

# PART I

## PERSPECTIVES BY PROMINANT LEADERS

### **The world after September 11, 2001: Challenges to the churches, and their leaders**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

### **The world after September 11, 2001: Challenges to the churches, and their leaders**

*Bishop Mvume Dandala, presiding bishop of the Methodist Church in South Africa and extra-ordinary professor in the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, was asked to lead an international delegation of Church leaders to the USA in the wake of September 11, 2001. In his article he tells about the experience of church leaders from a number of countries that suffered trauma and violence in the past, pastoring to leaders and congregant's in the USA, after the tragic events that shook the American nation. He reflects on the different challenges to Churches and their leaders, that await us in a time of trouble and tribulation: (i) to strive for universal peace; (ii) for churches to find a common voice in their struggle against injustices; and (iii) to communicate the imperatives of the gospel meaningfully to the people of the world.*

#### **1 STANDING IN SOLIDARITY**

In November last year, from 6<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> November 2001, eight of us were delegated by the World Church, through the World Council of Churches to visit the United States as 'Living Letters' from the World Christian Community, to express on their behalf, shock at having received the tragic news of September 11, 2001 attacks at the World Trade Centre in New York and at the Pentagon in Washington. We came largely from nations that had in some way experienced the trauma of violence or some other form of pain. We were from South Africa, Indonesia, Paki-stan, Palestine, Lebanon, the Soviet Union, France and Turkey. I had been asked to lead the delegation. My task was to try and

set the tone for the visit, and allow the message from the World Christian Community to evolve over the days of our visit.

The essence of the leaders' visit was to demonstrate our recognition that before we all started to engage important theories about the causes and results of September 11, we first recognise that it was ordinary people whose lives were snuffed in the events of the day. Our task was neither to offer explanations nor to expound theories that would be fundamental in the struggle to make the world a safe place for all its people. We were to go and stand in solidarity, cry their tears with them, share in the confusion of ordinary people who asked the heartrending question, why? To which none of us could have a ready answer. We spent time with pastors who did not know how best to offer anything that could give a semblance of sense to their members and their communities at that time. All they could do was to stand with their communities in their feeling of utter helplessness and vulnerability. A number of times they themselves were so overwhelmed that they wept. At other times their anger raged that they were not sure how to accept our outstretched hands of fellowship. Their own sense of having been violated as a nation was often so acute that there were moments when they were suspicious of our best intentions. In one meeting in the early days of our visit, one Lutheran Bishop warned us not to come to lecture them or preach at them from a position of self-righteousness. They were not ready for any of that, he said. At the same time, in our encounters with ordinary church members of the American churches, their questions, we found, were very simple and uncomplicated.

### **1.1 Why us?**

We try to do so much for the world, they said. Why would anyone hate us so much? When this question is asked not with any deep and conscious quest for an answer, it would be folly to even attempt to answer it. We did not. We just stood in solidarity; heads bowed at ground zero, and prayed that some form of answer would be forthcoming in the course of time. We had given these to be a living expression of that wise African idiom for comforting the hurting and mourning: *akuhlanga lungehlanga* – a recognition that there are always people out there who have encountered before, the worst that one encounters today. We asked them to look into our own sad eyes from our own misfortunes, and offered to stand in solidarity with them from the tragedies of our own situations. We trusted that such a ministry would light up a little hope in the hearts of those in despair – for them to recognise that even the worst tragedy in life is not enough to destroy the human spirit, that will seek to uphold the nature and the best in the character of humanity, so that humanity does not self-destruct.

## **1.2 Selective solidarity**

Yet even at this tragic painful moment we could not escape the scathing reminder to us as World Church, that we did not send “Living Letters” to Nairobi, Kenya, when people perished there in a similar, but in terms of volume, smaller tragedy at the United States Embassy in that country. Did we now respond in this fashion because it was the USA that had been affected? Was this act in a way a statement that not all life is equal? Was it a statement that the measure of the worth of persons was in the power they wielded? In the worth of their material possessions? We were asked at different times by those who were not convinced of the non-partisan nature of our stance whether we had even considered similar ventures to Rwanda and such places that have known great pain. The World Church has sought to reach out to all at different times. Be it the victims of Apartheid in South Africa, the victims of dictatorships in Latin America, the victims of endless wars in the continent of Africa, or the tragic events in Eastern Europe. The World Church has sought to care for people, irrespective of their material standing or political power.

