

# Listeners' Reports

## Final Session



*[Eight people, representing academics, religious leaders and community-based representatives, were asked to act throughout the ME99 as 'listeners'. Their task was to help identify core issues that would summarise the process as a whole, to highlight gaps that were not addressed, and absences that were felt. This group included José Chipenda, William Johnson Everett, Robert Franklin, Nontando Hadebe, Chirevo Kwenda, Ann Loades, Peter Lodberg, and Albert Nolan. They met during the process and reported to the entire gathering at the end. What follows is a thematic summary of their points —Editor]*

### **Ethos of the ME99**

- Absence of 'visible spirituality' (e.g. prayer)
- Expansive and inclusive conversation possible
- Generosity of vision

### **Theme of the ME99—positive**

- A humble rather than triumphalist view of religion
- Important self-criticisms about religion, including its destructive potential; also responsibility of religious traditions for devaluing girls and women as was reflected through many discussions
- Recognition that religion has no monopoly over ethics and morals, that it does have an important role in providing people with meaning, hope, purpose and faith in the transcendent
- Emphasis from powerful quarters on religion making concrete inputs into public life
- Convergence of concern among government, churches and NGOs about poverty. This was evident in speeches and linked events and requires practical way forward. It also suggests a way of discovering the nature of the relationship between these three sectors.
- Gala Evening presentation by community based groups very important
- An important chance to share among people with similar interests

### **Theme of the ME99—ambiguous**

- Tension between academic/theoretical and practical components of the workshops
- Large mix of foci meant the main theme (religion in public life) did not always remain central
- The new South African Constitution, and its ramifications for government and institutions, must be seriously brought into the foreground. This surfaced in small groups, but not enough in plenaries.
- Evidence of some preoccupation with AIDS/HIV issues—important, but should not overshadow other important issues (e.g. high infant mortality rate) /end p. 160/

### **Theme of the ME99—negative**

- Issue of the abuse of women insufficiently central; the key workshop by and large ignored by men
- Slow emergence of attention to institutional specifics among the participants
- Participants had trouble dealing concretely with areas of conflict in public life, tending to generalisations
- Difficulty evident in moving from an antagonistic model of church-state relations to a generally supportive and pluralistic

approach—old habits die hard.

- Nobody thrives under constant criticism, which tends to be the trajectory of ‘prophetic critique’ and can breed despair—need to learn to praise problem-solvers in society

## Gaps

- Clarity about source of values in society by which problems may be addressed
- Meaning of a multi-cultural society, needs to be extended
- Deeper analysis of the term ‘secular state’, especially where this precludes any reference to divine revelation or an ontological basis for moral judgement
- Contextual analysis of the model of a nation-state based on South Africa’s own history
- Analysis of old South African structures, which may still be needed
- Relationship of struggle for democracy to the fact of South Africa’s huge population who claim a religious base for their values

## Participation

- Concern about many church leaders who were not present
- Presence of people from religious traditions other than Christian was important
- Concern at the absence of black South Africans\*
- Most participants appeared to share common concerns and even approaches—where were the ‘enemies’ who might have benefited?
- Important was the presence of grassroots voices, interdisciplinary languages, interfaith perspectives, ecumenical approach and international character.

## Organisation

- Was it not possible, given that Africa is generally poor even if South Africa is relatively affluent by comparison, to do without donor money—to model a different way of organizing an ME99 at low cost?
- Concern expressed that the ME99 not function simply as a one-off occasion, but that it generate a series of events out of its beginning
- Follow-up among local communities needed—also ME2001?
- A continuing ‘clearing house function’ to keep all updated on ‘next steps’ needed
- Inter-sectoral aim is vital and must be developed

## Other

Noted was the way foundational texts of religious traditions are implicated in the devaluation of women and girls—e.g. the household codes incorporated into the New Testament which come from a slave society or Paul’s belief that women do not bear the image of God in their own right. This points to the need to be self-critical about our traditions. /end p. 161/

*\* [This comment is not entirely clear, as the list of participants who were South African reflects that a significant percentage were black in the sense meant by the listener who made this comment. It is also the case that many who were planning to come could not do so because of financial constraints which the ME99 was not able to address. This last point is especially worth noting, as our experience suggests that the capacity of South Africans to address the inequalities of opportunity of the past, for gatherings which do have direct business or government funding will be limited by the extent to which sponsorship can be provided to those who cannot afford to travel or accommodate themselves away from home. Inequality of opportunity thus continues, and is directly related to inequalities in access to resources. —Editor]*