

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

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CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. Will you gentlemen please stand to take the oath or make the affirmation. My colleague Bongani Finca will do that.

ADMINISTERS OATH.

CHAIRPERSON: Dear brothers, we are very grateful for your presence here with us and we are aware of the contribution that you have been making in the lives of various people in our country and we sit at your feet now. Thank you.

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MR M NTHLA: I would like to first take this opportunity, Mr Chairman, to thank this commission for inviting us the Evangelical Alliance to make a submission. We feel it is correct the Evangelical community alongside other South Africans of faith and those of no faith should give an account of their faith and conduct in the last few decades.

As representative of the Evangelical movement, we stand before the commission and a nation in search of truth and reconciliation. With heads bowed in shame for the way in which our movement failed God and South Africans by not standing sufficiently

with the poor and oppressed in the years of apartheid. This went against the biblical witness which we are committed to uphold. We are mindful of the fact that many South Africans might well be tempted to reject God on account of the way we represented him, instead of preaching good news to the poor, we found it easier to conform to the ways of the wealthy and powerful. Instead of rejecting racism, we not only institutionalised it in our own churches, but we proclaimed the gospel as though the sin of racism and violation of human rights did not matter to the God we serve.

To often some among us embraced too readily and uncritically the patronage of an unjust government simply because that government presented itself as Christian. This severely compromised the gospel we are called to proclaim. We therefore take this opportunity to express our hope that South Africans will forgive the churches. We have made it that much harder for them to find their God. Having said that, it needs to be said Mr Chairman that the Evangelical community as with other church groupings, had within its ranks at least two traditions. There was a tradition that was prophetic or progressive, as well as a tradition that was conservative. The former sought in word and deed to bring together Evangelism and social concern, personal salvation and social transformation. Indeed, this tradition has helped to produce a lot of good leadership in our society. This tradition might we add, was not part of the hierarchy of the church for the most part, but pastors and lay persons who were largely marginalised by the hierarchy and largely black. Their leadership was neither recognised nor embraced by the dominantly white leadership of the Evangelical movement.

On the other hand the conservative tradition within our movement tended to see faith largely in other worldly terms with regard to society, this tradition found it easy to move from theological conservatism to political conservatism. The tragic result of this is that the defence of human rights was seen to be outside the scope and mission of the church. In fact, Mr Chairman we probably need to say more than merely that the tragic result of this was that human rights were not part of the mission of the church, because indeed, a number of our Evangelical Christians began to be part of a broader programme, particularly in the eighties that the government instituted in terms of its programme to win the hearts and minds of South Africans. You will remember that in the mid-eighties, there was a time when the government of the day made a statement that churches, in particular at that stage, I think the Dutch Reformed Church with a lot of pressure from the World Church, was asked to no longer be involved in politics, but to busy itself with spiritual methods. What the government at that stage began to do more aggressively than it did in the past was to then recruit a number of Evangelical groupings to become part of its counter-revolutionary strategy and the phenomenon of right-wing religion began to multiply increasingly in those years.

And so, Mr Chairman it would probably be good if the TRC were to subpoena if it was possible, some of the foot soldiers within our movement who could testify about how it was that such things happened. Needless to say that these tensions between the two traditions marks the history of Evangelicals in this country. Those who stood for justice and human rights were often defrocked and victimised by their own churches.

In making this submission the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa wishes to state that we are a new body in the history of the church in South Africa. Having being launched in 1995, there's an alliance of 31 denominations with membership of over 2 million people. This launch brought together previously existing Evangelical groupings. There was - ever since 1967, an Evangelic Fellowship of South Africa which has existed up till the formation of the Evangelical Alliance.

And there was another organisation representing mainly Black Evangelical's, called Consandi Evangelicals that was launched in '85 and all these groups came together in 1995, bringing on board a number of other ones of Evangelical Churches that were for the most part not part of those two. So it is a culmination then of a history of a search for Evangelical unity that started in the 60's.

At it's inauguration, the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa adopted a constitution that states in it's preamble, that the Alliance recognises the ugly history of apartheid in South Africa and the complicity of Evangelicals by commission and omission in that history. This history was marked by racism and oppression. Having learnt from this, our Alliance is committed to building a community marked by dignity and justice.

The founding of the Alliance takes place in the context of transition to a new non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa. This transition is seen a visitation of the mercies of God and provides an opportunity for a new ...[indistinct] in Church and in society.

