



THE UNITING
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
IN SOUTHERN
AFRICA

Tuesday, May 18, 2021

Dear Friends

This is my second to last letter to you as Moderator of the General Assembly and I thought I would use the opportunity to share with you some thoughts I have around the challenges facing the UPCSA as we move into the future. These reflections are included in my report to General Assembly, but as many of you won't get to read that one, I thought I would share some of those thoughts here and in my final letter next month.

Natural Disasters

Here in the Southern part of Africa, it seems that we just come through one crisis, only to be hit by another. No sooner had we processed the devastation and loss of life caused by Cyclone Idai, than we received the news that people in KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape had been hit by torrential rain, flooding, landslides and enormous losses of property and lives. On a weekend where we were celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus, almost 100 people lost their lives and so many others lost their homes, their possessions and were left destitute. As a Church, we are reminded that we should mourn with those who mourn and, so, our hearts go out to those who lost loved ones and possessions in these devastating storms. At times like this, we feel helpless. It feels like we are at the mercy of the forces of nature which are way too powerful for us to try and hold back or control in any way. It is no wonder that the ancients identified the forces of nature with chaos and evil.

Sexism, Misogyny and Bigotry

When, at the 2018 Assembly I planned to have an event "celebrating" four decades of the ordination of women, many of our women leaders pushed back and said that it was inappropriate to celebrate an experience that was, for them, only painful. Having heard this, I think it important that we, as men, must take responsibility for – and repent of – our sexism, bigotry, and misogyny, whether covert or overt, that has led to the experience described by the women leaders in the Church. I long for a day when we will acknowledge our cruel ministerial gender stereotypes and our entrenched patriarchy, truly repent of it, and shatter the glass ceiling that prevents more women from entering leadership positions in our Church. I am not sure if quotas actually work, but maybe we are going to have to do something like that in our Sessions, Presbyteries, General Assembly and in our Committees to ensure that women do not remain relegated to an inferior position in terms of numbers and influence. How many of your Session elders are women? How many women Commissioners are there at Presbytery and Assembly? How many women are office bearers in Presbyteries? How many women are members and Convenors of General Assembly Committees? Why, twenty years into union, have we had only one Moderator who was a woman and why are so few women nominated by Presbyteries? I know it is tricky for me to speak about these matters and I risk raising the ire of some by doing so, but I do long for a day when the Church truly is a place where all feel at home.

Gender Based Violence

During the lockdown, we became sensitized to the scourge of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly in South Africa. The SA President, in his address on the 21st of June 2020, called this a "second pandemic". The numbers are harrowing: the number of women killed or assaulted or raped by an intimate partner and the number of children abused in what should be their safest possible space: the home. It is regrettable that the SA government, which seems so focused on addressing the evils of alcohol and tobacco, has done extraordinarily little to address the horrific abuse of women and children in SA. And we, as SA men must also take our own place of responsibility for this plague on our women and children. Although we

may not be guilty of abuse personally, every abuser is a son, a brother, a friend, an uncle or a cousin and it is our responsibility to call out abusers when we become aware of them. Turning a blind eye as a family member or friend verbally abuses an intimate partner or a child is not acceptable – we should call out those who do not treat others with respect in public, because what happens in public is replicated in private, if it is not challenged. I have always told the women who have been physically abused by a male partner and who have come to see me that there are two certainties: first, a man who hits a woman once will hit her again, and the second time will be harder than the first. Second, a man will not stop hitting until the woman is dead, unless she moves herself away from the situation. This is also where the church should play a role in providing safe spaces for women who are in abusive relationships. Many women stay in those relationships, exposed to danger every day, because they have no other choice. The church should be at the forefront of providing temporary places of safety for women and children who need to be removed from an abusive situation.

Centralization of Stipends

The Priorities and Resources Committee continues its work on the centralization of stipends. While we talk about the possibility of centralizing stipends and how this could be handled at a Presbytery level, the concern is the capacity of Presbyteries to handle a task as big as this. This is especially the case when one considers that even the items that Presbyteries should already be dealing with don't receive the correct attention: returns to remits; information required to be sent to the Assembly office; care for ministers and congregations and basic oversight fall through the cracks and often leave congregations to battle away on their own with little or no support from their Presbytery. As with all matters in our polity, however, this problem is not "out there", it is our problem, and it is within our hands to fix it. When Presbyteries do try and exercise their role, they often meet with resistance and even hostility from congregations, Sessions, ministers, and elders; Presbytery office bearers are subject to abuse; Assembly and Presbytery rulings are ignored and flouted, and the provisions of the Manual are disobeyed. The sad process of the same culprits coming to the AARP time and time again over the same issue at enormous cost to the Assembly in time, energy and money does not reflect well on us. The General Secretary, Clerk of Assembly and Moderator are, more often than not, seen either as fire fighters or enforcers instead of fellow servants of God.

Presbytery Capacitation

It is becoming apparent that our major capacity challenge lies in many of our Presbyteries. Presbyteries are not adequately equipped and supported to be able to meet the demands made on them by the congregations on one side and by the Assembly and its structures on the other. So, Presbyteries become one of our biggest obstacles that prevent us from moving forward. Presbytery Moderators also are not fulfilling their roles as a pastor to pastors, leading to many ministers experiencing breakdowns and burn out in ministry. In the course of my moderatorial term so far, I have visited or had contact with ten of our Presbyteries and I have discovered similar difficulties in all of them: relationship issues between ministers; relationship issues between ministers and congregations; severe financial difficulties, to the extent that ministers are not always being paid and the like. One of our greatest tasks is the empowering and capacitation of the Presbyteries to enable them to be the places of healing and wholeness they were always intended to be.

Friends, may you have a blessed Pentecost – may you experience the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in a fresh and a new way in this season of the Holy Spirit.

Your partner in the gospel



Peter