do in this situation? From the African mind I would have problems with this demarcation. I would say reconciliation is reconciliation.

Their views about differences between religious and secular approaches did not, thankfully, prevent the churches from playing a strong role in establishing and assisting the TRC (in partnership with various secular structures). The TRC itself, in fact, presents a very interesting combination of religious and secular approaches. This mix was probably responsible for many of the TRC successes as well as some of its failures.

The Church's Impact on the TRC

Without the input of religious figures, the TRC would have been quite a different phenomenon. While the conceptualisation of the TRC legislation and the drafting of the act were essentially political processes driven by pragmatic political concerns, the lobbying activities of churches and other NGOs did bring about some key adaptations in the final legislation. While not affecting the fundamental shape of the TRC, these inputs pushed the TRC towards a more victim-centred approach.⁷ The Religious Response to the TRC⁸ was launched in October 1994. This structure provided a network function for a number of NGOs (not only religious ones) to engage with the policy issues raised by the TRC. It was, however, only in 1995, when the draft legislation was released, that religious bodies and

other civil society structures started engaging more seriously with the process. Structures such as the Religious Response to the TRC made submissions to parliament regarding the legislation and made inputs into the process of selecting Commissioners.

Once the TRC was established, the churches became even more actively involved, particularly within local communities. Many churches provided direct assistance in facilitating the implementation of effective gross human rights violation hearings. The TRC made extensive use of church networks when setting up Human Rights Violations Hearings in local communities. Through the South African Council of Churches and other religious networks, local ministers were drawn into the process of coordinating meetings, arranging publicity, statement taking and other crucial functions to ensure effective community engagement in the hearings.⁹ In some cases, churches also assisted in creating a (limited) support structure for victims seeking counselling.

In collaboration with the TRC, church structures also made key inputs into two TRC events: the Religious Sector Hearing and a Children's Hearing. A wide range of churches participated in the Religious Sector Hearing in East London in November 1997. At these hearings, churches made submission about their role during apartheid. Some used the opportunity to look at their own history of human rights abuses, and apologised for their role in apartheid. Others used the opportunity to recount their experiences of struggle against apartheid abuses.¹⁰

The Religious Response to the TRC was invited by the TRC to formulate a program for children who were too young to testify at a public hearing. The children were instead involved in drawing, storytelling and sharing experiences with one another.

The most profound impact of religion was however through the shaping of the TRC's approach to the implementation of its mandate by particular religious leaders. The strong religious influence of numerous Commissioners and key staff directed the TRC's activities in a particular way. While the TRC's activities were clearly circumscribed by the legislation, the interpretation of the mandate was given a very particular form, and the tone of its proceedings were fundamentally altered.

In various ways this gave the Commission certain strengths. The ability of the Commission to engage victims and perpetrators in an empathetic manner, to promote a message of repentance and forgiveness, and to gain credibility in a range of communities was probably considerably enhanced through this participation. Interviewees particularly credit the TRC for providing a more humane and approachable face.

I do think it was helpful to have religious figures on the Commission. Otherwise it would have been very dry and analytical. Religious people brought a spirituality and a compassion and an understanding. They brought the spiritual attributes that we actually need. If it had just been a secular thing it may very well have just deteriorated into a legal process. There was something so much more than a legal process here.¹¹

The participation of religious leaders also came at a cost. Firstly, the TRC was not very effective as a mechanism to establish "historical truth." Its use of public hearings to

promote healing and build public empathy undermined or sidelined its ability to gather information and analyse the dynamics of human rights abuses.¹² Its focus on personal experiences and morality diverted attention away from processes of social reconstruction such as conflict resolution and community development. It could also be argued that a more legal approach could have resulted in more criminal investigations and thus more amnesty cases or prosecutions. What would have happened without the religious leaders depends ultimately on whether they were replaced by psychologists, sociologists, historians, politicians or lawyers.