The submission of the Alliance therefore takes account of Evangelical practice in the past and anticipates a future in which Evangelical Churches hope to fulfil a prophetic role in which they make their contribution in the national search for reconciliation, justice and human dignity.

It is also important to know that the Evangelicals were unanimous in espousing one or other position in respect to the policies of the past. And I'd like to mention a few points in relation to that and reflect on gross human rights violations of the past. I think it is true to say that the Evangelical theology is by it's very nature, such that a lot of the violations of the past are possible. With few exceptions, the Evangelical community has historically maintained a conservative theology. This is in marked contrast to the history of Evangelicalism world wide.

This conservative theology tended to hold that firstly, faith and spirituality are private concerns and little to do directly with social, political and cultural concerns. The implication of this is that believers abdicated their social and political responsibilities, adopting a stance of neutrality. In the context of apartheid conflict of the last few decades, such neutrality would naturally translate into uncritical support for the status quo.

Similarly because there was little worked out social or political theology, believers who participated in the struggle against apartheid would have tended to do so without

adequate theological rationale for what they were doing. And going with what was pragmatic, effective and was done elsewhere, that would be normally the way in which Evangelicals conducted themselves. Secondly, Evangelicals held that God Almighty was in control and that in his good time he establishes authorities and replaces them.

So that explains therefor Mr Chairman, the way in which Evangelicals justified doing very little because everything was left to the intervention of God. In fact it probably is not fair to say: "We did nothing, but there was lot's of prayers to bring about change".

The biblical text of Romans XIII, is largely interpreted to mean that the apartheid Government was to be supported and defended. This was particularly strengthened by the anti-communist mood of the times. The liberation movement was aligned to socialism and communism and to that extent - and to the extent that Evangelical movement is strongly influenced from the worst. The anti-communist posture of the worst also became the abiding wisdom and pre-disposition of Evangelicals.

Thirdly, those who became involved against the struggle against apartheid - the theology of liberation has exemplified in the biblical narrative of their exodus, became the guiding paradigm. God took the side of the poor and this raised the struggle of the poor to a moral high ground, making even the aberrations within that struggle hard to critique. And I think in that sense, those of us who participated probably could have done more to avoid some of the atrocities that took place within that struggle.

Secondly, the Evangelical contribution by commission and omission to the conflict of the past. By it's failure to develop a theologian practice that took adequate stock of social reality and relying only on private morality to guide people through complexities of socio-political ideologies and conflicts, the Evangelical community made believers easy prey to the forces of conflict. In fact, believers became socially and politically and culturally incapacitated to act decisively, authentically and in integrity either way.

Looking at the question of how we failed to live up to the faith and how we in that way, contributed to human rights violations. I think Evangelicals attempted to justify the system of apartheid and rationalise their support for it. This led to an embrace of a racist ideology in the ...[indistinct], in the theology and in the structures of the church. And more concretely there's a sense in which Evangelicals served in the military and police defence of apartheid - and I just want to make one example that will explain this.

In the 80's, there was a time when the government identified the young people particularly as being at the forefront of the struggle and there was a time when the government recruited young people by the thousands from a lot of the Black townships, to camps that were all expenses paid by government, inviting Evangelical Pastors and Evangelists to proclaim the gospel to these young people as a way - in a sense, of neutralising them from their political commitments.

A typical testimony would come out of a young person - for example, I remember a story of a young COSAS person who came away from such camps having discovered faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, with eyes shining and saying: "I used to be a member of COSAS, I used to be involved in the struggle and now I've received Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour and I'm no longer involved".

So in that sense, there was a way in which Evangelicalism became an antidote that neutralised the people who were committed to a struggle for their own freedom.

CHAIRPERSON: Excuse me, I really don't want to interrupt what is a very moving account but there is just this whole question of time constraint, how much more have you got?

MR NTHLA: Just one page.

CHAIRPERSON: One? Thank you, sorry, you were at a semi-colon.

MR NTHLA: The second concrete way in which this happened was that Evangelicals tended to oppose those who were involved in the struggle against apartheid and vilified them. Thirdly, the apartheid segregationist policies were part and parcel of the institutions and lastly, the legitimisation of human rights violations by the State machinery in the whole anti-communist rationale of the time.

Reflecting on the future, I'd like to take this opportunity Mr Chairman, to just thank the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in sense, for helping to disclose the truth about the past because, because of that, there has been a sense of awakening and a sense of realisation by a lot within our movement - people who felt or did not know or claimed not to know, that a lot of these things have been revealed. And we have seen a marked shift in a number of the people, who in the past would have uninvolved and unconcerned. So, because of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we have been able to find it easy to mobilise local churches in particular, to become more actively involved with the victims of human rights violations. And we've discussed this programme with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to see in what way the churches at a local level, can begin to be involved in reparation.

