

## **South Africa (7)**

### **Post-Apartheid**

When Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first black president of the "new" South Africa, "radical evangelical" Jim Wallis of Sojourners was ecstatic. He was convinced that "the South African miracle" had the real potential to infuse hope into every other struggle for freedom, justice, and peace throughout the world. Indeed, the new era began with many promising signs. As soon as the first democratically elected 400-seat National Assembly was installed, South Africa was swiftly welcomed back into the world community and to the membership of the many international organizations, including the British Commonwealth, from which it had been excluded. But despite the good start, the road to prosperity, peace and justice remains steep and uncertain.

When Mandela retired in 1999, euphoria evaporated and reality had set in. A landslide election saw Thabo Mbeki of the African National Congress (ANC) voted in as the new President. The immediate challenges the new government faced were the high crime rates, rising unemployment, stunted education, the AIDS epidemic, and the ragged squatter camps that have grown - and are still growing - in widening rings around the established urban areas. The legacy of the apartheid era saddled South Africa with a climate of fear, hatred, suspicion and a culture of violence. There is a growing sense of disillusionment and discontent based on unfulfilled expectations. The coloureds and the Indians feel threatened by the ANC's growing emphasis on race and colour and they fear a return to a new form of apartheid, which will lead to suppression and deprivations. Many whites fear reverse racial discrimination through unfairly applied affirmative action. They are also concerned that they are now being made the scapegoats for all the ills of the "new" South Africa.

The redistribution of lands remains a bone of contention. Its ultimate aim is the equitable redistribution of land and other resources aimed to eliminate homelessness, unemployment, poverty and squatting. Land reform has been a cornerstone of the transformation process since 1994. It is entwined with the daily existence of thousands of farmers and rural workers. But whites and blacks have different interpretations of what constitutes ownership. On the one hand, blacks view the ground in which their ancestors are buried as sacred ground. On the other hand, Afrikaner farmers believe that their commercial agri-businesses offer an important contribution to the economy. President Mbeki's failure to carry out any substantive land reforms has aggravated an already volatile situation. Most of the country's farmland remains in white hands and many rural blacks continue to live in extreme poverty. Jody Kollapen, the chairman of the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) observes that there is a high level of frustration among South Africa's farm workers. White farmers say they feel increasingly under attack and that racism and not crime is the main motivation. Murders of white farmers are on the increase, with about 1,500 having been killed since the end of apartheid. Some even feel it is more dangerous to be a

white farmer in South Africa today than it is in neighbouring Zimbabwe.

The rise of militant Islam is a cause for concern. Although the Muslim community is relatively small - it comprises 1.4 percent of the population - the influence of the community in the political, economic, academic and cultural life far exceeds their numbers. To combat crime in their neighbourhoods, Muslims founded the People Against Gangsterism and Drugs which engages in acts of violence against suspected drug and gang leaders. It is influenced by Qibla, a group founded to promote an Islamic state in South Africa. But one of the most worrisome developments is the destructive spirit of secularism which increasingly reshapes the fundamental character of South African society.

### **A Culture of Violence**

Another legacy of apartheid was a flood of cheap, illegal and readily available automatic weapons. The great majority of criminal acts are now being perpetrated by blacks against blacks. Violence has become rampant, murder made common while often criminals go unpunished. Dr. Motsoko Pheko of the Pan Africanist Congress claims, "South Africa is the most violent country in the world where there is no civil war. African lives are treated cheaper than those of mosquitoes and flies. Africans frequent grave yards with monotonous regularity." Recently, the North Transvaal Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church issued an urgent plea to the government to deal with crime in South African society. Pieter de Wet, a delegate, said, "People are sick and tired of violence. We can no longer be silent about it, because we then condone the violence that is destroying our society."

### **South Africa's Moral Crisis**

In October 1998, religious leaders joined Nelson Mandela in signing a code of conduct aimed at the moral renewal of South African society. But moral renewal has not come as yet. Although South Africa is one of the continent's most developed nations, for families living in poverty, AIDS is spreading quickly as risky cultural traditions and a lack of awareness propel its spread. "South Africa is experiencing a devastating epidemic - the world's worst- and this is just the beginning," a researcher told the country's first national AIDS conference in Durban. Statistics show AIDS' horrific human toll. An estimated 370,000 children still under fifteen have lost one or both parents to AIDS. Some 65,000 babies were born HIV positive in 1997 and the number of AIDS orphans is increasing. In government circles HIV/AIDS issues have been in hot debate, ensuring that these concerns remain a priority on their agenda.

