RELIGION & STATE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

*A German-South African dialogue on
historical and current challenges*

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COVID-19: our challenges and partnerships with the religious sector

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I would like to begin with a quote from Scripture that I believe resonates with our shared experience of COVID-19: Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 Verses 1 to 8:

- ¹ There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:
- ² a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot,
- ³ a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build,
- ⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance,
- ⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
- ⁶ a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away,
- ⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak,
- ⁸ a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

This year, humanity faced one of the greatest challenges it likely to face in our time. Despite the gallant battle that our brethren in Wuhan fought, it was all-out

¹ Dr Zwelini Mkhize, South African Minister of Health, keynote input for the virtual Annual General Meeting of the International Partnership for Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), 3 September 2020.

war that the novel coronavirus was waging and, in less than a year, it has left social, economic, psychological and environmental devastation in its wake.

At a time when we needed our places of worship the most, it robbed us of many aspects of our traditions and cultures where we find solace, stability and direction.

We will never forget that many believers were deprived of their final rites of passage, their final prayers, their final interactions with messengers of God as they passed from this life because of the coronavirus. Indeed, by virtue of being hospitalized during this time, many may have passed without the final counsel of a religious figure.

However, despite this upset, the religious community has stood firm, shown leadership, made sacrifices, and defied detractors by showing willingness to adapt and change. This is the very essence of faith.

At the beginning of the pandemic, we had to face the hard truth that places of worship were playing a major role in the spread of the infection. We all know the famous example in Daegu, South Korea, where one woman was responsible for a super-spreader event that became the epicentre of the epidemic in South Korea. Here at home the Free State pandemic began at a church conference and it took a full force of COVID-combat machinery to bring that outbreak under control for a short while. And of course we have since found many other areas that have behaved in the same way: shopping centres, prisons, old age homes etc. have been places where cluster outbreaks have occurred.

Yet despite all these challenges, the church has remained a pillar of strength for our people, providing psychical support in the face of the health and socioeconomic challenges that have come with this pandemic. Places of worship closed their doors, many for the first time in the history of their existence. But faith kept worship going – in homes, in workplaces and in virtual spaces.

I liked the message that came from religious leaders who said “turn your home into a place of worship.”

This is the faith that saw us through every time and every season.

I want to thank each and every member of the religious community for the solidarity you have shown with government, all sectors of society and within your own organisations. It is your steadiness and direction that shone a light

during our darkest hours, assuring us that God is always there and will never let us down. And what is most encouraging is that we are able to count the church as one of the major contributors in the containment of this scourge. I am really grateful that the leaders of faith-based organisations embraced our strategy to curb the spread of COVID-19.

COVID-19 has unmasked the depth of our social challenges – wealth gaps, food insecurity, job and income insecurity, poverty, inadequate access to health care and poor access to clean water and efficient energy. And therefore this has demanded a response that encompasses all of these societal ills. In fact, in many aspects the disease has worsened crime, particularly the gender-based violence which is so prevalent in our society.

Before the advent of COVID-19 I had many interactions with faith-based organizations where the government received overwhelming support for the National Health Insurance. In fact, it was all about building the resilience of the health care sector to ensure consistent delivery of quality health care to our people.

At that stage we all agreed that any obstacles hindering collaboration between all sectors should be eliminated as we took the path to universal health coverage.

In essence, there needed to be a new way of doing things where government does not confine itself to the role of service delivery and thereby exerting control over communities, but to rather shift towards the role of a facilitator and co-ordinator, supporting the numerous initiatives and proven networks of capacity within faith communities, NGOs, civil society and businesses that have the capacity to implement such programmes.

Religious leaders from organisations such as this one need to lobby for their members in all sectors of society to secure their social wellbeing. But in as much as there is a healthy track record in our history, there is always room for closer collaboration and for bringing unfamiliar activities into what might have been previously protected spaces.

I therefore commit to championing enhanced collaboration between government and faith communities – especially with regard to community-oriented primary health care, where faith communities work at local level and have a presence in

every corner of the country, including rural areas. For example, church-based health care workers and volunteers are a critical asset that the National Health Department can use more, expanding their programmes of dispensing chronic medicine such as ARTs, antidiabetics, antihypertensives etc.

Organizations such as the National Religious Association for Social Development, which have established a string of multilateral relationships with the Global Fund and NDOH, should be strengthened and replicated.

I am particularly intrigued by the Strategy Paper outlining concrete action-driven recommendations for mobilizing religious communities to end the HIV epidemic. I am told that this is commonly referred to as the “Berkley Paper” in your circles in reference to the institution that published this paper. The seven key elements are closely aligned with the objectives of the Presidential Health Compact and quality improvement plan, as they focus on community-led activation of health intervention

As government we agree that coordination between multilateral and bilateral agreements is needed to ensure streamlining and non-duplication of ground programmes.

Strong, sustainable partnerships between government and faith communities must be built to enhance long-term sustainable solutions for our people. In any country in the world, government alone does not have the capacity to cope with multiple pandemics, as we have to now, and I have always said no one holds the monopoly of knowledge and expertise when it comes to public health. I do believe that as we come here together with PaRD, your commitment to action will prove to be a powerful instrument of co-operation towards attaining our sustainable development goals for our deserving citizens.

As we move towards the national health insurance scheme, it is important for us to know that the way to achieve that would be to invest in local community capacity so that they can be the agents and champions of their own good health.

Before I close, on behalf of the people of South Africa, I would like to thank the religious community for the overwhelming support at every level as we navigated our way through the devastating storm of COVID-19: from the donations of PPE from countless faith-based organisations, to volunteers delivering medicines, food

and hope to the destitute. We salute all the leaders and members who provided ministry to our people using all possible avenues such as virtual services, making the most of television and radio, and delivering prayers and words of comfort and resilience through social media groups and text messages.

We thank you for being there, even when the coronavirus asked you to give up so much. We thank you for showing us that, while there is a time for everything, wherever we may be, there is always a time to pray, there is always time to believe and there is always a time to take action.

We are all anxious to get over COVID-19 so that we can pick up where we left off and accelerate our path towards the implementation of the national health insurance. With partners like yourselves, I am convinced that not only will we prevail over COVID-19, implement the NHI and achieve universal health coverage in our lifetimes, but that we will have stitched a new fabric for society – a fabric that does not compromise on alleviating poverty, preventing hunger, securing jobs and income and, overall, protecting the promise of a better life for all.

I thank you.