We've also set up a fund through which we make it possible for ordinary Evangelicals to take personal ownership of the process of Reconciliation and Reparation because - as you will remember, a few years ago at the Rustenberg Conference a lot of our leadership confessed sins of omission and commission and it is an opportunity - in the light of those confessions, to take the process forward and allow ordinary Evangelicals, local churches and various institutions to begin to make personal contributions to the process of reparation through a fund that we have set up.

We continue also to look at how we can bring human rights violations or human rights as an issue, more centrally to the agenda of Evangelicals through a process of

education for democracy which we have started. I'd like to pause there and allow my colleagues to add - if I may Mr Chairman?

CHAIRPERSON: Maybe you want to switch of yours.

Is there anyone of you who might want to - Mr Lafoy, yes?

MR LAFOY: Thank you Mr Chairman. Just to add to what my colleague as stated and further develop point number 3 - but briefly. Failing to live up to the faith and contributing to human rights violations, we must confess - as Evangelical Pentecostals, that our leadership frequently participated in government commissions. An example: the John Vorster Commission that led to the closing of the Christian Institute and the banning of Doctor Beyers Naude, effectively demonising the true prophetic voice which has left the church disadvantaged today.

When 25 years ago we proclaimed the direction of the nation, the precipice and the end result? - we were justified by being told that Jesus Christ will come before all that will happen. The slave mentality of the preponderous groups within our church further empowered the conservative right. Frequently our leadership travelled around the world to counter the SACC so-called propaganda, claiming to speak for 11 million Evangelical Pentecostal christians.

Point 2: On our way forward. We need to say that the reconstruction and development programme in building houses, sports fields and the upliftment of our community is very important but we have a nation with an identity crisis. We have a nation with damaged minds, we have cripple care societies which care for people with broken backs and withered limbs but we do not have a society that cares for people with broken minds.

We have people who hate themselves, hate the Negroid blood that flows in them and if we do not give attention in the reconstruction - not just of schools, but the reconstruction of the minds of our people, then we will miserably fail our country at a time like this.

There's a necessity - finally Mr Chairman, to create a new value system concerning life. We have a value system in South Africa where White life is very important and Black life is nothing. Pro-life people want to protect the unborn child and we as the church support that but those same people did not protect life - living life, in children, youth and elderly, simply because they were Black. And until we create a value system where all life - as created by God, is important, we as the church will fail our society at this point in time. Thank you Mr Chairman.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. Yes?

MR MORPHEW: Mr Chairman, I'm going to make five points which will be about five minutes.

My comments relate to Clause 2 of the primary document, which refers to the failure of the Evangelical community to develop an adequate theology of social reality. I wish to reflect on how this was manifest in the White section of the conservative Evangelical community.

In describing this section of South African society, I must acknowledge that there were Christians of conservative Evangelical faith and other constituencies already represented before the TRC, which could legitimately distance themselves from the confession which follows. My hope is that this statement will assist in the on-going confession and repentance of the constituency I will describe.

Perhaps the primary value and distinguishing mark of the Evangelical community is the place given to the authority and inspiration of scripture. A high view of scripture is believed to provide a perspective which safeguards the church from worldly thinking and keeps it faithful to its mission.

The critical question is therefore, to what extent did this value work for the church caught in the ideological struggle of the apartheid era? We have to confess that the Evangelical community largely lost its way and became as captive to the ideologies of the day as any other part of South African society.

1. Given a context where ideologies from the right: neo-fascist and the left: neo-marxist were present, marxism was routinely demonised and the power of this ideology was greatly exaggerated while the sinister influence of fascist ideology was largely evaded or ignored. This, despite the rich biblical and church historical heritage of terms like: "spiritual warfare", "the unmasking of the gods and of the spirit of the anti-Christ", the tearing down of strongholds in the mind and so on.
1. This partisan spirituality was nowhere more evident than when the church prayed for the State. Prayers against a threat of communism and revolution were filled with far greater zeal than prayers against the violations of human rights perpetrated at the time.
2. The Evangelical Church also has a rich heritage of social relevance. The history of church involvement in the development of human rights down through the centuries and the testimony of Wilbur Force type role models, is well-known. Yet the South African Evangelical community somehow managed to suffer from amnesia and opted rather for a form of gnostic dualism where evangelising the soul was unrelated to the transforming power of the Kingdom of God. Instincts of self-preservation predominated over compassion for the poor.
3. The Evangelical Church prides itself in its fidelity to ...[indistinct] trinal orthodoxy and is often quick to repudiate ...[indistinct], yet the South African conservative Evangelical community did not lead the way in discerning the heretical nature of apartheid theology.

