

# WORLD CONFERENCE ON RELIGION AND PEACE

## South African Chapter

### RECONCILIATION AND NATION BUILDING

#### A Proposal for People of Faith on December 16

On December 16, the Day of Reconciliation, let us as members of different faiths in South Africa, personally reflect on the extent to which we are contributing towards realising reconciliation in our troubled society. Reconciliation is a key building block for our new nation.

Let us make it a day for *acknowledging our weaknesses and shortcomings and for claiming our common humanity*, so that we do succeed in building a nation based on *dignity, equality and freedom*, as our new Constitution declares.

*Reconciliation is the restoring of relationships between hostile or alienated parties. Sound relationships are built on trust. To build trust we must be open to each other through acknowledging our part in what happened in our country and how that hurt us. Only by revealing the truth to each other can we allow our wounds to heal and thus prevent the start of another cycle of violence.*

We are a nation in distress. Much anger and fear remain on all sides. We each need healing on every level – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual.

Based on his experience of dealing with the aftermath of the genocides in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, Judge Goldstone has confirmed that a society which publicly acknowledges what happened to individual victims and which individualises guilt by calling to account those responsible for atrocities can heal itself, close the book on their ugly past and build a secure future together. He declared that truth is a form of justice.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 declares that we can achieve this unity by the revelation of the *Truth – The Road to Reconciliation*.

The Act provides that we can get to the truth by encouraging perpetrators to reveal the whole truth about their actions before they can obtain amnesty. Furthermore, Archbishop Tutu declares that living in a moral universe means that *There is no lie which can prevail forever*. Our goal is not to exact punishment for the perpetrators

but rather to encourage each person to come clean and to work for the restoration of the well-being of those who suffered wrongs or abuse. /pp1-2/

### **The Various Steps in the Process of Reconciliation from the Perspective of the Different Faiths in South Africa**

All our faiths share the same basic understanding that human beings are in a moral universe and have a conscience and thus an intrinsic understanding of good and evil. Any person who harms another damages the relationship between them. This harm affects not only the immediate victim, but all of us because [we] are all connected.

Thus, Islam speaks of the "need to develop a community sharing commonly accepted moral and social elements of justice" and Judaism reminds us that "harming a fellow human being is a [sin] against that person and against God".

For harmony to be restored between people, our faiths all [teach] that the perpetrator must acknowledge their wrongdoing; express remorse for their action; seek and ask for forgiveness; and earnestly commit themselves not to repeat such wrongs in the future.

This highlights the steps involved in achieving reconciliation:

becoming aware of having done wrong;

publicly acknowledging the wrongdoing;

making restitution for the harm caused;

requesting forgiveness from the harmed person;

making a sincere commitment not to repeat the wrongdoing;

accepting forgiveness where it is offered.

Clearly the Truth and Reconciliation Commission can only address some of these steps – for instance, the public acknowledgement of what happened to individuals and some attempt to make restitution for what was done to these persons.

### **Actions for our Faith Communities**

Our faith communities need to take the lead in encouraging their members to try to address all the other aspects of the reconciliation process.

The Act provides that perpetrators of vile deeds may obtain amnesty after full disclosure without even apologising for what they did. This is clearly not enough to promote reconciliation. Therefore, one of the most important tasks of our faith communities is to develop a moral climate which would encourage people to regard saying sorry as a moral obligation expected in our society.

The second aspect towards which our faith communities can make a major contribution, as in the provision of urgently needed interim relief through personal and collective contributions for rehabilitation and reparation of victims. The TRC Reparation Committee suggests that this might include: **/pp. 2-3/**

Support for persons with ongoing emotional dysfunction.

Medical care and assistance when needed.

Material and financial assistance.

Access to educational opportunities.

Participation in symbolic acts of remembrance.

Thus, if perpetrators say sorry and mean it and victims experience being helped to recover from their trauma and suffering, we will have begun to build a society based on a sense of justice.

### **The Duty to Forgive**

A further commonality of our faiths is their emphasis on the fact that the person harmed, has a duty to forgive in order to be forgiven by God.

Christian: *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that that trespass against us.*

Muslim: *since pardon is rewarded by God.*

Jewish: *the victim may then obtain forgiveness for his or her own sin.*

Hindu: *The negative force unleashed by our wrongdoing can be neutralised by the positive force we exert when showing forgiveness and repentance.*

### **Conclusion**

It is a South African tradition that if I hurt another person, I am responsible for helping that person to heal and be restored in order to realise his/her fullest potential.

As people of faith we call on everyone to contribute to reconciliation in our society. We will not have another chance. Let us use the present – today. 16 December 1996, the Day of Reconciliation.

The World Conference on Religion and Peace – South African Chapter is an inter-faith organisation committed to peace and justice. Its regional branches hold regular meetings to explore pressing current issues from the perspectives of the different faith communities in the country so as to develop inter-religious commitments for new common actions to promote peace with justice.

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