

Dutch Reformed Church. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 18 November 1999. [disclaimer](#)

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REV SWANEPOEL: Mr Chairperson, I wanted to start in English but only to say thank you for the invitation and that we can take part in this hearings of the faith communities and we truly believe that this will strengthen the essential process of reconciliation between faith communities and I believe thereafter also in a broader community.

But then Mr Chairperson it is written in Psalm 45 that the tongue can run smoothly and so thank you for the opportunity that I can do it in the language in which my tongue runs the most smoothly, in Afrikaans.

Mr Chairman, we as members of the Dutch Reformed Church form part of the people of South Africa. We were born here and we wish to stay here to participate in this wonderful beloved country of ours.

We have been here for more than three and a half centuries, we are part of this history. We are regarded as the greater portion of the negative of this history, but on this day we wish to come and to commit ourselves on this day to playing a positive role in reconciliation in this country.

I believe we can say that our people have positively assimilated the change in government in South Africa and that we are set to contribute constructively in this country to a place to create a place of freedom, justice and human dignity for everybody.

We also wish to come here before you and say that we think differently about ourselves, that we wish to play our role in the shape of a servant according to the example set by our Lord.

We also wish particularly to strive more than ever before to comply with and obey the commandment of neighbourly love towards all our peoples. We say today that we have a calling to promote redemption and that it means that we wish to continue to listen to the stories of other people, that we really wish to go to great lengths to see their pain and need and that we wish to cooperate in the healing of the community and the solution of problems.

Therefore we are called on this day to say that we admit to our own weaknesses, but to also say that we have been called unconditionally to accept and forgive other people.

And now we know that we as a church wish to cooperate meaningfully towards reconciliation in this country, we have to start with ourselves. Therefore we have to

do everything in our power, to have the process of church unification progress in our own midst. You heard that the previous group said they wished that we were a united church and we wish to state from our side, the same today.

We are also wishing that we have progressed further along this road. The actions of our church are determined to a great extent by Synod decisions and we have to say that very clearly stated decisions have been taken by our Synod, but we know that these words have to be translated into actions increasingly today.

A question which will definitely be asked today is whether I am speaking, I am able to speak on behalf of the whole Dutch Reformed Church. No, I cannot, just like other people, I have to admit that there are two groups in our church.

I believe that if I speak about reconciliation here today, with regard to the wrong which we committed, I am speaking on behalf of the greater portion of this church. A group which is increasing daily.

I would like to summarise our role in reconciliation in two words, reformation. We are a reformed church which means that we wish to be open to the Lord to change us through His Word. We also wish to be so in these times but there is also a new word, that is currently enjoying status and that is transformation, something which we also wish to implement in our structure so that we can become increasingly a reformed church.

The second matter we will refer to is that we wish to do this together with other churches. It is not something that we can do alone. It is only recently that we started thinking together and planning together with other churches and we wish to state our need here today that we are here to learn from other churches to hear what they are saying, to take the hands that have been reached us to assist us as well.

We also wish to recognise today and admit that there are other faiths in this country, and although it is difficult for us as a church to worship with other faiths, we would like to admit that on the basis of common goals for reconciliation, we wish to cooperate and are prepared to cooperate without coming to the point of comparing spiritual points of view or saying who is wrong and who is right.

Mr Chairman, if I refer to the practical implications of reconciliation, I would like to start with the building of people.

Reconciliation is always a personal thing and here the gospel has to enjoy precedence. There is a need of spiritual equipment among our people and also certainly among other people.

With regard to human dignity, fellow humanity, common humanity and neighbourly love, we wish to assist our people and also other people where necessary to learn values such as acceptance, patience, respect, honesty, diligence, etc.

We wish to afford every person an equal opportunity to take a place in this society of ours and therefore in addition to literacy programmes, we also wish to implement programmes which are already in place, to teach people skills.

