

Reformed Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 17 November 1997. [disclaimer](#)

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DR GIDEON KHABELA: Thank you Mr Chairman. We are one segment of the Presbyterian Church that has been mentioned before. The Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa is a black church. It originated from the union of two major Scottish missions, the missions of the Free Church of Scotland and the United Presbyterian Church. This union was affected in the formation of the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa in August 1923. In line with the changes in South Africa, the name Bantu was dropped in 1978 in favour of the name Reformed Presbyterian Church. As the name "Bantu" indicates, the Reformed Presbyterian Church was formed as a native experiment. A native church led by natives themselves. It was born out of a debate within the Scottish missions and the debate centred on two differing approaches, namely that there must be one Presbyterian Church in South Africa. The advocates of this view argued that it was wrong for the Church of Scotland to create two Presbyterian Churches in South Africa. Contrary to this view was the opinion that there must be a native church. A native Presbyterian church, led by the natives themselves. In a sense, this was a call for the liberation of African people from domination by white people in a white led church. In the African church, Africans would take charge of their destiny and shape their faith in a way suitable to them.

While today this position may sound in support of the apartheid separate development policy, at that time it was the most radical thing one could do about the liberation of the African people. The advocates of this position argued that there was no community in South Africa in which black and white people lived as equals. There was also no culture of worshipping together between Europeans and African converts. At Lovedale and at Umgwali, two racial churches, the European Church and the Native Church, had emerged within one church. It was thus, within this context, within the context of its experience as a black church responsible for a predominantly black membership, that the RPC responded, understood and acted in the face of gross human rights violations, which happened during the designated period beginning in 1960 and ending in 1994. Now the question that has been posed to us, the question whether the theology and the activity of the Reformed Presbyterian Church contributed to the formation of motives and perspectives of those who are responsible for the gross human rights violations raises to us the issue of the morality of the struggle. It raises a christian ethical question: How does a christian respond when faced with a human rights issue? While the RPC would not abdicate its duty of taking full responsibility for the actions of its members, we would like to point out that perspectives, motives and actions of our members who might have committed gross human rights violations or participated in such actions, within the context of a mob or within the military wings of political movements, did so not because of direct incitement resulting from the teachings of the RPC. There is no particular case, at

least known to us, which directly links our church to any actions of human rights violations. It is also unknown to us that there has been any charge that actions of human rights violations committed either by a mob, kangaroo courts or military wings of political organisations or committed in any other form, emanated from the teachings of the church. The RPC as a member of the South African Council of Churches, which reported this morning Mr Chairman, the RPC has acted according to the understanding of the South African political situation by supporting the SACC. Like other member churches of the SACC, the RPC has been faithful in its preaching of peace and reconciliation. An honest attempt to deal with the question relating to the contribution of the RPC in creating a climate or justification for human rights violations, must of necessity call to mind certain important factors which must be seen as having greatly influenced our church. For many years the RPC along with many other mainline churches, adopted a negative or at best, a neutral stance towards the liberation struggle, thereby helping to create a climate conducive to the violation of human rights.

An inherited racist system which eventually matured into apartheid created the social and economic climate into which we, as a church, were born and socialised in 1923. Whether you benefited from the system, or suffered under it, the racist system was a given if you were black. It formed our consciousness of reality and socialised us into a value system which sheepishly accepted racism. Individualism, selfishness, possessiveness and money as the merger of all values. In order to inculcate a culture of docility and acceptance of the status quo by the church, the apartheid regime often pointed at Romans 13. This was done to discourage members of the churches from taking part in actions of civil disobedience. The result was that this often caused the general membership of the church to refuse to follow a leadership that was politically active. Often it was this conditioning that was responsible for the failure of the church to lend meaningful support and protection to those who felt called to act. Religious propaganda that emanated from the apartheid system was effective, Mr Chairperson. It made many of our members feel guilty about any form of opposition, disobedience or even criticism of the government's policy. As a result, the church was silent when it should actually have spoken out. Because of its silence, when it should have spoken, it is guilty of collaboration with the system that caused great suffering to many innocent people. For that we wish to repent and apologise to all those who suffered because we were quiet. The church often took refuge in obstructions which removed them from the realities of life. It often resorted to formulas and formalities which were far removed from the harsh realities of daily lives. Lives of its members, even though it was a black church. The trouble with this kind of religion is that it fails to listen to the cries of the oppressed. It was this kind of abstract christianity which allowed the apartheid regime to carry on for so many years. For that we also wish to apologise unreservedly.

