

REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
IN  
SOUTHERN AFRICA

Submission to the  
Truth & Reconciliation Commission  
Special Faith Hearing  
Presented by  
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INTRODUCTION

The Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (hereafter called RPC) 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 effected in the formation of the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa in August 1923. In line with 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 RPC 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:

(a) there must be ONE Presbyterian Church of 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:

(b) there must be a NATIVE 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 the way suitable to them.

While today, this position may sound as support for the "Apartheid's 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 people 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 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 violations" which happened during the designated period beginning in 1960 and ending in 1994.

Our submission follows the framework as layed-out by the TRC:

Did the theology and activities of the Reformed Presbyterian Church contribute to the formation of motives and perspectives of those who are responsible for the gross human rights violations either in upholding the previous system or in opposing it?

The question raises the issue of the morality of the struggle. It raises a Christian ethical question "how does a Christian /pp 1-2/ respond when faced with a human rights issue?"

While the RPC will 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 (known to us) which directly links the RPC 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 the mob, Kangaroo courts or military wings of political organizations 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 (SACC) , has acted according to the understanding of the South African political situation by this Body. Like other member churches of the SACC, the RPC has been faithful in its preaching of peace and reconciliation.

*What was the contribution of the RPC in creating a climate or justification for gross human rights violations to be committed?*

An honest attempt to deal with this question 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.

## 1. An Inherited Racist System

An inherited racist system which eventually matured into apartheid created a social and economic climate into which we, as a Church, were born and socialised. Whether you benefitted from it or suffered under it, the racist system was a given. It formed our consciousness of reality and socialised us into a value system which sheepishly accepted racism, individualism, selfishness, possessiveness and money as the measure 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 Rom. 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 members who felt called to act./pp 2-3/

Religious propaganda that emanated from the apartheid system was effective. It made many of our members feel guilty about any form of opposition, disobedience or even criticism of the government 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 to apologise to all those who suffered because we were quiet.

The church often took refuge in abstractions which removed faith from the realities of life. It often resorted to formulas and formalities which were far removed from the hard realities of daily life of its members. 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 that allowed the apartheid regime to carry on for so many years. For that we also wish to apologise unreservedly.

## 2. Use of Violence for Political Reasons

The RPC strongly disagrees with John Kane-Bernan, Chief Executive of the SA Institute of Race Relations (Daily Dispatch -Tuesday, October, 7, 1997) who lays a charge against priests, theologians and other church leaders whom he accuses of having given support to the use of violence for political purposes.

It is regrettable that Mr Kane-Berman does not mention the violence of the apartheid system.

If what is reported in the Dispatch is, indeed, his own words, Mr Kane-Berman does not have his facts right. The violence which has helped to bring the end of the apartheid system began with the formation of the military wings of the ANC and PAC in the early 1960s. It escalated in following decades reaching its climax in the mid-1980s.

The church understood violent resistance against apartheid in the light of the "just war theory." Broadly, it is because of its understanding of "a just war" that the church sends or refuses to send chaplains to the armed forces. Specifically, the RPC understood the violence of the military wings of Political Movements in the context of this theory. It was also because of its understanding of "the just war theory" that the WCC launched its Programme to Combat Racism in the early 1970s.

Kane-Berman is wrong when he claims that the Kairos Document supported violence. It did not. Church leaders strongly condemned the violence of the mob. They condemned "necklacing" and other forms of killings the mob had resorted to. After the necklacing of the first victim at Duduza, Bishop Tutu was publicly recorded in the media as saying that if that kind of killing continued he will leave South Africa. Many times, church leaders saved people from the mob which wanted to kill /pp 3-4/ them.

The statement of the Kairos Document should be understood in the context of the State of Emergency of 1986.

*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 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 during 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 committed by the apartheid government, it failed to formulate a specific programme of action which reflects 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. For this we must confess and repent. We did not stand firmly and unashamedly on the side of those who were the victims of apartheid atrocities. 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 Bantustans, many of our members at clergy and laity 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 the system. But we have to confess and repent for the fact that there are some who took very senior positions in the Bantustan machinery and played very key roles in sustaining and defending the system of separate development. We repent for those who are the 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 stand 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."

*In which way did the RPC oppose human rights violations?*

The response of the RPC to the gross human rights violations caused by the apartheid system grew with the level of awareness /pp 4-5/ in the black community. As the level of awareness became sharpened in the 1970s, the response of the RPC became poignant. While before this period, all opposition to the government was suppressed - expressed in what used to be called Loyal Statements to the State President, in the 1970s it began to be vocalised.

The main reason for this change of attitude was the fact that in the 1960s the numbers of missionaries from the Church of Scotland had begun to decrease and the burden of leadership was increasingly falling on the shoulders of the native clergy.

After 1976, the repression of the Government had also become harsher. Large sections of the black population both in the cities and in the Homelands were being directly affected. The majority of these were the members of the church.

Furthermore, the RPC as a black church, was also experiencing the brunt of apartheid policies such as "the Group Areas Act." On one hand, many of its properties which were in the so-called "white areas" and in the towns had to be sold because a black church could not own property in the so-called white areas. on the other hand, schools and hospitals that the RPC owned in the so-called "Black areas" were taken over by the various Homeland Governments. The RPC lost Donald Fraser Hospital to the Venda Government, the Church of Scotland Hospital to the KwaZulu Government and Sulenkama Hospital to the Transkei Government.