Scripture is unambiguous in the unity of the church in contrast to the fragmentation of worldly society. Pentecost reverses Babel and Christ's blood creates a new community where dividing walls are broken down, yet many of the denominational structures reflected the divisions of South African society, nullifying the testimony of scripture.

It is with sadness that we have to acknowledge that the Evangelical Alliance and many of its denominational constituencies emerged from previously divided Evangelical structures only after the election of a new Government, so that the church followed the example of the State rather than providing an example to the State.

The Evangelical community we represent does have its history of conferences, statements, publications and positions, adopted in the struggle against apartheid. There were individuals and congregations who courageously exemplified a truly biblical witness.

However, in general, our testimony is one of failure to be faithful to the word of God we so highly value. We did not act as the leaven and salt of society Jesus called us to. This failure must be acknowledged before God, to ourselves and to the South African nation.

Our ability to be deceived in the past requires us to critically reflect on our understanding of the gospel as it relates to society. The future calls us to discover a practice of missions and evangelism where biblical discipleship takes on new meaning.

It will need to include biblical teaching on social ethics, human rights, the empowering of disadvantaged communities and nation building. We will need to make our contribution to nation building in the face of new challenges and threats to the emergence of a truly civil society.

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. Virginia?

MS GCABASHE: Thank you Chair. Let me quickly congratulate you and your team Mr Nthla, for your presentation and also for the open way in which you are ready to admit the problems of the past and your willingness to show that you are ready to become not only a new movement, but also new in your actions.

You have said that movement started in 1995, which means that you are quite young, could you just mention about five of the churches or organisations that are part of this movement - not more than five, you may have a long list but just to give us an idea whom we are talking about.



MR LAFOY: Alliance Church in South Africa, Apostolic Faith Mission, Assemblies of God, Baptist Convention of South Africa, Baptist Union of South Africa.

MS GCABASHE: Thank you. In your presentation you mentioned that during the dark days some of your ministers were defrocked, I would like to know whether you have reinstated those ministers.

MR NTHLA: Some yes, some no. And I think that is also part of the journey forward Mr Chairman, that part of the reconciliation that needs to take place in the churches - we'll have to deal with those wounds of the past where the faith of many was injured. And might I add that the Truth Commission does not help the churches very much in that it gives amnesty up front without consequence to the perpetrator. So in that way, there is a sense in which people feel that the past can be forgotten and we can go into the future without having to deal with it.

I think in that sense, the Truth Commission hasn't been very helpful but there is a journey that within our churches, we are working through to allow churches, local groups, to deal with those issues and find a way in which they can genuinely forgive and forget.

MS GCABASHE: My last comment, I would like to comment on your preamble to your constitution. It is a beautiful preamble, it has every word in the right place but I am hoping that when you say: "a non-sexist", you really mean that you are going be mindful of the gender issues which from your delegation right now, I don't think you are mindful of that. Your comment?

MR NTHLA: In that region - the fact that we were only launched in '95, means we only have three years to date or two years to date to fix that problem but we hope we will be able to deal with it. We have on our National Executive, two women who couldn't be with us today and we trust that in future we will be able to facilitate that.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. I suspect that my colleagues here would have wanted to ask more questions but I'm going to be a little ruthless and say that some of the people you have mentioned as members of your Alliance, are in fact going to be coming forward to make presentations, so the questions that might be asked can be put to them.

But what I did want to say is, I don't know about any other people but I've been very deeply moved by your presentation, deeply moved by the remarkable humility of your candour and I would hope that this - since you are such influential people with a very influential constituency, that the spirits that you have yourselves shown here would be one that could then be reflected amongst your membership because if that is the case, then in a real sense we don't have to worry.

Yes, we've got problems in this country but if what you are saying is something that is beginning to permeate a very important section of our community, then I am even

more hopeful than I was earlier and want to give thanks to God that the Holy Spirit of God convicts us in the kind of way that it has convicted all of us.

And we want to express our very deep appreciation to you because it is never easy to say: "I am sorry" and to have to say it in the glare of this kind of publicity is even more difficult and it means that you have received excesses of grace that are extraordinary and we give thanks to God for yourselves. Thank you very much.

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