

TOWARDS BEING A REDEEMED CHURCH

This session I want to convey three recent encounters I and the church have had. By means of these encounters I hope to install a deep sense of being a redeemed church and what it entails.

The first encounter was the most recent. Through my interest in ecumenism I visited Oxford University and Christ Church in January. I had the privilege to meet a very knowledgeable historian by the name of Winny Bernstein. After an interesting talk on the divide caused by the reformation our conversation came to reconciliation and especially the polarisation in South Africa and the ability to repent and forgive. She conveyed to me her own personal story being a child of Auswitch survivors and coming to a point to forgive the Nazis. Her Sharing this deep emotional experience with me was extremely touching and I felt honoured to be allowed on her holy ground. She eventually showed me a very special feature in the Christ Church, a black altar known as the altar of reconciliation. And there on the floor of the cathedral in front of the altar I saw the plaque you have on the picture you received. These words by Bonhoeffer's friend, George Bell, set the frame for our talk today.

NO NATION NO CHURCH NO INDIVIDUAL IS GUILTLESS WITHOUT
REPENTANCE AND WITHOUT FORGIVENESS THERE CAN BE NO
REGENERATION

I instinctively knew I was on holy ground indeed.

The second encounter happened on 26 and 27 September 2017. A meeting was set up for the Dutch Reformed Church and the Khulumani support group. The Khulumai Support group was a support structure set up for those people directly affected by the apartheid regime's atrocities. These were the people who witnessed at the Truth and Reconciliation Committee and who suffered the loss of loved ones, pain and torture.

Khulumani were represented by some old ladies, and a few men of whom some were renowned scholars like Professor Vuyani Vellem. Two clergy out of each regional synod of the church represented the Dutch Reformed Church as the church that condoned apartheid. Pieter van der Walt and I were the delegation from the Western Cape Synod. Although the church has repented and confessed its role in Apartheid on numerous occasions, facing these people were extremely profound and daunting. Under the capable guidance of a facilitator that enforced principles like human dignity, love and respect, openness, teachability, trust and compassion, we engaged in listening and telling the stories. Once again we were acutely aware of being on holy ground, being in the presence of the Lord.

We heard stories of a man stripped naked in the mines degraded and ridiculed resulting in a deep resentment of white people, and yet in this space he became willing to share and empty is being. We heard many stories of torture by the police and security forces. We heard the deep desire to be heard and to receive repentance. We heard the pain of hearing white people say “the past is the past” without them being heard, without them hearing what happened to their loved ones. The process of storytelling and listening and responding with compassion continued for the whole of Tuesday and until late the next morning.

Then as if by divine intervention a very old lady stood up and made an astounding declaration. She told her story of her husband being killed in the Sharpsville uprising of the sixties and how she came to hate white people for more than fifty years and now at this juncture, this meeting with the Dutch Reformed Church the time has come for her to declare that she has come to a point where she forgives.....

Everyone in the room was stunned and emotionally overwhelmed. Let me quote the words of Prof Vuyani to illustrate: “Mama there, she ruptured my guards. She said this in the morning, before she spoke to the group, that for 50 years I did not have a sense of forgiving a white person, for 50 years, but today she said without reasons... I have forgiven all white people. I am not even 50 years... And imagine this... for 50 years... It is a sermon that I’m going to preach for the next decade... For 50 years, what about me? What about a young person? For 50 years... But today! Out of this process ruptured a new spirit of forgiveness, the thing that mama is seeing.”

For the first time my colleagues and I had a glimpse, a sweet sense, of what it means, what it feels like to be a redeemed church. To be forgiven.

I did not tell you my personal story and journey. If you know my story you will understand how profoundly this event has impacted into my life.

The third encounter I had, shaped my vision of how a redeemed church should be.

In the beginning of November last year I was asked to represent the church at a meeting with the Jewish council on their request. I was a bit taken aback by the dignitaries at the meeting, like the ambassador for Israel and most notably Mr Akiva Tor, Head of the Bureau for World Jewish Affairs and World Religions. Very soon I realised that the purpose of the meeting was to gain support for Israel in their quest against the Palestinians. They perceived the Dutch Reformed Church to be an ally being a church that historically supported exclusivism. I informed them that I would reply in a letter, which gave me time to articulate the stance and character of a new DRC, a redeemed church.

Here are the five characteristics that I conveyed to them and that I envision should form a redeemed church.

Firstly we as a church had to do serious introspection and change from an exclusive “apartheid” viewpoint to an inclusive view. As a church this entailed a rethinking of theological views regarding other people. We adopted a new confession, the Belhar Confession. In our case we regard all people as people whom God loves so much that He gave His all on the cross. For us this includes all the races groups genders and orientations in this country. From this viewpoint human dignity became very important for us as we believe it is to God.

Secondly we became acutely aware of our loss of authority and being compromised every time we speak up. To engage with leaders had very little effect. This led to a change of approach. We had to relinquish our perceived power and sense of superiority. We have learned that engagement should be localised to every congregation and community. The Dutch Reformed church, with the Anglican, Methodist and Roman Catholic Churches are present in every community in South Africa. We had to change from a “top-down” authoritative approach to a “bottom-up” localised influence.

Thirdly we had to cross the lines and be exposed to other views and also expose ourselves to others. The local Dutch Reformed reverend had to become acquainted with other churches through a fraternal and other community structures. We have learned that by establishing trust relationships we can change perceptions. Even after a short engagement and becoming acquainted we are more likely to be influenced by each other.

Fourthly, the way we communicate has become acutely important. Not only did we have to become more effective but we had to change to a more respectful tone. We are now called to convey the truth in an honest, transparent and non-threatening way. The language we use changed to not only a politically correct vocabulary, but also a theologically correct language and tone.

Lastly the church has succeeded in changing attitudes and regaining respect and integrity by taking visible action and providing tangible aid and care in every community. The Dutch Reformed Church is now regarded as the largest non-governmental organisation providing welfare services. This resulted in the church growing in integrity. A Genuine church.

In short a redeemed church is a church who is profoundly aware of its status of existing solely by the grace of God and through His mercy. In fact it consists out of people who know they are redeemed only by His grace and mercy. It is a humbled church. It is a church with nothing to pride itself on. It is a vulnerable church. It is constantly ridiculed judged and demonised by the press and critics with titles like “the rise and fall of the Dutch Reformed Church”. However it should read: The fall and rise of the church as it is regenerated only by the forgiveness of those it has harmed and it can only regain respect and integrity through the impact it has on society and the peoples of this world. May God bless us.