Confusing Law and Morality

The input of religious leaders into a process such as the TRC did however give rise to particular problems. The amorphous twinning of religion and law created serious moral dilemmas in the way the TRC approached certain issues. A key example of this was the way in which Commissioners conflated the legal process of amnesty with the religious concept of forgiveness. Repeatedly in their public pronouncements, Commissioners referred to the amnesty process as one that implied forgiveness of perpetrators. The gross human rights violation hearings have many examples of this:

Commissioner: ... but I want to ask you one question concerning this matter. If the perpetrators, the police are forgiven, are given amnesty, do you see any danger concerning people's lives in Adelaide?¹³

While some respondents in this study recognise this problem, others reflect this same conflation of religious and legal concepts. Bishop Marcos, head of the Coptic Church of Southern Africa, for example, argues, "I believe that the principle of the TRC was biblical. The Lord says that if somebody confesses his sins and asks for forgiveness he should be forgiven."

For victims, this created tremendous confusion and moral doubts. The TRC is presented as a body that supports the granting of amnesty within the framework and conditions provided by the Act.¹⁴ For most victims, the amnesty provision is a fundamental rejection of their right to (criminal and civil) legal recourse. The implication that the Commission would grant forgiveness simply on the basis of disclosure of the truth (without repentance or compensation for the victim) is deeply undermining of their right to refuse forgiveness.

Rather than seeing the process as one of law (forged by political compromise), victims are now faced with a morally and religiously sanctioned process of absolution. For victims who are ready to forgive, this may be an additional social aid in their healing process, but for those who oppose amnesty (or resent it being granted), it could well be seen as a rejection of their moral sense of injustice. The more complex perspectives of the religious leaders interviewed here, however provides some solace. The complexity of the process of forgiveness is given much more recognition than was their experience through the TRC.

The Internal and External Role of the Churches

The problem of reconciliation in South Africa is incredibly complex. There are many levels of social division that need to be overcome. The church's ability to reach a large portion of

the population combined with its moral influence provides it with a potentially powerful role in many arenas of society. For this potential to be translated into concrete action, it appears that the church needs a strong principled commitment, a clear understanding of the dimensions of the problem, and a clear understanding of the dynamics of reconciliation (rather than simply the ideal), and a clear organisational strategy.

The interviews show though that fighting injustice was a much simpler task than rebuilding social relations. The struggle within the various churches to develop a new vision for their role in society is, it seems, the beginning of a long process. This crisis of vision is not unique to the church. Nevertheless, it is something that goes to the heart of many religious beliefs.¹⁵

While the respondents show a very detailed understanding of the challenge of reconciliation, they seem to despair at the size of the task and often question the extent of their church's commitment to this new responsibility. Fr Sean O'Leary, Acting Director of LUMKO, reflects the views of most interviewees when he states:

The religious groups have really fallen down in taking this reconciliation process seriously. And yet they have so many opportunities to do so and I think they MUST take the initiative to organise events, healing events, to bring the people together. For example a walk for peace and reconciliation, using stadiums for people to gather to hear each others' stories, events that stretch out hands across the divides. That is the role of the church but they are not fulfilling that role. It is their role and not the role of government to do this. But they have retreated into a laager since the late eighties.

Respondents also express a general concern about the lack of coordination and organisational coherence of reconciliation work both within and among churches. Wolfram Kistner, a Lutheran theologian, sees this an important obstacle in the development of such work:

We sometimes (think) that the Church is doing nothing but there are many church people involved in many venture - but they are isolated. We need to link them up so that they can strengthen one another, to feel that they are not alone, and share not only their failures but also their successes. And give hope to one another.

The various interviews demonstrate very clearly that there are individuals with a strong yearning for reconciliation. There are also numerous examples of concrete actions to promote reconciliation in addition to a strong core of support for developing reconciliation into a key pillar of the church's mission in society. There are, however, also many obstacles to the development of a concerted campaign and the implementation of reconciliation programs in the broader society.

The biggest challenge perhaps, and the biggest space for change, is the fact that churches largely reflect the social divisions of society. This is very clearly recognised by respondents who talk about their churches' efforts to deal with the problem, but also reflect on the difficulty of dealing adequately with the challenge.