But president Mbeki has been accused of not caring about the lives of those infected with the virus that causes AIDS. In the late 1990s, Mbeki became convinced stereotypes of black sexuality were driving the Western AIDS agenda, and fell in with a fringe movement that denies HIV is the cause of AIDS. In

August 2003, under pressure from activists he quietly backed away from his position and allowed the drugs he had described as poison to be distributed to South Africans. And Christians are making a difference by providing care and compassion. The faith mission organization SIM (Service in Mission) offers HIV/AIDS Bible correspondence courses. Hundreds have taken the course in the past year. A hospital administrator said, "The greatest thing that the church can do is to provide care, especially spiritually based care for people who are dying of AIDS, to give them some hope and dignity." For example, despite the well-known racial divide, Indian Churches are ministering in black townships to people living with AIDS.

South Africa has become one of the few African nations which offers abortion on demand. The passing of the constitution in 1996 included control over "reproductive rights." The fight against liberalization of abortion was lost at this stage. In 1997 South Africa passed the "Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act" legalizing abortion and stipulating that registered midwives can perform abortions with women of no more than twelve weeks into their pregnancy. In South Africa the abortion issue is placed alongside women's rights and they are inseparably linked in the minds of the South African politicians in the ruling party.

### **Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in December 1995, appointed by Nelson Mandela. It captured international attention. It promised amnesty to any individual guilty of "gross violations of human rights" who offered full and truthful disclosure of his acts, and whose offenses were deemed politically motivated. TRC's chairman was the world's best-known Anglican cleric, the former Cape Town Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who (alongside Nelson Mandela) had become the symbol of the South African Liberation Movement. In 1998 the TRC published a five-volume, 3,500 page document. The report insisted that the reality of apartheid was complex "multi-layered and multi-dimensional." It revealed not only the action of the security forces against black activists, but also the ugly web of black-against-black violence and collaboration on which apartheid rested. The confessions before the TRC came as shock to many people, leading them to question the role played by the Reformed churches in general and the Dutch Reformed (DCR) in particular. Interestingly, after all the gruesome testimonies Tutu had heard he could still say, "At the end of the truth and reconciliation process, I am away exhilarated by the fact that, yes, we have this capacity for evil, but we have this remarkable glorious capacity for good. It is quite extraordinary. We are fundamentally good!"

Not all parties are pleased with the TRC's performance. There is a growing indignation and anger over the role that has been played by the TRC and by its denigration of former leaders. For example, Dr. Motsoko Pheko does not believe that the TRC enhanced democracy in South Africa. He claims that it "criminalizes the African struggle against apartheid which was recognized as

legitimate by the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity." Dr. Piet Mulder, Member of Parliament for the Freedom Front, fears that the commission had turned into a witch hunt and divided people further instead of bringing reconciliation.

### **Witchcraft**

One of the main centres of modern witchcraft and witch-hunting activity is South Africa, the most developed state on the whole continent. Instead of declining as the society modernized and secularized, witchcraft accusations actually flourish in the booming cities during these times of economic slump and political crisis. For the Western mind it is almost impossible to realize the power witchcraft has over the black South Africans. Andrew Walls remarked, "The role of ancestors and witchcraft are two important issues. Academic theologians in the West may not put witchcraft high on the agenda, but it's the issue that hits ordinary African Christians full in the face."

### **African Independent Churches**

The early 20th century saw an explosive growth of African Independent Churches. They usually represent a combination of Pentecostal, revivalist, ritualistic, and traditional African religious elements, with liturgies and ceremonies unique to South Africa. The continued growth of the independent churches corresponded with the growing political and racial crisis in the nation between the 1960s and the 1990s, when Black-White tensions reached heights unknown in most of South Africa. In the 1990s, there were 4, 000 independent churches, claiming five million adherents; 900 congregations operated in the city of Soweto alone. The largest such body, the Zion Christian Church, is a major religious and political force. The independents vary widely in belief and practice. However, Harvey Cox argues that we should place them firmly within the Pentecostal landscape on account of their 'free wheeling, Spirit-filled' worship style."