Mr Chairperson, a charge has been laid to the churches and other leaders of churches and theologians by a certain John K. Burman, this has been referred to this morning. I will not dwell on it. In summary, I would just like to say that we reject the accusations that he levels against the churches. The question also, another question which has

been posed to the church is: In which way did the RPC fail to live up to those values and principles of the christian faith which oppose human rights violations?

The membership of the RPC, Mr Chairperson, as we have already said, consists mainly of the part of our society who have been victims of apartheid. There are specific responsibilities which the christian gospel places upon a church, which finds itself in the midst of such victims as the RPC found itself in the period which the TRC is investigating. Christian teaching would require such a church to have a pastoral ministry which is relevant to the situation in which its members find themselves in their day to day lives. Although from time to time, the RPC made public statements condemning human rights violations that apartheid committed, it failed to formulate a specific programme of action which would reflect a church which is in solidarity with the struggles of the oppressed. Our teaching, preaching and witness did not differ from that of the so-called multi-racial churches, most of which have reported this morning. For this we must confess and repent. We did not stand firm and unashamedly on the side of those who were the victims of apartheid atrocities. We lived with them. They were our total membership. We lived with them everyday, but we did not embrace their struggles as a black church would have done.

When the apartheid government embarked on a strategy of co-opting black leadership into the mainstream of apartheid through the creation of Bantu Stand, many of our members at clergy and later levels were used to lend respectability to this policy. We recognise that there are members of our church who, much against their will, served as civil servants because they had no option but to seek employment within those systems. But we also have to confess and repent for the fact that there are some who took very senior positions in the Bantu Stand machinery and played very key roles in sustaining and defending this system of separate development. We repent for those who are members of the RPC who have not had the courage to repent for themselves. We also have to repent for the manner in which we failed to support those who took a position of faith and stood up to oppose the system of apartheid. Some of our sisters and brothers were marginalised within the church for their prophetic stance against apartheid. The propaganda which was spread against all those who were fighting for justice in our land, was too powerful. We confess and repent that this blinded our eyes to the truth, and some of us adopted the language of the system in labelling some of our fellow christians as communists and terrorists. The other question posed to us, Mr Chairperson is ...[intervention]

CHAIRPERSON: Uxolo, andifuni ukupazamisa kakhulu. Are you going to read through all of it, or will you highlight in consideration of ixesha. I am aware that it hangs together and it is probably not easy to - don't know what you want to do.

DR GIDEON KHABELA: Yes, I will just highlight a few things Mr Chairperson.

While some of the members of our church, particularly leaders, at a particular time in history stood up and took at a great risk to speak out against apartheid, they did not always get support from the church and from the rest of the clergy as well. I will

highlight here and I would like to apologise on behalf of the church to the Reverend Soga here next to me, the Reverend Finca here, and many others who stood up at a time that was very critical in the life of our church, that we didn't give support. At other times when they were detained, we did not visit them. But I would like to say, Mr Chairperson, that the awareness of the evil of the apartheid system grew with the awareness, with the level of awareness in the black community in general. Fear was widespread in the black community, because as you know the apartheid system spread its tentacles deep into the black communities and if you spoke out you were snatched easily. Everyone wanted to save his skin, and we did so most of the time in the RPC, letting our fellow ministers and brothers and sisters who felt called to act at the time to feel both vulnerable and isolated from our community. We unreservedly wish to apologise to them and to the whole community of South Africa.

We also have indicated in our reports, Mr Chairman, how we would like to see the future of South Africa in terms of healing and reconciliation. We would like to highlight a few things, particularly that we recognise that there is a spirit, there is a general spirit of denial in the white community. In particular we have been watching the process of the TRC unfold. In the white community seems that the general feeling is that they did not know what was happening. The apartheid machinery hid its human rights abuses from them. As a result they feel embarrassed by revelations of human rights abuse by the government they supported and feel impatient with the truth of the past. Some of them, we feel correctly or incorrectly Mr Chairman, that some white people in our community want a quick fix reconciliation where the nation will not dwell on the human violations of the past but will hurriedly move forward into the future in the spirit of reconciliation. In the black community we observe, Mr Chairperson, that the question is: Did indeed white people not know what was happening in the country? Or did white people not want to know? It is this understanding that our church feels that it can contribute to the process of national healing by developing a theology of reconciliation. It must emphasise the requirement for reconciliation such as has been mentioned already, economic reconciliation, national healing and the preaching of relevant messages and openness to the truth that has happened in the past and the hurt that has happened in the past. Mr Chairperson, I think I will stop here.

