

## **Nelson Mandela on leadership and the role of the churches: An interview**

**Nelson R Mandela**

(Former President, RSA  
& Nobel Peace Prize Winner: 1994)

*In October 2002 the editor of Die Kerkbode, official newspaper of the Dutch Reformed Church (N G Kerk) paid a visit to ex-president Nelson Mandela. He talked about his life, leadership, as well as the challenges to the churches in our day. His gracious remarks on the role of the Dutch Reformed Church is of special significance, in view of the fact that during many years the church not only supported the policy of Apartheid, but provided a theological argument for doing so. During the 1990s the church, on a number of occasions, confessed guilt in this regard. Dr Frits Gaum, editor, provided a transcript of the interview to Verbum et Ecclesia for this special edition on leadership.*

### **INTERVIEW WITH EX-PRESIDENT NELSON MANDELA**

All of a sudden he stood in the doorway: the grizzled head with the well-known broad smile. "Come inside, come inside," he beckons us.

We – Freek Swanepoel and I on behalf of *Die Kerkbode* – follow him inside the large room. He sits down behind his desk and once again smiles broadly.

*Gaum:* You are still a very active person despite your age and "long walk to freedom", Mr Mandela. You play an important and much appreciated role in South Africa and also on the international scene. Are you still healthy?

*Ex-president Mandela:* A princess of the Zulus visited me seven years ago and with her departure she said she hoped I would still live another ten years. So I still have another three years left! I'm well, thank you.

*Which three matters in our country bother you most?:*

The high food prices bother me most. There are millions of poor people in South Africa who cannot afford it.

The second problem is the diseases which plague our people. HIV/Aids is number one. But also cancer and tuberculosis and malaria.

The occurrence of tuberculosis in South Africa is the ninth highest in the world!

And then there are too many children who still cannot attend school. We should move to a system of free education in South Africa. Government is doing its best, but more can still be done.

Other things that worry me are corruption and crime. The level of crime is too high. And the need for houses is still very high. The land issue must also be coped with if we want to live in peace.

*Mr Mandela ...*

Please call me Madiba.

*Madiba, much has been done by the churches in order to help combat the HIV/Aids pandemic. The congregation of Skuilkrans-Pretoria is, for example, directly involved with such a project. And at the Huguenot College in Wellington there is an Aids-research centre.*

I'm aware of the involvement of churches regarding this matter. And it is of the utmost importance! I'm happy that the Afrikaans churches, also the NG Kerk, try to fulfil their responsibility with regard to HIV/Aids, because HIV/Aids is one of the biggest horrors of our time. Not one of us can ignore it and think that it doesn't concern us. It involves all of us. And it is only right that **the church** plays its role in this regard.

*Do you agree with a recent proposal that there should be a time-limit to affirmative action in South Africa? And if you agree, do you perhaps have a date in mind?*

When people talk about affirmative action, they think about positions occupied by black people. But affirmative action is about much more. It is a deliberate effort to raise the different groups in our society to the same level. And for that there cannot be a "date". We must continue with this effort, even if it takes a decade or two. Opportunities must be created for all. And in the process the Afrikaners must also be won over. Especially the Afrikaners, because they are closer to our people than some other groups. They revolted against British imperialism for their freedom!

*Eight years ago you visited the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church Kerk and made a speech....*

Yes, if I recall correctly, it was the time when I lost a shoe when I departed! The people flocked around me ... yes, it was also the first time that Afrikaner women kissed me on the cheek.

*You are the first and up to now the only president of the Republic of South Africa who has ever visited a General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk). In 1994 you said in Afrikaans to the General Synod: "Now that the NG Kerk has admitted that apartheid was wrong, this church has a special prophetic responsibility. The church that has opened up its soul, must now work with all of us in order to ensure that the Reconstruction and Development Programme is a success". What is your view: has the Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk) done its duty?*

The NG Kerk has the ability to help the poor and the weak. My impression is that this church has tried in the past decade its utmost to work together with others in order to make a contribution to the reconstruction and development of our country. The NG Kerk has moved! The only thing about which I am sorry is that Afrikaners are still divided in different churches. Three or four, how many are there? I am prepared to organize a meeting in order that the leaders can come together to discuss the matter. Please tell the leaders about this.

The NG Kerk has a unique reconciliatory role to play in South Africa. Your history, where your church members wanted to throw off the British yoke, enables you to understand how our people had felt. You, who had broken bridges by means of apartheid, can now help to build new bridges of reconciliation. In these matters one can never underestimate the individual's role in leadership. When individuals become convinced of a cause, they can make a big difference. Also with reconciliation.

