

**Baptist Convention of South Africa**  
*Submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*  
Faith Communities hearing  
A special hearing of the Human Rights Violations Committee  
at  
Christian Centre, East London  
19 November 1997  
presented by  
Rev Desmond Hoffmeister (General Secretary)  
on behalf of the Baptist Convention of South Africa

## **INTRODUCTION**

Chairperson, commissioners, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, the President, Rev M Mathibedi and myself greet you on behalf of the Baptist Convention of South Africa. The Baptist Convention of South Africa as formed in 1927 as the then Bantu Baptist Church. The Church was started as the missionary expression of the then South African Baptist Missionary Society, an extension of the Baptist union of Southern Africa. In 1987 the Baptist Convention declared its independence from the Baptist Union for what it perceived to be Institutional racism in the life of that community at that time. though a segregated church we share a common existence up to that time.

This submission will therefore focus on our experience prior to 1987 and the period subsequent. We as representatives are deeply aware of the constituency that we represent. People whose experience of suffering and courage have inspired us. People like Phineas Mapheto, Simon Lukwe, Gideon Makhanya, the late John Dairies, the late rev Nxumalo, Mahola etc. We, the Convention, are deeply thankful to the commission for granting us this privilege to place before you and the country the experiences of the black Baptists.

We will restrict this submission to our experience and understanding of the role the Baptist church has played in both the omission and commission of acts of gross violations of human rights within the mandate period prescribed by your ACT, namely 1 March 1960 to- 10 May 1994. We, the Convention, hope thereby to contribute constructively to your efforts of "establishing as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights". Your founding ACT identifies gross violations of human rights as killing, abduction, disappearances, torture, severe ill-treatment or any attempt, conspiracy, incitement, instigation, command or procurement to commit a gross violation of human rights that occurred within a political context. /pp. 1-2/

## **MORAL CRISIS**

There is indeed moral crisis in our land when faith communities find it more than necessary to appear before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and appeal via the commission for forgiveness and reconciliation. The formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has indeed been propelled by the awareness of the moral morass facing our nation in the wake of the destruction of Apartheid. It however remains disturbing and distressing when a church finds it necessary to appeal to a secular state and political process to consider whether it has in fact contributed to commission or omission of gross violations of human rights. We are part of that past and we do not engage in this introspection very lightly.

## **THE STRUGGLE AGAINST APARTHEID**

The struggle for Black Baptist against apartheid was a struggle within the church. It was also a struggle to justify ones fight against that system to a church that was providing the moral, spiritual support for that system. The struggle meant challenging the imported theological framework labelled "conservative evangelical". This framework had an inherent arrogance that gave itself the right to declare that it had discovered absolute truth all on its own. It refused to accept the European cultural, socio political framework. within which this theology was formed. This led to a debilitating separatist laager mentality fuelled by such concepts as the "remnant", who were protectors and custodians of Gods truth and values.

It was a theology that dichotomised life between the secular and the spiritual. This invariably led to a conflict for a Black Christian between His/her Faith and the struggle for freedom. The possibility of embracing liberation theology in the broadest sense of the word was betrayal of the Christian Faith. On a personal note I remember studying at Seminary in the 1980's. I lived in with a stone throw from Saint Barnabus in Bosmont at the time. Great leaders such as Dr Boesak, Naude, Chikane and yourself shaped the liberation agenda. for the majority of South Africans using your theological framework. I was made to feel that what was happening at St Barnabus had nothing to do with Theology. What you were engaged. in was viewed as "politics" of which the "gospel" had no part. It was possible for pastors and parishioners to fight their way through barricades, caspers, teargas and the stench of death to go to a prayer meeting to pray for the souls of people. What happened outside had nothing to do with ones faith. Black students were threatened with expulsion when they wanted to attend funerals of victims of violence, marching to Poolsmoor to call for the release of our President today, or if students stayed home on the alternative public holidays such as June 16. It was a theology that was interested in a persons soul and ignore the life experience of that person. Statements such as "I would rather see a person hung in heaven than in hell with a full stomach." /pp. 2-3/

It was a theology that expected the Black Baptist to embrace the same fears of the White minority. We were expected to pray for the "boys on the border". I remember my patriotism questioned when I supported the British Lions against the Springboks. This was considered unchristian. This was no different of the experience that Malcolm X described in slavery in America. He spoke of the house slave and the field

slave. The house slave were given more privileges than the field slave. Because of those privileges the slaves became more and more sympathetic to this master. He therefore identified with that master in all respects. The way the master was viewed and what happened to the master was viewed differently by the two types of slaves. The two therefore even developed different theologies. If a fire would threaten to consume the master's house the house slave would run to put it out, while the field slave would pray for a wind to fan the fire. When the master was sick the field slave would pray that he would die. The house slave [sic] would so deny his identity that he would say Master we are sick. The purpose of this theology had similar aims. The denial of black experience and embracing

This theology led to an isolation that was afraid of ecumenism and interfaith cooperation. As Baptists we were given positions of privilege within the organs of state to preach the gospel that ended to be a betrayal of the gospel. That was a gospel of that was quo. That gospel called for "slaves to obey their masters", "obey the state who was placed there by God".