Most obviously the problem is reflected in the racial composition, divisions, and mistrust that still exist in the churches. Churches are often divided internally along racial lines – divisions between different congregations, branches, etc. These internal divisions make the churches excellent laboratories for reconciliation. For a church to seriously consider itself as an agent of reconciliation, it would have to firstly look at how these internal divisions can be dealt with. Some respondents see this internal process as a basis from which they can learn and develop their ability to tackle problems in society. Bishop Phaswana, (of the Central Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Southern Africa) argues:

Once the churches started to operate in their own isolation we began to miss the boat. We must work and operate within our denominations for the sake of growing strength and vision to go out into the community. ... Denominations must meet on their own but not for their own sake but for the sake of gaining strength and sharpening the vision to go out and share with others.

(What is reflected in) The interviews *reflect* (is) that this process has been fairly ad-hoc. While there are exciting examples of successes (and inspiring attempts at promoting change), they do not give the impression of a coordinated programme to address the history of the church, the relationships among members of the church, and change the way that the church reflects society.

Reflections on the transformation of the church hierarchy have not, it appears, progressed as far as many would like. This aspect of church transformation would seem to be quite crucial in assessing the future role of the church. While one component of this process is obviously broadening the racial composition of church leadership, another is the manner in which the ethos of church leadership and authority relate to a social message of empowerment and valuing differences. Only a few of the interviewees addressed this issue, most particularly the comments of Rev Wesley Mabuza:

We still have ministers who want to teach their people what is right and what is wrong instead of empowering the people to discover for themselves. I detest the continuous patronising in ministry that our churches seem to dish out to congregations. The religious community has a lot to do on its own. Never mind what it can give to the country. If it can get right it will automatically get the country right. I am not so naïve as to believe that the hierarchy of the churches will give away power to empower the people so easily. The pretence that churches are places where there is justice and we know what justice is about is a pipe dream and the sooner we acknowledge it the better.

Numerous people working with the TRC found it to be extremely authoritarian in its internal operations, and thus questioned its ability to effectively contribute to the promotion of open participation and empowerment and facilitate a break from a history of authoritarian rule. Similar questions need to be asked of the church: What internal values does it still cling to which may these limit its ability to promote external change?

Churches are also generally institutions with their own legacies of racial discrimination and insensitivity in relation to their own black members and clergy, or in relation to black communities. These histories were not wiped out by their good deeds in opposing apartheid. They constitute a legacy that will undermine trust and respect unless they are

dealt with openly. As many interviewees reflect, the churches could well make use of internal TRCs. While some efforts have been made by the churches to acknowledge their role in supporting (or not sufficiently opposing) apartheid, and admit their own discriminatory practices, a more transparent participative process of engaging with the past could provide a more solid foundation for building a new vision.

The churches' role in addressing reconciliation more broadly in society should obviously be informed, limited and complemented by its internal reconciliation process. While the church can only play a limited role externally without having its internal house in order, the internal process will never be completely finalised. The external role is thus one that needs to continue, but will only reach its full potential through being energised by the fruition of its internal processes.

Reconciliation Strategies

There are various strategies of reconciliation identified by interviewees that fall broadly under the umbrella of reconciliation. While some initiatives seem to predate the TRC, others appear to be attempts at building on the momentum of the TRC process and providing more people to participate in processes of storytelling and dialogue.¹⁶ While some essentially duplicate certain activities of the TRC, most also attempted to extend them (to new types of divisions) and deepen them (to provide a more serious engagement with issues). These strategies have been used for internal reconciliation processes and/or for promoting broader national and community reconciliation.

Reconciliation sermons: The most obvious role for the church (and the most commonly mentioned by interviewees) was to provide a guidance regarding the values and journey of reconciliation through sermons. While some felt that not enough attention was given in developing this message and addressing it consistently, it seems to have been a very common phenomena for the churches to take on this role in their regular services.

