Unfinished Business?

Faith Communities and Reconciliation
in a Post-TRC Context

Foreword

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission marked a seminal moment in South African history. Born out of the negotiated settlement that created the post-apartheid South Africa, the commission was an attempt to lay the foundation for a genuinely peaceful future for all South Africans. It was the task of the Commission to air and cleanse the wounds of the past and to sow the seeds of future flourishing.

The faith communities had played a pivotal role during the apartheid era. Some were responsible for creating and upholding the theology that undergirded the system of government. Others banded together to lead the opposition to apartheid. But, even those who stood in firmly in the anti-apartheid camp had to admit that their communities were compromised. Submissions to the Faith Community Hearings of the TRC (convened in East London, Eastern Cape from 17 to 19 November 1997) made it clear that many faith communities in their structures, leadership and practices mirrored apartheid society. Many faith communities had been muted in their opposition to the regime – some out of fear, some out conviction. No community escaped our tormented history unscathed. All came to the hearings wounded in some way. Whether it was the unconscionable hurt of

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having their places of worship desecrated as a consequence of apartheid laws, as was the case for many Hindu and Muslim congregations; or the repression of religious and cultural values experienced by all religious communities that were not Christian; or the closure of schools, mission stations and other facilities that was experienced by communities of most faiths; or the targeting and harassment endured by individual communities and interfaith alliances that stood in resistance to apartheid; the faith communities were wounded. But all who came emerged from the Faith Community Hearings with a commitment to contribute to the healing of our land.

On 8 and 9 October 2014, the Beyers Naudè Centre at Stellenbosch University partnered with the Desmond & Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation to convene a re-enactment consultation on the Faith Communities' Hearing of the TRC. The need for the original hearings in 1997 had been questioned by many who did not believe that the faith communities had anything of value to add to the process. What, it was asked, would they confess? What need had they for reconciliation? As it happened, the original Faith Community Hearings offered an opportunity for reflection, repentance and a commitment to lead the healing work of reconciliation.

The re-enactment consultation prompted some of the questions the original hearings had provoked. But, once again, the faith communities proved their worth and their wisdom. They took this effort seriously. All the commissioners who sat at the original hearings were in attendance. All of the faith communities that had sent representatives and depositions to the original hearings were also represented. Some who, for various reasons, were not present in 1997 came in 2014. They enriched all of us with their presence.

The presentations were thoughtful, deeply self-reflective and offered with genuine humility.

The bright hope of inter-religious engagement in the healing process for our land faded with the passage of years. The truths we had told and heard were searing. The national trauma we had endured was real. The faith communities retreated into their silos either to lick their wounds or to engage in the necessary work of reconciliation within their own groupings.

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Many of those who came to the consultation expressed a yearning to re-engage with the work of national reconciliation that had been pushed off their agendas by the multiplying needs of the post-apartheid South Africa. We pray that the renewed engagement will become a reality, the hard work of reconciliation is not yet done.

***Archbishop Emeritus Desmond M Tutu &
Rev Mpho A Tutu van Furth***