As is the case with other faith communities, many of our members have suffered gross violations of human rights at the hands of the Apartheid state. We, the Baptist Convention, want to place on record our absolute disgust and dismay with the white Baptist Church for its complicitous and sometime explicit role in the perpetration of gross human rights violations. We recognise the complexities of the political conflict in South Africa and try to resist a reductionistic approach. However, it is widely accepted at the root of the political conflict in South Africa was the issue of race. There is no doubt that black Christians have suffered enormously at the hands of white Christians - and herein lay the paradox. The greatest pain inflicted on our people was not inflicted by the much feared Marxist-communist trying to invade our country's borders tragically, the greatest pain was inflicted by fellow Christians dressed in military and police uniform - also known to us on Sundays as 'brothers in Christ'. The greatest ideological threat was not the materialist analysis of DAS KAPITAL nor liberation theologies of our Latin American comrades but the insidious and all pervasive theological heresy of the religious dogma which legitimised Apartheid.

The white Baptist union is on record for having made numerous statements and representations to the Apartheid government indicating their disappointment and concerns about racial discrimination and so forth. Most of those statements were made after much struggle from the Black (broadly speaking) component of the Church. We were not able to convince our church to declare Apartheid a heresy and were not able to support economic sanctions against the then government. /pp 3-4/

We can however place on record the contributions made by the International [sic] Baptist Community. Our African American Baptist Community made a major contribution. They supported the liberation and ecumenical movements. They marched, boycotted, petitioned and supported those who were in exile. We are proud of the efforts of Jesse Jackson, Bill Grey, Charles Adams, BW Smith, Wyatt T

Walker, Clifford Jones Jerry Sanders. Leon Sullivan for formulating the Sullivan principles.

The Baptist World Alliance exerted continued pressure on the Apartheid government, even though they did not do enough. Individuals such as Dr Keith Clemens the present general Secretary of the European Council of Churches as well as Pir Miteide of Norwegian Church Aid. The American Baptist Churches of USA was in the forefront of the disinvest campaign.

In 1987 when we went separate ways from the Baptist Union we discovered the rich heritage as Baptist as well as forming strategic alliances with those parts of the Interantional Baptist Community that is supportive of these ideals. We were able to embrace traditions represented by people such as Dr Martin Luther King Jr one of the worlds most profound and influential civil rights leaders and Jimmy Carter.

It is true that Baptists have a reputation for being trouble-makers - if fighting for freedom is considered making trouble. And yes, Baptists have a history of non-conformism. Baptist were among the first 'free-church' type who refused to acknowledge the King, Queen, Fuhrer or any other secular person as the head of the church. For this they were killed and martyred.

It is true that Baptists love freedom. Baptist were among those early ancestors who were brutally murdered by governments who refused to respect fundamental freedoms such as freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, freedom of association, freedom of expression as so forth.

It is with deep sadness and regret that we (both black and white Baptists) have betrayed our ancestors and have not pursued the freedom fight with the kind of vigour and commitment demanded by our very own tradition. We have all been responsible for 'selling out' ancestors and defrocking our heritage of its radical socio-political edge and allowing Apartheid ideology to co-opt and relegate Baptist theology to the racially exclusive church bench on a Sunday morning.

### *Conservative theological framework*

Chairperson, it is our view that the Baptist Union, who used to issue statements on our behalf, have in spite of the many anti-Apartheid statements, was immobilised by its choice of theological framework (basically conservative evangelical) - a framework which valued equiescence - a framework not unlike that of the Dutch Reformed Church. /pp 4-5/

t [sic] was this theological framework which blinded us all to the for the justifi cation of the perpetration of gross human rights. As if that was not enough, the Baptist Union also provided the personnel who communicated (chaplains) and acted out (soldiers) this heretical message of inhumanity. The Baptist Union through its chaplaincy work provided the "boys on the border" the necessary moral justification

for upholding a political system universally condemned as a crime against humanity. The military chaplains did not just "preach the gospel". It was not uncommon for Baptist ministers to be taken to the "operational areas" where the troops were committing suicide and other fighting the terrorists. The current president of the Baptist Union, Rev Brian Jardine, unashamedly tells of his time served as a chaplain to the SADF.