### **The General Church Scene**

South Africa has been called a "Christian nation." But some 77% of its inhabitants are only nominal Christians. South African society and institutions of higher education have become largely secularized with some notable exceptions. Many of the so-called black "lost generation" have explicitly rejected the church and what it stands for. Furthermore, many Afrikaners have rejected Christianity in the process of rejecting their apartheid heritage. The sad fact is that many Afrikaners are not members of a church and are without the foundation of Scripture. And members of the DRC do not have a good track record. An item of deep concern for the DRC is their ever-decreasing numbers. Already in 1944, a survey showed that only 22% of DRC members attended one or both Sunday services, 25% attended Holy Communion, and 3% the weekly prayer meetings, while only 27% still adhered to the practice of family prayers. Today the DRC is

in conversation about unification with three other denominations, the Reformed Church in Africa, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. And as it is the case in many churches in the Western world, the homosexual issue is troubling the DRC. It is no longer satisfied with its 1986 decision, which stated that homosexual members who are homosexually active are not eligible for church office. At its synod held in October 2002, the DRC commissioned a study committee to revisit the question. Its moderator Coenie Burger, said in an interview that the DRC could not remain satisfied with the 1986 decision. He said "the church must display more sensitivity and love for their homosexual members." But he could not accept 'at this time' that sexually active homosexuality was right.

Among the mainline churches the largest are the Roman Catholic, Reformed, Methodist, Anglican and Lutheran. Recent years have seen a rapid increase of independent charismatic churches. In fact, the fastest-growing churches are undoubtedly the so-called New Pentecostalism type (sometimes called Faith Gospel or Prosperity Gospel) introduced by evangelists, especially from North America. Despite all the years of political, theological, and social turmoil, South African churches are still involved in missionary outreach beyond their borders. At present there are about six hundred South African missionaries (mostly Protestant) serving in over fifty countries through more than twenty-five missionary agencies.

Besides the mainline Reformed churches, there are some small conservative churches. There is a small English Reformed Church in Randburg, which runs its own John Wycliffe Theological College, which also gives training to many black students. The Afrikaans speaking Free Reformed Churches in South Africa established their first congregation in Pretoria in 1950. Eventually other churches have also been established in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Bethal. They are a sister church of the GKN (Liberated), the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, and the Canadian/ American Reformed Churches. In addition to these contacts they are also members of the International Conference of Reformed Churches. They also have contacts with the Free Church of South Africa, mainly in the Eastern Cape Province with some 62 Xhosa speaking churches and with their own theological centre. Via mission work, there are now a number of Sotho speaking congregations, plus two small Afrikaans -speaking coloured churches. In the future they will have to adopt the English language as the common language at synod level. Through mission work there is constant growth in the black congregations. The white Afrikaans speaking churches are not really growing due to the fact that growth is neutralized by those who migrate overseas. They are also strong supporters of Christian education. In 1955, members of the Free Reformed Church in Pretoria established a society for Reformed education. (Vereniging vir Gereformeerde Skoolonderwys). They opened the Johannes Calvynskool in 1964. Today it is a thriving school with seven grades and 6 full-time and 2 part-time teachers.

## **Conclusion**

Post-apartheid South Africa with its infinite sorrow, its cruelties, its racial divisions, its fragile democracy, its wealth for a few and its poverty for so many is not yet a symbol of hope for a watching world. But failure is not a foregone conclusion. There is hope for the Church and the nation through a return to the Word of God. The current situation presents a wonderful opportunity for churches faithful to the Gospel. They face the challenge to evangelize millions of non-Christian fellow citizens and to promote peace and reconciliation in a deeply divided society. The late David Bosch, a prominent South African theologian, said that South Africa's hope is in the hands of the people of the Cross, God's alternative society. He said that South Africans are called to extend their arms and grasp opposing people and bring them together, knowing full well we, like the crucified Christ, may be torn apart in the process.

For South Africa's Christians this is not the time to retreat pietistically into one's local church and spiritual life. The country urgently needs not only the conversion of individuals but the transformation of culture and society as a whole.