Famous schools such as Lovedale, Blysswooth etc. were also lost to the Governments of Ciskei and Transkei.

The above reasons led to a vocalised and sharp criticism of the Government by the leadership of the RPC. The first Moderator of the General Assembly to make an unflinching statement against the Government was the Rt. Rev. D.M. Soga in 1978. In a prophetic way, the Rt. Rev. Soga spoke about the Kairos which he declared had come for South Africa. He pointed at the growing racial tension in South Africa and the widespread feeling of defiance of white authority by the black community, Soweto uprisings, scenes of bloody confrontations between armed police and the youth, detentions without trial and deaths in detention. Rev. Soga emphasised the fact that "the zest and daring in which these acts were taken by the younger generation of black people shamed the rather submissive older generation.

This was a call for the church to break with the culture of submissiveness and suppressed protest demonstrated in the actions of the older generation of leaders. Rev. Soga urged the church to speak to the concrete situation of black people and to proclaim the only relevant message of the gospel - the message of liberation.

As the Rev. Soga had indicated in 1978, the Kairos had indeed come for the church in South Africa. In the 1980s, it was no longer possible for the leadership of the RPC to respond with submissiveness and suppressed protest against the apartheid system. /pp 5-6/

In June 1984, the Rt. Rev. Sam Ngcobo (Moderator of the Church) wrote an Open letter to the State President. In the letter he spelt out the position of the RPC regarding the Homeland system which he said affected the movement and deployment of ministers of the church. The litany of complaints which he presented to the State President included racial and ethnic divisions that the apartheid system demanded, forced removals which had affected the RPC directly at places such as Umgwali and the general sacrifice of human rights that the apartheid system thrived on.

In one way or another, most of the coming Moderators of the RPC. spoke out against the apartheid system. of significance are the speeches of the Rt. Rev B.B. Finca, Moderator of the Church (1989 and 1991). Declaring that the church was "nec tamen consumebatur" (a burning tree that never gets consumed) , the Rt. Rev. Finca declared that the RPC was a black church in a white dominated society and that, as a black church, it had no illusions because it knew clearly that it stands in the midst of a tough and a fierce struggle and that it was ready for combat against the principalities and powers that usurped the position of God.

These words meant that the church had definitely moved away from suppressed protest and sharp criticism to a more focused action against the apartheid system. By the end of the decade of the 1980s some of the clergy and ordinary members of

the RPC had experienced detention and arrest by the authorities for their stance against the apartheid government.

The RPC had also appointed a full time research person whose duty was to direct the church in its action in what was called "The Standing for the Truth Campaign." The campaign, as the name indicates, was launched by the SACC in order to direct its member churches in acting in accordance with the "Truth" of the gospel.

*How can the Church contribute to healing, reparation and rehabilitation of victims as well as perpetrators at individual, communal and national levels?*

The RPC is aware that there is a spirit of denial in the white community. In the white community, the general feeling is that they did not know what was happening. The apartheid machinery hid its human rights abuses from the white community. 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. They 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 a spirit of reconciliation.

In the black community, on the other hand, the question is "Did indeed white people not know what was happening in the country?" or "Did white people want to know what was happening?"

It is in this understanding that the church feels that it can contribute to the process of national healing by developing a theology of reconciliation. It must emphasise the requirements /**pp 6-7**/ for reconciliation such as:

### 1. Economic reconciliation

The Church must point out to the Government that those who were disadvantaged in the previous system continue to be disadvantaged in the new South Africa. The church must emphasise the fact that their situation must be redressed through a process of reparations and land restitutions.

### 2. National Healing

The Church can contribute to the healing process by encouraging reburials of the remains of victims who were not properly buried. This will allow the families to mourn their deceased in a proper way and thus be able to heal and the church must also encourage erection of memorial stones for the victims of human rights violations. This contributes to the healing process.

### 3. Preaching of Relevant Messages

Preaching plays an important role in creating a climate of healing. This is the prerogative of the church and the ministers of the church are always in touch with

the families of the victims. They can contribute to the healing process by preaching healing messages.

*Does the RPC have recommendations on how to prevent human rights violations in the new South Africa?*

The RPC feels that human rights violations can be prevented in the future by applying a paradigm shift in so far as the treatment of the black masses is concerned. Treatment of ordinary people in the Government offices and other official places where they deal with Government authorities has not changed. Black people still stand in the long lines unattended and the treatment meted out to them is not different from the apartheid times. Black people are not made to feel that change has happened.

A paradigm shift can happen if the spirit of *Ubuntu* is applied in dealing with ordinary uneducated masses.

Structures that educate about human rights must be extended to the Provinces and regions. In that way, it will reach as many people as possible.

The culture of work and accountability must be encouraged.

*Does the RPC have recommendations on how national unity and reconciliation can be promoted in South Africa today?*

National unity and reconciliation can be promoted by inclusion of all political parties (including the smallest ones) into the decision making process. /pp 7-8/

## CONCLUSION

Lastly - What is it that we should have said that history will charge us for having omitted?