*You talk about leadership....*

True leaders do not have to receive Nobel Prize-Awards. Walter Sisulu was a great leader in his day and age, one of the biggest, but he was willing to spread his influence without taking up the front seat. He always pushed other people to the front, but his leadership and guidance was unmistakable. The greatest leaders do not always receive the most awards or prizes. But they determine the course of history. Pure leadership involves service, not own interests.

*Would you like to say something about your own experience of your faith as a Christian?*

The relationship between a person and his God is very intimate. But this I can say: religion and faith is even in today's world of the greatest importance. The famous and infamous people in history all came to an end: Alexander the Great, Julius Ceasar, Napoleon, Hitler ...but religion has always survived, be it Buddhism or Hinduism or the Christian faith or Islam. Why? Because they all talk about things which are valid for all times. Love. Peace. Stability.

The church has played a great role in my life. The Methodist Church gave me my basic education. When the government could not provide, churches intervened by means of church schools and did great and enduring work. This I'll always remember.

*And Jesus Christ?*

As I have said, a person's relationship with God is very intimate and private. But faith in Jesus is accepted by all of us.

Madiba's secretary knocks at the door. Our half-hour is up – the next visitors are already waiting. But first of all a few photos may be taken – on the stoep outside, not inside, the light of the camera is not good for Mr Mandela's eyes. We go outside and hand over a copy of **NG Kerk 350** to the ex-president and show him the photo where he stood next to Freek Swanepoel (moderator) at the Synod of 1994. It was, after all, a remarkable day then, I think to myself, when a NG Kerk-synod gave a standing ovation to Nelson Mandela. That was reconciliation in the same spirit as was at the final match during the World Rugby Cup-series of that year ....

We stand on the stoep and take photos, and then Madiba smiles broadly in the direction of his new visitors. It is now their turn.

Frits Gaum

The following excerpt from Mandela's autobiography aptly underscores the sentiments in the above interview expressed by the former president (Mandella: 1995:616-617):

“In South Africa, a man who tried to fulfil his duty to his people was inevitably ripped from his family and his home and was forced to live a life apart, a twilight existence of secrecy and rebellion. I did not in the beginning choose to place my people above my family, but in attempting to serve my people, I found that I was pre-vented from fulfilling my obligations as a son, a brother, a father and a husband.

In that way, my commitment to my people, to the millions of South Africans I would never know or meet, was at the expense of the people I knew best and loved most. It was as simple and yet as incom-prehensible as the moment a small child asks her father, “Why can you not be with us?” And the father must utter the terrible words: “There are other children like you, a great many of them...” and then one’s voice trails off.

I was not born with a hunger to be free. I was born free - free in every way that I could know. Free to run in the fields near my mother's hut, free to swim in the clear stream that ran through my village, free to roast mealies under the stars and ride the broad backs of slow-moving bulls. As long as I obeyed my father and abided by the customs of my tribe, I was not troubled by the laws of man or God.

It was only when I began to learn that my boyhood freedom was an illusion, when I discovered as a young man that my freedom had already been taken from me, that I began to hunger for it. At first, as a student, I wanted freedom only for myself, the transitory freedoms of being able to stay out at night, read what I pleased and go where I chose. Later, as a young man in Johannesburg, I yearned for the basic and honourable freedoms of achieving my potential, of earning my keep, of marrying and having a family - the freedom not to be obstructed in a lawful life.

But then I slowly saw that not only was I not free, but my brothers and sisters were not free. I saw that it was not just my freedom that was curtailed, but the freedom of everyone who looked like I did. That is when I joined the African National Congress, and that is when the hun-ger for my own freedom became the greater hunger for the freedom of my people. It was this desire for the freedom of my people to live their lives with dignity and self-respect that animated my life, that trans-formed a frightened young man into a bold one, that drove a law-abiding attorney to become a criminal, that turned

a family-loving husband into a man without a home, that forced a life-loving man to live like a monk. I am no more virtuous or self-sacrificing than the next man, but I found that I could not even enjoy the poor and limited freedoms I was allowed when I knew my people were not free. Freedom is indivisible; the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were the chains on me.

It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppres-sor alike are robbed of their humanity.

When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. Some say that has now been achieved. But I know that that is not the case. The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.”

### **Consulted literature**

Mandela, N 1995. *Long walk to freedom. The autobiography of Nelson Mandela.* London: Macdonald Purnell.