During the Synod of 1994, we gave recognition to the RDP programme and we stated that the church wished to link up with that as far as possible and practical. We recognise the large extent and scope of poverty. We are also concerned about that portion of our society whose situation has not shown any marked change. The church knows that it cannot just preach reconciliation, but that here it also has to go into action so that basic requirements for life are provided for everybody.

From the norms of our church, we wish to continue to contribute our share through equal payment for equal work and to strive for just wages. Without expanding too much on what is being done, we wish to say that we are thankful that our social services in this respect, have been expanded into the other communities.

I wish to continue with my fourth point and state that without contact among persons, there cannot be reconciliation. Therefore these programmes will also have to enjoy precedence on the road ahead, so that there will be spiritual contact between people so that they will be able to hear each other and thus also to establish and strengthen the essential mutual trust amongst people.

Our daily management has also been discussing a day of reconciliation which we would like to discuss with other groupings as well. I would like to refer to the future and the past as well.

It is impossible to build a solid future without having honestly dispensed with the past. Similarly the unique problems of the present times, such as violence, corruption, lawlessness and meaningless murders of innocents, cannot be overcome if the past and the future is not fairly judged.

It can therefore be expected and must be expected of the DRC to speak honestly about the past if its inputs are to be acceptable. It should also open the door to us for forgiveness and mutual acceptance.

I therefore wish to testify to the struggle that the DRC had to wage within itself in order to reject apartheid and to do away with apartheid in its decisions. In 1982 the Synod rejected apartheid as sin, to reject racism as sin.

The Dutch Reformed Church stands by its admission in 1986 that the church had erred seriously with the Biblical foundation of the forced segregation of people. In 1990 it confessed that the DRC should have rejected this point of view much sooner than it actually had on the occasion of the Rustenburg conference of churches where Willie Jonker declared our personal guilt and responsibility for the political, social, economic and structural injustices in this country.

Here in this meeting today I can also just say that we wish to support these decisions and prove that they are true by our attitude of working at reconciliation and also by listening to what other churches tell us regarding the past.

In 1994 the General Synod gave credit to members, officials and church gatherings who have voiced a clear descent against apartheid in the past. You would have read about our fellow brothers, like Dr Beyers Naude who had been accepted among us.

The church also admitted that in this struggle of its doing away with apartheid and rejecting apartheid, it also entered into discussions and meetings with brothers and sisters of the Dutch Reformed Church family as a broader family.

Then just to complete the picture, we also would like to refer to the persistent statement of this point of view which from time to time gave rise to a loss of members and officials from our church. We experienced that people left us because of this.

I can also testify to a spirit of reconciliation which has developed in many of our congregations in these days and which is still ongoing. Honest efforts have been made through confession to close the past and to step into a new future.

The most poignant of these took place at the GCOWE consultation in Pretoria where 180 ministers and members of the Dutch Reformed Church at the end of the meeting, made a written public confession. In this confession statement was made with regard to wrongful attitudes and deeds of the past and they also committed themselves to working with other churches towards redemption, unity and justice.

The movement for reconciliation is growing in our church on ground level. The church also continually and with empathy focused on the large numbers of people who were unjustly disadvantaged during the times of apartheid and to assist them in their poverty and suffering.

A lack of understanding, unwillingness and disobedience among members and officials with regard to the need in the community, were also admitted and confessed to before God.

The Dutch Reformed Church apologises to these people and admits that its voice of protest had not been loud enough and to prove and admit that what had been done was not adequate.

It is said that one must have a dream. One of our members, Johan Heyns' dream was that the church should use less water during christenings, and rather used the water to build homes. Therefore this church also has a dream. It is a dream of a country where people will accept each other and where every human being will also make a contribution to peaceful co-existence.

As a church we wish to be guided in this regard by the Word of God which says try to be at peace with everyone. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you Dominee Swanepoel for your contribution. My colleague Dr Mgojo.

REV MGOJO: Thank you very much brother Swanepoel. It is nice to be with you here. It reminds me of the days when you came with your church to become an observer in the SACC when things were tough and with others you did pave your way and I remember it was a day of celebration when we received you in the SACC as an observer church.