The church seeks to assert constantly the need to touch people and care for them as we seek to reach out to God’s creation for a better world. It thus becomes imperative that as we recall the tragic events of September 11, 2002, none of the reflections should seek to undermine the very real pain that was experienced by people. In the same vein, that solidarity should be understood as an effort to remind the world forcefully of the place of simple ordinary human beings in the context of conflicts that are allowed to so escalate, that they become the primary definitive point in the global relationships. Christian faith locates the place and responsibility of human beings highly in the scheme of all creation. It is the centrality of human beings and stewards, as well as victims together with the rest of creation that the Christian faith concerns itself with.

## **2 REFLECTION NECESSARY**

September 11, 2001 therefore by virtue of the ingredients involved in the making of this tragedy, be it the number of people killed, the nature of politics involved and the power, symbolized both by the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, makes it sensible and necessary for us to reflect on “the world after September 11, 2001, the challenges to the Churches and their leaders.

## **2.1 The first challenge: Peace as a divinely inspired goal**

The first challenge that clearly made itself evident in the encounter with the churches in the USA was, “What kind of relationships with neighbours across geographical and faith borders need urgently to be built?”

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference in the United States of America noted its concern that some who engage in acts of violence today tend to support and justify their actions as religious expressions. It now becomes necessary to make a distinction between the extremism of a few and the positions supported by the large numbers in any particular religion. Above all, the Conference pleaded, religion should not be used as a cover for political, economic or ideological causes. It compounds the wrong when extremists of any religious tradition radically distort their professed faith in order to justify violence and hatred. It then becomes necessary to work harder than ever for people of all faiths to work together in the conviction that violence in the name of any religion profanes that religion. A deeper appreciation of the role of religion in world affairs, and a need for positive and creative dialogue needs to be nurtured and encouraged. More than the tendency to want to defend one’s religion first, is the need to seek to preserve the common good, to protect the innocent and pursue the cause of peace as a divinely inspired goal.

### ***2.1.1 Preserving the common good through co-operation***

It is not possible for religions to find one another, at least for the purpose of preserving the common good? This is a challenge to all religious people. In our visit to the various religious communities in the USA we saw people struggle in a very real way with this challenge.

One of the most encouraging stories I heard recently with regards to cooperation among peoples of different faiths comes from the Middle East. The London *Sunday Telegraph* of the 5<sup>th</sup> May, 2002 graphically told a story of interfaith cooperation in the Nativity Church siege ordeal in Bethlehem. A Palestinian Muslim, *Nidal Abed Rabbo* sought to find something to keep his mind off his predicament in the besieged church. On April 7<sup>th</sup> he fell in with a like-minded Christian Palestinian called *Jeried*. Together they decided that they would run the gauntlet of Israeli snipers stationed around the church, to sound its ancient bells as a sign that “the holiest place in Bethlehem was still holding out”. He says: “We agreed to do this every time there was shooting at the church. As a Muslim I would begin to recite: ‘There is no God but God’. Jeried would do that Catholic thing, making the sign of the cross, then we would run like hell. Everybody inside agreed that the bells raised their spirits. Hardship had enabled strong hands between us. As the Christians had

their altars in the church to conduct their worship occasions, they in turn helped us to construct a little wooden mosque inside the church. We prayed side by side.”

### **2.1.2 *Nurturing mutual respect***

What a wonderful testimony to the power of positive respect for each other's beliefs, this was. It is this that has to be found and nurtured if religion will not be a source of calamitous conflicts in the world today. At ground zero, people of all faiths lost their life together. This is a powerful premise for developing a common respect for life together. We must together uphold the basic ideals of justice, freedom, fairness and openness that are hallmarks of self-respecting nations and communities. Coupled with this need to foster greater understanding between the peoples of varying faiths must be an abhorrence of all types of violence, whether terroristic or formal militarism.

The attacks on September 11, have not ushered in a new dispensation of joy for people anywhere. And in a similar vein neither has the military action against Afghanistan. Instead suffering has increased. The churches need to intensify their ethical reflection on war and peace, so that it may help guide the momentous decisions that must be taken for a better world. The use of arms must never be allowed to produce disorders that are more grave than the evil to be eliminated.