Symbolic Events: Symbolic events, such as mass gatherings, memorial services, marches, public celebrations are commonly cited as things the churches should be doing, but aren't. Interviewees express some regret that such events have been the province of political parties, when religious bodies could have used these opportunities. The Day of Reconciliation, an annual public holiday, is cited as one example of an opportunity that is generally squandered by the church.

Counselling: The role of counsellor was mentioned by a number of interviewees as a particular strength of church leaders which was utilised effectively within the TRC, and which could be extended to those who did not have access to counselling services through the TRC. There is however a recognition that more training needs to be provided to equip church staff with appropriate skills. Another component to the role of counselling is to provide space for confession. Some interviewees felt that perpetrators of human rights abuses were not sufficiently confronted (or given a space) where they could confront their sins and make a sincere confession.

Storytelling: The experience of the TRC seems to have imbued respondents with immense appreciation for the significance of storytelling. They recognise that the TRC only gave a

very small number of people this opportunity and see churches as having an important role in expanding the space for such processes.

Cross-racial dialogue and community building: The church recognises that whites and blacks in South Africa still live in very separate worlds and see a need for opportunities where people can share their experiences of society – both of the past and the present. Rev Dr Desmond van der Water explains:

Perhaps where it will count is where you bring people together in small ways to encounter one another, working together, breaking down the stereotypes and cultural barriers. The church is very well placed to facilitate that kind of coming together as it is a safe environment to do it. We have a big task and exciting task at that level to foster reconciliation between alienated race groups.

Advocacy on behalf of victims: A number of respondents mention their frustration and anger with the lack of reparations from government for victims. While not reflected in the interviews, churches have been active in lobbying government for more appropriate reparations.

Victim-perpetrator mediation: A few respondents stressed the importance of facilitating dialogue between perpetrators and victims (or victimised communities) directly so as to promote individual and collective healing.

Social justice and poverty alleviation: Many respondents stressed the importance of poverty and economic inequality as fundamental obstacles to reconciliation. While these interviews do not clarify the church's role in this regard, the importance of development initiatives and advocacy regarding economic justice is generally supported. The need to confront white church members with the need for social upliftment, and their responsibility for this arises from whites having benefited from apartheid.

These strategies are very similar to those used by non-religious NGOs in South Africa. The fact that they are conducted under church auspices adds a new dimension to the intervention and provides access to different types of groups and communities.

Impact of the TRC on Reconciliation Work of the Churches

For many churches, the TRC largely served to re-emphasise the huge amount of work that still needs to be addressed in terms of reconciliation. It has made it clear that reconciliation has not yet been achieved and does require extensive further work. This has, in the opinion of many, been useful and opened the door for further reconciliation work. As noted by one NGO staff member: "The work of the TRC has created waves. They have created greater awareness among churches of the need to look at reconciliation. Churches are now confronted with how they engage their congregations in reconciliation processes."¹⁷

This impetus only seems to have materialised in the wake of the TRC. During the life of the TRC, direct church action was largely absent. It could be asked whether the religious participation in the TRC actually served to demobilise the churches' role in facilitating reconciliation (at least in the short term). In effect, for the period during which the TRC

operated, it became the reconciliation body that fused state and church power in a very charismatic manner. The TRC drew into its ranks various people who had been working for the church on reconciliation issues. The church initially saw the TRC as a body that would take on more of a reconciliation role, rather than simply acting as a truth commission. Many in the churches saw their role in assisting the TRC as their contribution to reconciliation.

It was only in the second year or so of its operation that the TRC became clearly aware of its own limitations and started portraying itself as simply "laying a foundation" for reconciliation (through providing truth and a space for dialogue).¹⁸ It realised that reconciliation is something that would take decades and generations. It then started talking about handing over the task of reconciliation to the churches and civil society upon its completion. This two-stage approach to reconciliation was however not clearly strategised. The coordination between the TRC and the churches was mainly to ensure the effective functioning of the TRC's work. Very little was done to develop a clearer long-term strategy to take the work of the TRC beyond its lifespan.

