

Open Letter to Pastors (Nico Smith and Moss Nthla). Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 19 November 1999. [disclaimer](#)

---

PROF SMITH: Honourable Chairperson, I am very thankful for the opportunity the Commission has granted us to submit this open letter and I am very thankful that I am last on the programme. In Afrikaans we say "agterom kom ook in die kraal."

But I take it that being the last person then, oh, not quite, oh, I just thought that the rest of the afternoon belongs to me.

CHAIRPERSON: You've still got only 30 minutes.

PROF SMITH: First of all I would like to apologise for Dr Beyers Naude, he is at the moment in Holland and he would have liked to have been here this afternoon, but unfortunately he couldn't.

And I would also like to apologise for Dr Nico Botha and Dr Tinjiko Maluleke, they phoned to say that they are in the midst of the exams at UNISA and it is impossible for them to come. I am very thankful that brother Moss Nthla is here, he is one of the fellow compilers of the letter, and he would also like to say something about the letter.

Chairperson, before I read the open letter, I would just like by way of introduction, to say something about the origin of this letter.

It was after the previous night when a certain Brigadier made a statement to the Truth Commission in which inter alia he revealed how Dr Fabian Ribeiro and his wife were assassinated. It touched me very, very deeply not because of this Brigadier's witness but because of the very sad reality of our country.

Dr Ribeiro and his wife were our neighbours in Mamelodi, a very beloved medical practitioner in that community and the afternoon when they were killed, five o'clock in the afternoon, they called me and said come immediately and here were those two people, dead.

I said my God, but it cannot be possible, who did this? The next week a pamphlet was distributed by the South African Defence Force saying this was the work of ANC terrorists because they are communists, they want to implement a revolution and they know how beloved these two people were and therefore that is the way they do it.

And then a few months ago this Brigadier said that two assassins were hired to kill them. The next morning in our tea room at UNISA I spoke to my colleagues and I said how is it possible, we were all pastors of churches, preaching every Sunday and in

many of our congregations, members of the government were present Sunday after Sunday.

Many of these willing executioners of this government were members of our congregations, and in other churches. What happened, how must we explain it? Didn't we understand the gospel properly, didn't we preach the full gospel, didn't we know? No, we knew. We had to admit first of all that we had failed to spell out the consequences of the gospel of Jesus Christ and therefore we didn't touch the conscience either of the members of the government or the willing executioners of their plans.

We were also afraid, we had to admit, we were afraid. I was afraid many a time when they wanted to put me into jail. Sadly enough that we had to admit that because the earliest history of the Christian church or the pastors of the Christian church, the apostles, especially Paul, they were not afraid of jail. They went from one jail to another but we were unfaithful to the gospel because of our fear and we had to admit that.

And we said, well, what can we do about it? And we said, well all that we can do is to admit and to confess and say we didn't do our work properly. We have failed the gospel and we have failed the Lord of the church.

But when I got back in my office, I thought well, that is an easy way to get off it. I started to draft a letter and I thought churches may issue statements of confession, church leaders may say many things, but the real people who must say what they feel about what happened in our country, are the pastors.

The pastors of all the different congregations, they had the responsibility to speak to the hearts and the conscience of the people in our land. So all the pastors have failed and I therefore drafted an open letter to pastors of all churches in South Africa and I took it to Beyers Naude and I said Beyers, please read this letter and tell me what you think about it.

He read it and said I will sign it. I am willing to sign it. Also I could have done more, also I failed. And then we called together four other colleagues and we sat down and then moulded the draft into a final document which I will submit to you and that is how this letter came into existence.

Chairperson, I would therefore like to start to read this letter, it is not a long letter, it is only one and a half pages.

An open letter to all pastors in South Africa. To us as preachers of the Word of God, the responsibility is entrusted to proclaim at all times, the gospel of reconciliation with God and our fellow human beings in Christ.

This responsibility entails the prophetic denouncement of all forms of injustice, oppression and violence committed against any human being. As we read and hear what happened in South Africa during the years of Nationalist Party rule we as preachers of God's Word, are confronted with the question how could it possibly have happened while we as preachers of reconciliation, justice and peace were preaching this message from our pulpit every Sunday?

But the question which disturbs us even more is this, how was it possible that those who intentionally committed murders and sabotage against fellow citizens, could have been as is now becoming evident, members of churches and even regular churchgoers?

Was there nothing in our preaching, litigious and sacraments that disturbed the conscience of those who were directly involved in all the evil deeds committed?

Therefore we have indeed more than enough reason to feel deeply guilty for having spiritualised and even gagged the gospel to such an extent that those in government and those responsible to execute government policy, didn't feel confronted by our preaching.

We are guilty of having allowed the rulers to execute the ideology of forced separation for the sake of so-called law and order without offering united resistance as preachers of justice and peace.

We admit and confess that we too were blinded by an ideology which presented itself as justifiable from the Bible.

