

Lionel R. Louw*

Christianity in a Changing South Africa

It is very daunting to undertake discussion of Christianity in a changing South Africa while we still find ourselves in the transition from a known past to an as yet unclear future. The ideas presented here are intended to simply add to an ongoing debate about the appropriateness of the contributions of different sectors to the transition itself and to the future.

The Recent Past

The recent past in South African history has been characterized by a dramatically sharpened attack on the unjust, violent, and heretical system of apartheid. The workers' strike in Durban in 1973 and very decidedly the students' uprising in Soweto in 1976 injected new vitality into the resistance movement. Since certain political parties and other organizations were still banned, the resistance movement inside the country needed a structure through which to express its objectives and to operate.

The South African Council of Churches, its network of regional councils and individual church leaders became more prominent in articulating the aspirations of oppressed people and engaging in action designed to dismantle the existing social order. Until the watershed developments of February 1990 the Christian Church developed a high public profile in resisting injustice, apartheid, and the present regime, and calling for a just, non-racial and democratic

*Lionel R. Louw is Lecturer at the School of Social Work of the University of Cape Town and a minister of the A.M.E. Church, Rondebosch, South Africa.

dispensation for South Africa. When the United Democratic Front was launched it emerged as a body complementary to the Church in the liberation struggle. As could be expected, since February 1990 the political parties have been at the forefront of negotiating this new dispensation.

The Church, through circumstance, has positioned itself as a creditable institution which created space during the years of repression. It made an ongoing contribution during the transition and still has tremendous potential to expand its contribution in the future.

Contributing to Social Reconstruction

The necessity for movement towards a non-racial, democratic constitutional dispensation in South Africa is widely recognized and the process cannot be reversed. There have been setbacks and interruptions. That is not surprising given the polarities in this country for such a long time. On the contrary, what has been surprising is the the speed with which agreement was reached on a broad front. Church leaders and the the South African Council of Churches have been extremely active in working for reconciliation amongst the key actors in order to break the negotiations logjam, and it is evident that a monumental task awaits them right now. I am confident that the politicians will finally reach decisions about how power will be shared amongst them. Through the establishment of an elected interim governmental authority, the spiral of violence can be addressed decisively.

Beyond this present phase an urgent future priority is for social reconstruction to be undertaken in order to give substance to democracy in the daily life experiences of people at the grassroots level. At issue is how a matter such as poverty will be addressed in

the future. There are many other matters requiring urgent attention, such as education, housing, and employment-creation.

It is in this arena of social reconstruction that there is enormous potential for the already creditable position of the Church to find a natural extension.

The Church carries this obligation not only because of the theological roots of apartheid, but because of its extensive institutional network serving almost eighty percent (Population Census 1980) of the South African population. In addition its structure and resources hold the potential for the Church to be a powerful vehicle for social reconstruction. James concludes her brief review by acknowledging this potential:

Because of its sophisticated, multi-level organization, the church as an institution has the infrastructure through which it could be an effective facilitator of development and of social change in South Africa.¹

At the conclusion of a study which examined the role of indigenous organizations on neighborhood stability in the Washington, D.C. area, Thomas and James acknowledge the Black Church as "one of the Black community's most visible and powerful indigenous institutions, the church, in community services"² Robinson-Browne focused her study in participation in voluntary associations being influenced by religious affiliation and writes:

The church in the Black community has served social, economic, cultural, and political functions for the Black

¹Marylee M. James, "Supporting Injustice or Empowering People," *Policy Issues and Actors*, 3:3 (1990), Centre for Policy Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.

²Veronica G. Thomas and Michelle D. James, *Indigenous Organizations and Neighborhood Stability: A Selected Assessment of the Role of Black Churches* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Urban Affairs of Howard University, 1987).

community as a whole, as well as provided a gathering place for numerous groups not directly related to the church. Furthermore, the pastor, church officers, and church members are often viewed as leaders and spokespersons in the Black community, whereby their activities often extend beyond the realm of the religious to the political, social and economic.³

As South Africans we understand this strong influence of the Church in society and recognize its potential to make a decisive contribution to social reconstruction. My colleagues in the Department of Social Work at the National University of Singapore informed me in 1991 that though Christians constitute only about fourteen percent of the total population, they constitute a majority in the social service delivery system.

The *Cape Town Statement* (1991) at the conclusion of the consultation of the World and South African Councils of Churches included Poverty and Development in the proposals for action by the Church under existing and future circumstances in South Africa. Social development is recognized to be a decisive ingredient in the ministry of the Church under these changing circumstances.

Permit me to pose six areas for debate in thinking through the role of Christianity in a changing South Africa.

Firstly, it is an inescapable necessity for the Church in South Africa to be an active participant in the promotion of social development as a concrete expression of the ideals it articulated at the height of repression and resistance to the apartheid system.

It has been referred to as "the Second Liberation", people empowerment, capacity-building of people's institutions. It calls for

³Diane Robinson-Brown, *The Church as a Predictor of Black Social Participation in Voluntary Associations* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Urban Affairs and Research of Howard University, n.d.)

the application of the varied and very appropriate skills acquired through engagement in church programs to community and nation-building. The sustainability of development is determined by the organizational capacity of organizations in the community. What more sustainable institution than the Church is there in most communities?

Secondly, social development occurs at different levels. viz., *macro, mezzo and micro* levels.⁴ This dovetails with the national, regional, and community or parish levels at which Church structures also operate. There are different demands and responsibilities vested in each level, but the complementary nature of the functioning facilitate effectiveness in addressing the expectations of South Africans as change occurs.

