

ME Chronicle

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Forward with modesty and care

by Marina Bang

WARNING Multi-Event 99 delegates against easy and non-sustainable answers to the challenges facing them, Carl Niehaus, South Africa's ambassador to The Netherlands, said that religious representatives should not think that they automatically have the answers to such challenges because of their religion.

Presenting the first opening address of ME99, Niehaus cited positive contributions religious people, including Beyers Naude and Desmond Tutu, made to the liberation struggle, but also pointed to the silence and apathy of others. "If it were left up to the formal structures of religion to end apartheid, we would still have it today," he said.

Niehaus said that although religion had formed the centre of his life and was key to articulating his struggle against apartheid he had also been greatly inspired by people like Marius Schoon who were moral but not religious.

"We cannot have a church that does not realise the need for a deep and fundamental transformation which challenges the pockets and pillars of privilege in South Africa."

He said the Church cannot ignore the challenge of AIDS, of violence against women, of child abuse and of massive unemployment figures but that it must rise to the challenge with modesty.

"We could easily have a situation in which the church smoothes over the problems we are facing. It could become self-satisfied with what has been achieved thus far."

Niehaus highlighted the need to challenge the rich and powerful, especially those who have managed to hold onto wealth acquired under apartheid. He said religion has failed dismally to bring this message to the white community and that the Church needs to move faster and challenge deeper.

"Yet we, as religious people, should not be like a huge cathedral towering above the city. Instead we must realise that we have a small contribution to make, and offer our contribution with extreme modesty and care."

Finally Niehaus called on religious people not to try to suspend the personal when dealing with broad issues of social justice. "Individual experience is an integral part of the process."

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CHIREVO Kwenda, in the ME99's second opening address, challenged delegates to grapple with each other and exchange information in order to answer the question: "What is the right thing to do?"

"Religion attempts to guide people as to whether their instincts are good enough to follow. It may enable us to decide what the

right thing to do is and then give us the courage to do it," he said.

"The Church must challenge every constant and create an otherness within society that helps us to make sense of the status quo, the world and ourselves and must work towards transforming these. Religion must help us to look beyond the mountain top to the next challenge, to the next unfinished task."

Kwenda highlighted the plurality of our society — plurality of culture, worldview, language, faith, race and ethnicity — and described life as an endless process of delicate negotiations between diverse elements. He challenged delegates to adopt negotiation as a way of life.

“Even democracy cannot be allowed to be an end in itself, an end to which human lives are subjected and for which they may be taken. Rather it must be seen as a means to an end, the end of enabling humans to do the best they can. This means that we should not hesitate to consider going beyond democracy, to search and fathom other possibilities together, to find the right thing.”