We lacked the gift of discerning the spirits because we had not real desire to receive this gift. In the light of the above, we want to confess publicly that we as preachers were co-responsible for what happened in South Africa. In fact our guilt should be considered as more serious than that of any other person or institution.

We who were supposed to be the conscience of the nation, didn't succeed in preventing the most serious forms of abuse of the human conscience. As a result of this, the criminal violation of people's human dignity and even the destruction of human life, continued for too long.

But this confession of guilt is not intended to be vague and general. We confess our guilt by mentioning specific examples of our failure to be faithful to the gospel. We first of all acknowledge and confess that for many of us, especially those in the white community, life was very convenient and comfortable under Nationalist Party rule.

Many of us therefore couldn't and wouldn't see the oppression and violation of millions of people in our country, hear their cries for justice and failed to take action.

We furthermore acknowledge and confess that when we sometimes did feel uncomfortable about the way the government and other institutions persisted in its abuse of power, we did nothing because of fear.

We thereby allowed evil with the cooperation of Christians, to continue its devastating work against the people of God.

In the same breath we commit ourselves to call upon Christians to be careful in their support of political leaders and their policies. We furthermore commit ourselves to challenge Christians concerning their political and socio-economic responsibilities.

We also want to make amends for neglecting the needs of the poor and the oppressed, therefore we commit ourselves to the task of guiding God's people towards involvement in actions to eliminate the socio-economic inequalities of our country.

We have evaded this responsibility for too long. We furthermore commit ourselves to the task of encouraging people with the gospel of hope. Especially in these days when many have lost hope and are despairing of the future of our country.

This we will do by replacing the longing for the previous so-called better days, by dreams of an even better future. The same gospel therefore, also urges us to commit ourselves to engage in the reconstruction of our society.

Although we recognise that some ministers have stood bravely in the struggle for justice, it is our hope that every church minister who reads this document, will recognise the challenge facing us all, which we dare not push aside.

We are compelled to make a choice. Either we confess our guilt in order to be set free for greater and more faithful service to the gospel of Jesus Christ, or we ignore this challenge to confess our guilt and thus declare ourselves not guilty of what happened in our country.

If you are willing to identify with this document and commit yourself to a process of unified action and a process of healing and rebuilding our nation, send your reply before the end of 1997 to the following address.

This document with the signatures will be submitted to the TRC and we express the hope that it would serve as a unified response from ministers. We hereby also wish to extend this invitation to spiritual leaders of other religions to participate in the submission.

Thereafter a national conference of all those who have signed this document, will be arranged in order to discuss the implications of our confession.

Chairperson, after we decided on this final document, Beyers Naude and I offered that we will send this letter to as many pastors as possible and we started to collect all the names and addresses of as many as we could get hold of.

Now, we were saying to one another, if only we could get a 100 pastors to identify with this letter, we will perhaps feel like an Abraham in the Old Testament to start bargaining with God and say well, there are at least 100.

The good news is that we received 396 signatures and just before I came to the table, Dr Don Degruishi from the Congregational Church asked me to add his name, so there is at least righteous person in the Congregational Church, because we didn't receive any other.

The bad news is that we have sent out on our own account 12 000 letters to pastors. 12 000 letters, we received back 51 undelivered, address unknown. We received in total 605 responses to the letter, 396 signatures and the other 290 responses.

Honourable Chairperson, I am sad to say I couldn't believe that any Christian could write such letters as we have received, some of them. Even less I can believe that any pastor in this world could put something like that on paper and send it to us.

It is therefore that I would like to say something about the reaction of the pastors to this letter, but let me, may I then just first read from whom we received signatures saying we identify with this letter, from pastors from the different churches.

From the Apostolic Faith Mission, seven pastors. Africa Enterprise, one. Church of the Province of Southern Africa Anglican, 50. Arbeidsbediening Interkerklik, 1. Baptist, 6. Baptist Convention 1. Baptist Union, 3. Church of the Nazareer, 4. Dutch Reformed Church, to my own surprise, 88, one of the highest. Evangelical Lutheran, 7. Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa, 1. International Fellowship of Christian Churches, 1. Helderberg Christian Fellowship, 1. Jubilee Community Church, 5. Laudium Community Church, 1. Lutheran Church, 3. Methodist Church, the highest of all, 97. Moravian, 1. New Life in Christ Fellowship Centre, 1. Nuwe Hoop Gemeente, 1. Presbyterian Church of South Africa, 17. Rhema Ministries in South Africa, 1. Roman Catholic Church, 28. Volle Evangelie Kerk van God in Suid-Afrika, 1. United Congregational Church of South Africa, 3 and yours is then 4. Four righteous pastors. Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, that is the two brothers who were here this afternoon, 56 of the pastors. Vineyard Church, 1. World Wide Church of God, 1. And then some pastors overseas who read about the letter and sent their names, there were 8 of them.

Now, Chairperson, 12 000 letters and the letters were also published fully in the Afrikaans and English newspapers. So I can't believe that any minister can say I didn't know about this letter.