The fact that the churches face a crisis of vision after the closure of the TRC, is perhaps because of the expectations that they laid at its door, and to some extent, the responsibility which they appeared to have transferred onto this para-religious structure. The TRC has provided the churches with many insights and channels to pursue, but the blurring of the line between politics and religious involved in the process has left churches with little clarity about their responsibilities in the new society.

Notes:

¹ Interview with Rev Dr Maake Masango, Presbyterian Church of South Africa.

² In a statement titled "The Challenge of Reconciliation" published by the Gauteng Council of Churches, it is, for example claimed that "... the state cannot bring about repentance and true reconciliation. Only we the religious bodies in our land can do this."

³ Interview with Rev Charity Majiza, General Secretary of the SACC.

⁴ In "The Challenge of Reconciliation" cited above the churches proclaim that "models are needed for the practical implementation of reconciliation," but while the need and basis for reconciliation are clearly articulated, a process for intervention is left to the reader to develop for themselves: "We need to search for and become involved in any action or programme that focus on reconciliation." It is a process that is still to be defined.

⁵ Interview with Ashley Green-Thompson, Director of the Peace and Justice Department, SACBC.

⁶ See for example, Hugo Van der Merwe and Undine Kayser, "Community Reconciliation in South Africa – A Review of NGO Initiatives in the Post-TRC Era," Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, (forthcoming).

⁷ While church structures were central actors in the lobbying process, the key drafters of the legislation were politicians, legal academics and human rights lawyers. See Hugo van der Merwe, Polly Dewhirst, and Brandon Hamber, "[Non-Governmental Organisations and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: An Impact Assessment](#)," *Politikon* 26 (May 1999): 55-79 for a more detailed analysis of civil society influence on the TRC.

⁸ See Undine Kayser, "[What do we tell our children?: The Work of the Centre for Ubuntu in Cape Town \(formerly the Religious Response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission\)](#)," Johannesburg, South Africa: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2001 for a detailed review of the work of the Religious Response to the TRC.

⁹ Sometimes this relationship was however quite frustrating for local church leaders who felt that, while they were providing essential assistance to the TRC, they were not given much space to influence the way the TRC engaged with their communities. On this point see Hugo van der Merwe, [The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Community Reconciliation: An Analysis of Competing Strategies and Conceptualizations](#), unpub. Ph.D. dissertation., Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, VA., 1999.

¹⁰ This hearing was one of several TRC sectoral hearings, which were convened to develop an understanding of the role of institutions in promoting (and failing to protect) human rights.

¹¹ Lesley Morgan, Coordinator of the Justice and Social Responsibility Division of the Uniting Presbyterian Church of South Africa.

¹² For a more detailed analysis of this problem see Audrey R. Chapman and Patrick Ball, "The Truth of Truth Commissions," *Human Rights Quarterly* 23 (February 2001): 1-43.

¹³ Grahamstown Human Rights Violations Hearing, 7 April 1997.

¹⁴ This was further conflated by the Commission's support for the extension of the amnesty date to 10 May 1994.

¹⁵ This crisis of vision is one that mainly appears to affect the progressive groupings within the respective churches. Because the churches as a whole did not directly engage in fighting apartheid, the struggle for a new vision is probably only seen as a challenge for a section of the church.

¹⁶ Less than 10% of victims who made statement to the TRC were given the chance to tell their stories at a human rights violation hearing.

¹⁷ Interview with Athol Jennings (Vuleka Trust, on 16 January 1998) cited in Hugo van der Merwe, Polly Dewhirst, and Brandon Hamber, "The Relationship between Peace/Conflict Resolution Organisations and the TRC: An Impact Assessment," Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, October 1998.

¹⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the TRC's various conceptualisations of reconciliation see Hugo van der Merwe, [The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Community Reconciliation: An Analysis of Competing Strategies and Conceptualisations](#). While much discussion occurred within the TRC about the meaning of reconciliation, little consensus emerged from their debates.