Thank you very much for your input. The history of your church has been a painful one indeed. But I must say that it has not been very different from other churches. Some of the experiences which you experienced in your Dutch Reformed Church, are the experiences which have been felt even in the English speaking churches.

I think that needs to be clear. What I want to ask here, miracles do happen. You have seen when we met with the Apostolic Faith Mission, the church which was affected as your church has been affected, do you think that there is any way or do you feel motivated by what you have seen from that church where confessions were made publicly between the household of that church and then reconciliation had also to be processed within that church in public so that the church can be one, even before they can try to move out to promote reconciliation in the outer world?

I say this because of the testimonies which were made here by some of the people who came out of the mother church. They came out very bruised and hurt, because of what happened there.

You as the mother church maybe you need to take a very big initiative to see that confession may be and asking for forgiveness from those churches as the mother church can take place. Do you feel that you are able to do that as the Dutch Reformed Church, to address this which has been mentioned here by the Belydende Kring, I don't know how to pronounce the Afrikaans words, and also the United Reformed Church this morning?

You are speaking about the people who were very hurt on the way, thus covering the great mission of your church in this country, thank you.

REV SWANEPOEL: Thank you Mr Mgojo. I do want to admit that without hearing each other in confession, there can be no reconciliation. Alongside with our confession to God and reconciliation which God grants us, it is necessary for a church and its members to do public confession.

We are currently in the process with a consideration of the confession of our church. I hear they speak of the mother church, we would rather consider ourselves to be

sister churches in these days, and we are sending a document around amongst our people to have a confession accepted.

With this I want to say that we are attempting although public confession in my view, must be a part of the process and I would believe that at the right time we will achieve this, so from our side we can come to the fore at a certain time to apologise for that which we had done wrong, so that we can take hands and walk into the future together.

CHAIRPERSON: Bongani Finca?

REV FINCA: Thank you Mr Chairman. I have two questions to direct to you Dominee. My observation and I don't know whether it is correct, but through reading in the media, the press, my observation is that many in the Afrikaans community have not fully embraced the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

I would like to have the benefit of your comments as a leader of a denomination that is primarily working in that community. You are in touch with people at the grassroots. You have a better feel of the pulse of the community. Am I right that there is a problem generally in the Afrikaans community with the work of the TRC and if so, what are the real problems with the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

REV SWANEPOEL: With regard to members of the Dutch Reformed Church, I would like to react in the following way. That which had appeared before you, was the pain and the sadness from the heart primarily of one group of people. In that regard, they might well have felt that it was not fair or equitable although from my side, of course I know that the injustice was one sided.

That is the only way in which I can explain the situation. People might have felt, Afrikaans people, that that which had come from the old order was considered to be entirely wrong and that was all pushed to the side. I must say to you that there are a large group of people who do not want to accept the work of this Commission, and who do have a negative attitude towards the Commission.

But I do believe that the voices of those who would say that as believers and as a church we have responsibility to make a contribution wherever reconciliation occurs, that would be the case, and that is why in our church we continue again and again to ask. It is my view that this Commission had been given and our denomination prays for the Commission.

We do not pray that the Commission must fail, we pray that your work and what I have seen in the past two days and which I appreciate very much, that we pray that God will bless this. Certainly a large number of our people do not accept your work, but there is a group who pray that your work also as individuals will be blessed.

REV FINCA: My second question is on the number of applicants who come before the Amnesty Committee of the Commission to apply for amnesty and who in their testimony to the Amnesty Committee actually blame the teachings of their church and say that they were misled by their church, into believing that the things that they did, were actually in the service of the interest of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that the church blessed their weapons of terror, that the church ministered to them, encouraged them.

Does the Dutch Reformed Church feel that there is any room for repenting together with those who apply for amnesty?

REV SWANEPOEL: Rev Finca, I would begin to reply in this way. We have indeed taught our people wrongly with regard to apartheid as a Biblical instruction. If you teach them that this is the way of the Bible, in fact you instruct them how they should act, and in this regard certainly the church has confessed that it is guilty and we are experiencing an inner struggle to change around and turn around in this regard.