## **FOCUS OF THE SUBMISSION**

We recognise the enormity of your task as a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We are aware of the high levels of expectations the victims have of the TRC. Without wanting to overburden an already impossible workload, and being sensitive to the limited time you have left to fulfil your mandate, we make only one simple request. We appeal to you to investigate the relationship between the white Baptist Union and the Apartheid security establishment. We, the majority of black Baptists in South Africa, hold the view that the white Baptist Union have contributed substantially to upholding the Apartheid killing machine.

Even though our church issued these wonderful statements we were at the same, uncritical about its more than cozy with the upper echalons of the security establishment of the Apartheid state (including the military and police).

## **BAPTISTS HAVE MADE CHOICES**

And chairperson, it is not as if the Baptists did not have a choice. There were those young white conscripts who made a choice - they chose imprisonment and excommunication from the church rather than join an illegitimate Apartheid army. If my memory serves me correctly the first conscientious objectors were Baptists. One thinks of people like Richard Steele, Graham Philpott and others. We pay tribute to these Baptists who in many ways were ahead of their time.

We further allege that the Baptist Union made a choice to go beyond vilification and simply ignored the plight of their black "freedom fighters" who were languishing in detention and spending many years on Robben Island. I need only mention Timothy Nxumalo (son of Rev and Mrs Clifford Nxumalo) who spent 17 years on the island. Andrew Mapheto (son of Rev and Mrs. Phineas Mapheto) 15 years on the island. . In fact, the Baptist Union refused to acknowledge that of its members were spending /pp 5-6/

It was not uncommon for Baptist Churches to pray for their sons on the border protecting the country against the onslaught of communism.

I beg your indulgence: The year is 1997. The place is Grahamstown. The occasion is the 100th year anniversary of the white Baptist Union in South Africa. The guest speaker for the Baptist Assembly is the then President of South Africa, the Honourable JJ Fuschee. Just down the road preparations are underway for the funeral and burial service for Steve Biko. The issue placed on the Baptist assembly floor by a radical white Baptist theologian (Dr Jon Jonnson) is this: What do we Baptists say and do about the death of Steve Biko? The assembly took vote saying that the Biko matter did not warrant the attention of the assembly.

We do not believe it to be a coincidence that one of our ministers in the Eastern Cape, Pastor Lukwe, was interrogated at the King Williamstown Police Station by some of the white deacons of the Queenstown Baptist Church - the church which exercised white superintendancy of Pastor Lukwe's black church.

We do not believe it to be mere coincidence that Rev Gideon Makhanya arrested and held at Protea Police Station in Soweto. The irony was that the Head of the Security Police at this police station, the one who harassed and interrogated Gideon, was a deacon of the Johannesburg Central Baptist Church.

We do not believe it to be mere coincidence that the late Rev John Daries, a Baptist Union pastor but sympathetic to the Convention, was arrested immediately on his return from a Baptist World Alliance in the Bahamas. In fact he was arrested while still on the aeroplane, taken to John Vorster Square, stripped naked, interrogated and beaten.

We do not believe it to be mere coincidence that a white missionary, on the payroll of the white Baptist Union was caught in Zambia and found guilty by a high court of being a South African Defence Force spy.

We do not believe it to be mere coincidence that towards the end of the 1980's that the white Baptist Union's president elect is a certain Brigadier Andrew Van Aardweg, a senior chaplain to the SADF and allegedly [sic]

We do not believe it to be mere coincidence that at this time the venue for the annual national meeting (assembly) of white Baptists is the military barracks in Kimberly - a fitting place to announce the candidate for president-elect of the white Baptist Union. If there was any doubt of the cosy relationship between the security establishment and the white Baptist Union, then the choice of this venue and its decision to elect a SADF Brigadier as its spiritual and moral leader speaks for itself. /pp 6-7/

I submit to you Chairperson, that the lack of a common memory/understanding of what constitutes Baptist theology and praxis is one of the roots of our problem. A lack of understanding at this very basic level of church history was exacerbated by the all pervasive hegemony of Apartheid ideology manifested in the ethnic and racial exclusivism of our churches. All this you already know, chairperson so what's news you might ask.

We cannot leave the commission today without asking this one question - What was the relationship between the white Baptist church and the apartheid security establishment including the military and police? We have been unable to develop a common mind on this aspect of the life of the white Baptist church and it is this lack of information that to a greater extent, hinders engagement in the reconciliation processes aimed at bringing about unity.