## **2.2 The second challenge: Speaking with one voice**

The second challenge for the churches and its leadership is to be at the front line of the struggle against injustice everywhere. The churches have to reflect together and endeavour to name together the major injustices in the world. They must speak against the destructive economic imbalances, oppression, gender and racial discrimination. The churches must strive to find a common voice against the support of totalitarian regimes.

### **2.2.1 *Self-reflection***

One of the most encouraging features of the visit to the USA was to see the churches struggling to see beyond the events of September 11, in order to confront the impossible question of “Why”? A Baptist minister said: “In the wake of September 11, Baptists knew what to do. We worshiped Wednesday night, we worshiped Thursday night – we knew where to go and to whom to go. Yet the people of the USA are totally out of touch with who we are on the world stage, an innocence that is impossible to penetrate. The contradictions between what we believe

about ourselves and what we do has never been clearer. The job of peace work has never been more difficult.”

A member of our team, Ms September Lakawa, a teacher at Jakarta Theological Seminary, Indonesia, commended the church leaders in the USA for endeavouring to ask questions about justice and their country in the world stage. She said: “When I agreed to come to the USA, my friends in Indonesia asked why. Their impression is that the American people never experience suffering. The language of America that they hear is the language of victory, prosperity and power. They never hear the language of victims”. Lakawa said she would take home a message that the US people are also suffering. And in their suffering they are also asking questions about the suffering they may also be responsible for. An American, Dr Bernice Powell Jackson of the United Church of Christ observed: “Jesus wept over Jerusalem because they did not know the things that make for peace. I think he is still weeping”, she said. Jackson saw September 11 as a Kairos moment for the USA and the world. She said, “We can face the pain we cause or not. What we are facing is pivotal and our choice has got to be from the word of God, from the sermon on the mount. If we miss this opportunity, I believe this nation and the world will never face another peaceful day!” With this the National Council of Churches in America noted the need for justice to be expressed in the struggle for the elimination of poverty around the world.

### **2.2.2 Globalisation**

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference noted: “September 11 made even more clear that globalisation is a reality requiring greater moral scrutiny. If the problems of Afghanistan or Central Asia seemed irrelevant to Americans before, that is no longer the case. America as a principal force for economic globalisation must do more to spread the benefits of globalisation to all, especially the world’s poorest. The injustice and instability in far away lands about which we know too little can have a direct impact on our own sense of peace and security. In a world where one fifth of the population survives on less than 1 US dollar per day, where poverty, corruption and repressive regimes bring untold suffering to millions of people, we simply cannot remain indifferent. As Pope Paul VI declared, “if you want peace, work for justice”. So must we! No injustice legitimises horror such as ground zero. But a more just world will be a more peaceful place. There will still be a people of hate and violence, but in a just world they will have fewer allies, supporters and resources to commit their heinous acts. This is the challenge to the church, not only for the USA, but also for the entire world, and particularly for our own continent with its history of poverty and conflict.

## **2.3 The third challenge: Communicating the Christian Gospel**

The third challenge I would wish to suggest to the leaders of the Churches is the challenge to communicate meaningfully, the imperatives of the Gospel where there is a struggle for the hearts and minds of people. The question is what kind of communication, what images, will bind us together in community rather than increase the gulf between people, as dominant media images tend to do.

### **2.3.1 *Telling it like it is***

It is most interesting that on the whole the dominant news that comes from the US is that of warmongering – leaving us with a dominant view that all Americans either support this stance or are indifferent. The links with the church communities there often point to the contrary. The desire for that which binds is significant. But this is rarely conveyed in the public media. The desire for a global family whose relationships are not governed by market forces is what the church is challenged to foster. There is a growing recognition that all nations need to be assisted to establish their basic capacity to exist without being dependent on the big powers to merely survive. It is questionable if this is and can be in the interests of market forces. Yet failure to do this will only serve to exacerbate the sense of bitterness among those nations that are vulnerable to exploitation. If, or better still since the market forces will not see this as their priority and role, the churches have a responsibility to ensure that the concept of family of nations is built on the principles of mutual care and welfare for one another, and more so for the weak.

## **3 CONCLUSION: THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH**

The church cannot wish away what is its responsibility before God. If September 11, 2001 has inspired another form of quest for superior militarism, the church and its leadership must be in the forefront of seeking to help build a world that is secure on the foundations of justice, love and mutual accountability among nations. This responsibility we cannot, and must not shirk.