The question I would like to put to the church leaders who were submitting their confessions here, what is happening in the churches? Are the pastors not interested? Don't they care? I can't believe that the pastors will still consider me and Beyers Naude as communists, rebels, trouble makers or whatever it may be.

Or do they just look at it and say no, I am not interested in a thing like this. Why out of 12 000 letters only 396? It is saddening to think that that is the reality about the church at grassroots level.

And if pastors are not willing to make a confession, how on God's earth can they ever expect that the members must do so?

And therefore in conclusion, I would like to mention three things. First of all, in spite of all the good things we have heard during the past three days, and I am thankful I didn't intend to be here for three days, but it so happened that I had to be here and in spite of all the good things that I have heard, I would like to call upon all these church leaders to go back to the drawing board in the light of this letter, the response to this letter, and to do their homework. Are they convinced that what they have said here, is the conviction of the pastors in their church?

I would very humbly suggest that all the leaders who made submissions will send their documents to every local congregation and say please read this to the congregation, and if possible you as a pastor, sign it so that we as the leaders of the church may know that this is not only the conviction of the few leaders, but the conviction of every pastor in our church. That is the one thing.

A second thing I would like to put on the table is, I would once again, I have done it so many times already, and I want to do it once again, before I do this, can I just add, I have read again through the Rustenburg Conference decisions we have taken.

Honourable Chairman, Rustenburg was a wonderful conference, but not much crystallised out of it. If you read those beautiful decisions we had taken, very few if any were really implemented.

Is this going to be a second Rustenburg Conference? Many decisions by church leaders, no implementation? I put it to the church leaders.

The second thing, I would once again as I have said I have done it before so often, call upon the leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church in God's name to leave, to free themselves from the bondage of the Afrikaner Broederbond.

I can't see how there can ever be real reconciliation with the black churches of the Dutch Reformed Church family as long as those churches know that the leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church belong to the Afrikaner Broederbond which after 1994 put on a new jacket and called themselves Afrikanerbond, it is still the same thing.

It is still a secret organisation, you are still not allowed to have a look into their documents as strange as it may be. You are still not allowed, and many pastors of the Dutch Reformed Church - I was a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond for 10 years. In my time 60 percent of the Dutch Reformed Ministers belonged to the Afrikaner Broederbond, and I believe that it will perhaps still be the same.

Why must the Dutch Reformed Church burden herself with this albatross around her neck? Wouldn't they, the leaders be willing to free themselves from that bondage and call upon all pastors of the Dutch Reformed Church to say let's get out of it.

And the third thing I would like to put on the table, yes and before I put the third one, I would just like to mention that just before I came to this commission, I received a very painful letter from a young Dutch Reformed Minister whose life was ruined recently by fellow Dutch Reformed Ministers whom he knew are members of the Broederbond.

And he said for God's sake, just mention it to the Truth Commission, and that is why I feel that I have an obligation to put this on the table.

And thirdly, yes, I would like to identify myself and say let the executioner of the assassination on Johan Heyns come forward. Let us hear why, who commissioned him? Why did they decide that he must be killed?

Perhaps the Truth Commission can put it officially and say let the person who gave the command or the person who executed the assassination, let him come forward. It can even be behind closed doors, but I think it is a shame on our country that something like that could happen and that they tell us it is impossible to find the one who did it.

Those are the three things I would like to put. I thank you for the time. I don't think I have used 20 minutes. My colleague, I know that he would also like to say something, two minutes you say.

CHAIRPERSON: Yes, well okay, two minutes.

MR NTHLA: Just to say Honourable Chair, that the reason I feel that it is appropriate to identify myself with this letter was that it was a challenge directed at the local pastor and that I believe is the place where we must start not only to uncover the full story about the past, because in fact the reasons that the churches were very afraid to become involved, was that the pastor very often even though the apartheid Security Police were a part of the church, or a part of the leadership or even pastors themselves, it was very impossible for young people to continue to practise their faith in honesty.

So, there was such a fear that gripped the churches and I think that it is important for the pastors to admit their failure in that regard.

But secondly also in terms of the future of reconciliation, the pastor again becomes an important agent to help us move beyond the confessions that we make, to practical ways of changing our habits of the past and so on.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. Piet Meiring?

PROF MEIRING: Brother Nico, brother Moss let me just say one word of profound gratitude for the letter you wrote. When we learned about the letter, read about it I thought for one time I am sorry I am sitting this side of the table, because I would have wanted to add my name 100 times.

It may be that there are more people who did add their names. In our office there is a letter if I remember correctly, from the Congregation of Bosmont in the Cape where the whole congregation, I think about 300 members added their names. So it may be that there are many, many people who really identified with this.

But thank you ever so much for the inspiring thing, when we heard about it we said if Oom Bey has to confess, what about the rest of us.

If you and Moss and the others had to confess, it humbled us, it put us to shame, but thank you for the challenge and the inspiration. Please convey that to Oom Bey.

---

This verbatim transcript was provided by the TRC and is reproduced here unedited. RICSА does not assume responsibility for any errors.