## **BAPTIST AND MACRO ECONOMIC PRIVILEGE**

We also hold the view that the white Baptist Union has consciously benefited from the macro economic framework which underpinned the Apartheid state. It was this economic framework that favoured the privilege of white Baptist churches over against their black sisters and brothers. It is unfortunate but true, that the white church used its access to privilege to influence and reinforce the economic dependency of some black pastors and churches. I must also mention the union's unilateral management of the pension fund investment portfolio at differing rates and scales of benefits depending on one's race. Allow me to point out that some black ministers who have served the union for more than thirty years are today only earning a mere R 50.00 (fifty Rand) per month.

## **SINCE 1987**

Despite its deep sense of material loss in the form of buildings, pensions etc. the Convention struggled to give berth [sic] to a new form of Baptist expression. It adopted a Vision called Vision Jubilee 2010. This vision is undegenerated [sic] by the Word of God Joel 2:24 I will restore the years the locust has eaten." The essence of the vision is working to redress the economic order in society, theological reeducation, leadership and church development and national reconciliation. We have endorsed the campaign against poverty. Throughout the entire process we have committed to reconciliation.

## **BAPTIST INITIATIVES AT TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION**

For 16 years we have tried to negotiate a common memory of our past and thereby work toward genuine repentance and restitution. Unfortunately we are still divided on many matters making the foundation of reconciliation too fragile for the weight of truth. /pp 7-8/

In the spirit of Ubuntu there has been a readiness on the part of the Convention to embrace our privileged white brothers and sisters but for that, to happen we must

have a common understanding of the past. There are still too many unanswered questions which stand in the way of reconciliation. Our people are drowning in a sea of unanswered questions - suspicion - making trust difficult. The Baptist Union still holds the title deeds to properties built by the sweat and blood of black people. The Baptist Union still holds funds raised on the backs of black people but never really administered for the benefit of black people.

Chairperson, it is our hope and prayer that we will be able to develop a common understanding of our past so that we will do not repeat our mistakes in the future. Thank you for this opportunity. God bless you.

We hope, Chairperson, that as a result of this process, the Baptist family of churches will reach a new level of openness about the causes of the pain that divides us.

We were happy to endorse the formation of the TRC within the ambit of the South African Council of Churches, in the process of endorsing the aims and objectives of the TRC - in resolution and personal letters to The Chairperson, The Honourable Archbishop Tutu. We have been praying for the TRC. We do not underestimate the moral burden you as a commission have been asked to carry on behalf of our nation. We pray for God's continued strength and wisdom as you enter the last phase where you will be required to make many hard decisions. We, the Baptist Convention, are proud that some of our members serve with you in achieving these ideals.

### **Addendum:**

Kempton Park Tembisa II  
BU/BC Retreat  
6-8 Nov 1997  
Corrected Version (RC 1-11-97)

### **Kempton Park Tembisa Resolution II**

#### Preamble

We, the Baptist Convention the Baptist Union of South Africa, meeting for the second time at Kempton Park Tembisa from the 6th to the 8th November 1997, have sought to continue the process of reconciliation. During these few days we have experienced the presence and power of God. This has been manifested in the harmony and openness expressed by our two delegations. We thank God that we have discovered a significant measure of common ground and we are anxious that the same spirit should be experienced at regional and local levels.

We are still committed to pursuing actively the ideal of structural unity but agree that we continue as two separate bodies for the present time.

## Resolutions and Challenges

1. We believe that our longing to work together in harmony needs to be in practical ways. These include:
  - sharing information about our respective bodies and our vision for the future.
  - committing ourselves to affirming each other in public forums as well as at national, regional and local church levels.
  - affirming the right of individual churches to affiliate to the body of their choice. Mechanisms should be put in place to minimize friction and conflict that would be detrimental to the Baptist witness.
  - reflecting an attitude of reconciliation and co-operation in our submissions to the TRC.
  
2. We commit ourselves to co-operation in specific areas in order to give substance to this resolution. Possible areas of co-operation could include the following:
  - the establishment of joint committees dealing with issues of common concern.
  - the sharing of human and other resources
  - pulpit exchanges to facilitate fellowship and mutual understanding in our local churches.
  - cooperation in theological education.
  
3. We reaffirm the importance of point (3) of the Kempton Park Tembisa Resolution of 1996 which reads as follows:

A gathering of leaders and pastors of both bodies to "provide an opportunity to share our experiences of the past and create an opportunity for repentance, forgiveness and healing".

We propose the following as ways of achieving this goal:

- a national *Indaba* of Union and Convention leaders, pastors and interested members and invited guests to induce the process of confession, healing, reconciliation and restitution to take place during 24 - 26 April 1998 and that a statement be issued by this meeting. Both constituencies be encouraged to engage in an ongoing process of reconciliation at a regional and local level.
- As indicated in point (4) of our 1996 resolution, we commit ourselves to creating an opportunity to publicly celebrate the progress made by our two constituencies at the BWA meetings due to be held in Durban in July 1998