When a person appears before you, applying for amnesty, it is indeed true that he can say that this gospel was taught to him in this way.

Certainly there had been different messages sent at a later stage, but people can certainly make this claim. Whether we would want to do something with these people, alongside these people in their process, most of these people prefer personal accompaniment and pastoral ministry from their ministers, there have been no request for a larger process brought to us, but I hear what you say and we could certainly consider such a process.

Up until now, these people had been individually accompanied by their ministers in their local congregations in a pastoral sense.

CHAIRPERSON: I wanted to say that we have deep appreciation for all that you have said. It is certainly difficult for any one of us to confess something and to ask for forgiveness.

To be able to do so is only possible because of the grace of God. Grace which God so voluminously pours out on us. You have personally spoken of your many efforts with regard to the relationship of your denomination towards this Commission and how you would have liked to have made a presentation from your denomination.

For that reason we are very grateful that you have indeed decided only just now recently, that you indeed as a church would be represented and that you would represent your church.

I want to give thanks to God because as you say, what has been happening here, has truly been wonderful and we can all just, all we can really say is thank you to God that

God has led so many to doing that which we all find so very difficult to do, especially when we have to do it in public.

Your church has a tremendous role to play, it has had an important role in the life of this country from the beginning. It has had a very significant impact on the lives of very, very many and I have no doubt at all, that God is intending to use your church powerfully for this nation.

I have sometimes, one of the wonderful things about Afrikaners particularly, is that they are not subtle. That might sound as if I am not praising you, but what I mean is that unlike other people, the Afrikaner is one who once they see the light, have no half measures.

When you are committed, you are committed to the hilt whatever the cost, and we saw it with the many people that you referred to whom for quite a while your church has ostracised and your church did a wonderful thing in 1994 because there are not very many churches that have publicly until recently, publicly said we erred. Beyers Naude and all of you others who were prophets, we are sorry for what we have done publicly and I think we need to acknowledge that.

Again the grace of God is wonderful and that you responded to the grace of God on that occasion and that now the prophets who have sidelined, have been welcomed back into your community. I am saying they are an example of people who once they have seen the light, as it were, take the bit between their teeth and you have a problem reigning them in.

And if I may say so humbly, I am so glad that you have seen the light and we know we could almost say to the devil watch out, here comes the Dutch Reformed Church.

But I am sort of half (indistinct), but I think I mean to have you as it were, on our side, is a tremendous thing and we give thanks to God. There is a lot of healing to be done, there are many horrible things that have happened and we are glad that you are part of the process of healing in this land.

Someone said to me perhaps today, one of the things we should do is perhaps just to keep a moment's silence and remembering many people, but to pray in thanksgiving for people like Johan Heyns, but what this person was saying was they wished we could pray that God would bless the Police to find the people who did what they did to Prof Johan Heyns.

Perhaps I must ask you after a moment's silence, to offer a prayer in the broad under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

REV SWANEPOEL LEADS THE COMMISSION IN A PRAYER.



REV SWANEPOEL: Oh God, our Lord, thank you that we can worship you everywhere and that you can be heard everywhere.

Thank you Lord, that we can pray here now and ask for your blessing, that we can ask for truth, for reconciliation, for restitution and for healing.

We pray Lord, for every person and every family that had been hurt, that had lost people that they loved. Our hearts ache and we confess that great wrongs have been done. We pray Father, that you will strengthen our hands to bring healing while we know ourselves that only you can strengthen our hands.

Thank you for every church that came and spoke here and bring blessing Lord on the work of churches in this nation. I pray oh Lord, for your blessing on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Chairman and all these members and the other members busy at other venues.

We pray for their report, we pray that you will give them health and energy, that you will guide them and bless them so that what we receive next year, will help us to go forward to heal, to reconcile and to move forward through your power.

We pray this in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, amen.

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