CHAIRPERSON: I hope I have not inhibited you Dada?

DR GIDEON KHABELA: No, you have not.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. Because it is actually an extraordinary document as many of these have been and I am actually feeling a little sorry because some of the things that you say about people like Soga and Finca, if you had been good I would say you were read into our record, but we have got it here and we give thanks that your church raised leaders of their calibre. I don't know whether there is something that you would want to add?

REV. D.M. SOGA Thank you your Grace. On the question of whether the Reformed Presbyterian Church has recommendations on how to prevent human rights violations in the new South Africa, we feel that there has got to be visible signs that change has come in our country. If you look at the treatment of our people at government offices. People are made to stand in long queues, subjected to different kinds of weather and the treatment they have to get from our young clerks, leaves much to be desired, and so there is a cry among the ordinary people, men and women of our country, that there is absolutely no difference, you know, from the situation that prevailed under the apartheid system as far as this type of treatment is concerned. So we believe that there has got to be a paradigm shift. Let's make an effort to bring to the notice of the ordinary people that change has taken place, or is beginning to take place. So that people are being treated better than they have been. For so long, people have suffered under the ruthlessness of government officials of the past regime. So we feel that we have got to put pressure on the government to attend to these problems and find a way of introducing better treatment of our people at government offices. For instance, I'm thinking of the Department of Social Welfare where there is a lot of controversy and many complaints from our people who feel that they are being let down by a government they have voted for, so we are gravely concerned about that, and we do promise that we will do our best as a predominantly black church to lend our support to whatever action the government will take, and we will do our part as individuals or congregations where we are based, to try and make a contribution towards addressing this problem.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. I would have hoped that any one in government would take that as - I mean it seems a thing that could in fact be effected fairly quickly, but it means that there is a job for all of us because many of those working there are our children. And we ought to be saying: "Where is Ubuntu?" It's got nothing to do with money or anything like this. These are often old enough to be your parents. Why do you continue to behave in this way towards them? And I think it doesn't have to wait for this commission to make a recommendation, it doesn't have to wait for the government. I think that we, you people with your stature and so on can already be making that difference, but thank you very much.

DR K. MGOJO: Thank you very much for your contribution. I just want to take you back to the formation of your church. The native church led by natives themselves. Was there any clear programme worked out for this type of a church to make it indeed an indigenous church? We should be custodian of the African theology which manifests itself in Ubuntu which has been very difficult to promote in these other multiracial churches. Number two: we have heard a lot about the programme to combat racism where some of the churches did not affirm it or oppose it. I haven't heard anything about your church as far as the programme to combat racism is concerned. Could you comment on that?

REV. D.M. SOGA: Chairperson, I would respond by saying we have not made any direct contribution to that, besides supporting you know the stand of the SACC as far



as that is concerned. Unfortunately we have not made any direct contribution to the programme to combat racism.

DR GIDEON KHABELA: The other question, Chairperson, relates to the formation of the Bantu Presbyterian Church as a black church. Your question was, was there any effort to make the Bantu Presbyterian Church truly indigenous? The answer, Mr Chairperson, is that that is the ambiguity of our church. Although it was created as a black church, it was created by the white people, so there was not effort made to make it totally a black church that has its own independent thinking. That is why we say in our report that the understanding of the black situation grew with the level of understanding in the black community. We also state in the body of the report that the leadership of the RPC was white for a long time, until eventually the missionaries were being, the number of the missionaries, were being reduced and the black leadership began to take over. That is when the reflection began about the nature of the church that we are. In other words we cannot say that we have been a native church in the sense that we have been truly indigenous.

DR. K MGOJO: Thank you. But is there any programme now to instil a type of theology in your church which would manifest itself in Ubuntu as a black church?

REV, D.M. SOGA: That is a difficult question, Mr Chairperson. We have not yet reached the stage where we have begun to question ourselves as a church. What we represent exactly. Because we have been influenced by the multiracial churches among which we count ourselves. That is why we say that we have responded to things in the same way as the multiracial churches have. We have not stood back and said how do we respond to this as a black church? We are beginning to do that, but we haven't done it in a very clearly defined way. We hope to do it in the future.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. Siyabulela kakhulu for your contribution and again I think the thing that is so noteworthy is the strong self-critical element which I hope can be something that we will be able to communicate as well to all the people of this country that from that basis we make ourselves more open to the possibility of receiving the grace of God and we thank you for your own contribution to the struggle to bring democracy and peace to this land. You may stand down.

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