Thirdly, the Church has to help in the reinterpretation of the relations of citizens to the state. The move from the illegitimacy of the present government to one that will enjoy legitimacy by virtue of democratic elections should be prepared for and followed up by an active campaign of reinterpreting church-state relations. Confrontation has to yield to cooperation. Witbooi, for example, highlights the role of the church in voter education when he says that:

There is a great need to understand what the various political parties stand for, and the Church has the responsibility to educate the people. While it is not the task of the Church to tell people who to vote for, it is nevertheless important to emphasize the significance of each and every vote to ensure majority rule.⁵

⁴James O. Billups, "Toward Social Development as an Organizing Concept for Social Work and Related Professions and Movements", *Social Development Issues* 12:3 (1990), 14-26.

⁵B.C. Witbooi, "Power-sharing and the Spirit of Liberation," *Baobab*, 7:2 (1992), 4-5.

What require attention are cooperation, realism in expectations of the new government, and not developing wholesale dependence on government. Yet, the Church still needs to preserve its capacity to be the conscience of society and to speak prophetically even under the rule of a democratically elected government.

Fourthly, rural areas and women require special attention. Much of the resources to develop people have been invested in residents of the urban areas. These are the places where most of the organization-building occurred. There has been a growing awareness of the desperate plight of the rural areas and that half of South Africa's citizens live there.⁶ The oppression of women is rightly also receiving more attention as the society is reminded that liberation must also include change in the status of women.⁷

Fifthly, ideological and religious tolerance merit urgent attention. South Africa is a very heterogeneous society. Apartheid exploited difference. Democracy celebrates difference. Based upon the common foundation of faith the churches can play a leadership role in developing tolerance among South Africans. It would have been most monotonous if we had to be of the same ideological and religious ilk. Engagement in social development would quickly cause the practitioners to develop an appreciation for the multiprofessional nature of the work. The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches very appropriately reminded member churches of their Vancouver Assembly position that "Diakonia cannot be confined within the institutional framework. It should transcend the established structures and boundaries of the institutional church and become the sharing and healing action of the

⁶Brian P. Engel, "The Role of the Church in Rural Development with Specific Reference to South Africa," unpublished paper sub-mitted to the Institute for Social Development, University of the Western Cape, n.d. See also, M. Nash (ed.), *Rural Poverty Challenges the Church* (Johannesburg: S.A.C.C., 1984).

⁷Andrew Charman, Cobus De Swardt, and Mary Simons, "The Politics of Gender: Negotiating Liberation," *Transformation* 15 (1991) 40-64.

Holy Spirit through the community of God's people in and for the world."⁸

Sixthly, such a rethinking of the mission of the Church in undertaking social reconstruction in South Africa will impact upon the training of church workers. Both the ordained and unordained workers of the churches need exposure to the theory and practice which social development requires, knowledge and skills which complement the traditional patterns of preparing them for ministry. At parish level the membership would have to be challenged to extend their own parish ministries to address the needs and expectations of residents in concrete ways.

Vision in spite of Handicaps

Charles Villa-Vicencio and many others will justifiably criticize me for being too generous about the capacity of the institutional church to deliver on these lofty ideals. Villa-Vicencio cautions against such optimism.

The dominant theology of the church has at least since the time of the Constantinian settlement in A.D. 313 been firmly on the side of successive ruling classes - and frequently it has been used to prop up corrupt and oppressive regimes.⁹

Marylee M. James admits that "Church membership is apathetic, rarely rising to the challenges of the vision of its leadership. Those who are comfortable do prefer to protect the status

⁸Kenneth Slack, (ed.), *Hope in the Desert* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), p. 134.

⁹Charles Villa-Vicencio, "Toward a Theology of Nation-Building: Church and State in Africa Today," *Journal of Church and State* 32:4 (1990), pp. 851-867.

quo, even while expressing horror at economic and social injustice."¹⁰

Engel adds another dimension: "A major criticism against the church's involvement in development has been that its compassion stops with just a handout or patching up a body wracked with malnutrition, or starvation, and that the cause of this need is not attacked."¹¹

But, like them and many others, I continue to pursue the prophetic vision of the Church engaging itself in building our nation from the ravages of apartheid, and I am grateful for the evidence in the writings of Joseph, Marais, Perkins, and many others, that the vision can be actualized.¹²

Such evidence is not emerging from conference resolutions, or the top echelon decision-making bodies of churches, but from local congregations that are doing most exciting work at the level where a direct difference can be made to the quality of people's lives. In two important articles, Martin Marty and F. Ellen Netting both acknowledge that relationships between church bodies and service delivery agencies are not always easy, but perhaps more often than generally recognized an infusion of religion into the agencies' *raison d'être* can be effected by the Church.¹³

¹⁰James, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹¹Brian P. Engel, *op. cit.*

¹²See, Sister M. Vicentia and Sister Ann Patrick Conrad, "A Parish Neighborhood Model for Social Work Practice," *Social Casework* 61 (1980), pp. 423-432; Dirk Marais, "MAG: A South African Success Story," *W.K. Kellogg Fnd. International Journal* (Spring-Summer, 1990), pp. 23-26; John Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1976).

¹³See, Martin E. Marty, "Social Service: Godly and Godless," *Social Service Review* 54:4 (1980), pp. 463-481, and F. Ellen Netting, "Church-Related Agencies and Social Welfare," *Social Service Review* 58:3 (1984), pp. 404-420.