
Discipleship in a Local Context

The Assembly Theme as Inspiration for Mission

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Our church, our country and our region all face new challenges that offer wonderful opportunities for mission and ministry. We stand in the twilight, just before the dawn of a new millennium. If you are an early riser, you will know that the lightening of the sky just before dawn breaks is a time of great expectation and anticipation. Our age is such a time of great expectation and anticipation! Therefore it can never be “business as usual”; it has to be business with a difference. We have to open our hearts to God, trusting as did Abraham, our forefather in the faith, without being able to verify that trust. It is a trust that God will lead his church by walking beside us and living in us, always to the honour and glory of his name. We therefore need to pray for grace to embrace one another as we journey with God into the future.

The challenge of poverty

Poverty can be defined in terms of financial income, in terms of the loss of human dignity and new human suffering. We can also speak of poverty in terms of denial of access to opportunities for advancement. It is said also that poverty is found in those whom progress has pushed to the periphery. That is particularly telling for us since we live in a country and a province in which there are huge material and natural resources at our disposal, as well as dramatic technological advancement; but also inequalities, and an uneven distribution of wealth resulting in the awful consequences of poverty, which we see in the faces of women, children, people with disabilities, the marginalized, the elderly, migrants and refugees.

Clearly, poverty is not just about low incomes. The deprivation it causes is far wider, bringing with it a retardation of knowledge. It also has its selfish side, preventing some human beings from sharing in the increasing wealth of technology and information that is available.

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We have just started the first year of the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. It is pleasing that so many organizations are using their energies to do away with poverty. A coalition of organizations has signed a "Declaration of War on Poverty", while an ecumenical commission is also actively engaged in mobilizing the churches to act meaningfully and decisively in the struggle against poverty. The alliance arraigned against poverty includes the church, nongovernmental organizations, government, trade unions, the UN and, significantly, homeless peoples' organizations which represent grassroots communities here in the Western Cape. The establishment of such a coalition is good, as poverty is too great a problem to be left to a divided society. The Declaration describes poverty and the effects it has on the lives of people in these words:

The war on poverty and inequality is South Africa's most important priority and our greatest challenge. Eradicating poverty is essential to consolidate the gains of our new democracy. It is a precondition for social justice, peace and security in our land.

South Africa and poverty

Poverty should have no right to exist in South Africa. Our constitution has created an environment – and a mechanism – for the provision of "full enjoyment of human rights". The Bill of Rights provides for traditional civil and political rights such as the right to equality, human dignity, freedom of association and of expression, as well as political rights. But it is unique in the world in its specific reference to the rights of access to housing, health care, food, water and social security, to an environment that is not harmful to health and well-being, and to the right to basic education. These are *fundamental* rights that must never be viewed as secondary. They belong integrally to the human rights that must be seen as belonging to everyone, and as being protected by all.

Poverty in South Africa is inextricably linked to the legacy of apartheid. To spell out the inequality of resources and opportunities that apartheid has spawned, allow me to recall a photograph of a South African woman in a rural area walking underneath huge electricity pylons and power lines which are taking electrical power to the cities and industrial heartland of our country. Balanced on her head is a bucket of brackish water which she had walked several kilometres to fetch from a tiny pool in a dry river bed. Here progress and poverty are vividly juxtaposed. As a country we face the huge challenge of addressing the glaring imbalances epitomized by this image. It is simply unacceptable that in an advanced technological society which has found solutions to the most complex of problems, poverty should exist – destitution amidst plenty.

Acting together against poverty

Such images should not lead us to a sense of despair and hopelessness. This year's United Nations Human Development Report makes it quite clear that poverty is no longer inevitable. The world has the material and natural resources, the know-how and the people, to bring about a poverty-free world in less than a generation. This, the report says, is not "woolly idealism", but a practical and achievable goal. It points out that over the past three decades a dozen or more developing countries have shown that it is possible to eliminate poverty in its most severe forms. In Britain, Minister Claire Short has said that poverty can be eradicated by the year 2015, provided there is the political will to do so. Over a century and a half ago, the world marshalled its

resources and launched a successful campaign against slavery. In our own times, moral and righteous people all around the globe campaigned for the end of apartheid in South Africa – and were successful. A concerted effort from all sectors of society is required now to eradicate poverty.

Let me commend those parishes in this diocese which have immersed themselves in programmes to combat the poverty in their midst. Many have programmes aimed at human development, as well as those that seek to alleviate the immediate hardships that poverty-stricken people experience. It is the human *development* programmes – the ones that teach a person *how* to fish, rather than just *giving* them a fish – that will bear the most productive fruit. Poverty is a formidable foe – it requires a creative sharing of all our resources in order to overcome it.

In this respect, let me share a suggestion that has previously been made and which has impressive merit. It is the simple proposal that the people of a parish, or a group of parishes, or a region in the diocese – or why not the whole diocese? – adopt as their motto: “Give a meal a week so that everyone has a meal a day.” That is, they would commit themselves to sacrificing one meal a week until the year of jubilee, the year 2000. They would take the money that they save – most families in this diocese could probably contribute anything between South African Rand 20 and 30 (US\$4 and \$6) for a basic meal – and donate it to a special diocesan fund dedicated to programmes aimed at eradicating poverty. Ideally these would be programmes that seek to deal with the problem of poverty by providing training for work, or even work itself. Once the minds of creative people were applied to such a proposition, we might see exciting results. The funds generated could be amazing – if each family gave an average of R25 (\$5) a week over the period, starting this Advent Sunday, a parish with 250 families would contribute over one *million* South African rand by the turn of the century! Here is a real and tangible way in which we can all be a meaningful part of “Jubilee 2000”.

Our diocesan financial experts would, I am sure, find additional ways to make these gifts become even more valuable. This would result in desperately-needed resources being freed for people and projects so that they could have a head start in a common quest to enable all people to realize their full potential. I have no doubt that commerce and industry, other denominations and religious faiths, NGOs and even the government could be persuaded to become part of such an initiative. All right-thinking people in this country desire economic growth, for they know that it will lead to fewer unemployed and to an improvement in the quality of life of our people. I cannot believe anyone who can afford such a small sacrifice would be unwilling to participate in such a venture.

I am therefore calling for a national programme of “A Fast for the Celebration” – the celebration of the next century, the celebration of the fulfilment of the new South Africa, the celebration of a future for our children and the generations to come. Such a fast would see resources used to their fullest extent, and shape a new environment in which the contorted lines of division between the “haves” and the “have-nots” will become blurred as *all* are able to achieve legitimate and law-abiding objectives for themselves and for their community.

Please remember that fasting is widely practised by Christians. Our Lord himself fasted, with dramatic results. In this secular age, fasting has even become popular amongst those striving to perform better – at work, or in their sport – and, of course, in

that all-consuming 20th-century pastime of losing weight. We would all benefit from such a fast – and more importantly, the poor would benefit the most!

Acting together for housing

One such benefit would be that of having housing. I am told that there are 183 specific bureaucratic actions that people have to take in order to obtain a house. The process should be shorter! The situation is even worse here in the Western Cape where, winter after winter, we see the pitiful sights of people's homes being flooded because they live in inadequate shelters. We must also speed up the delivery of other basic services. No one in this land should be without sanitized water, electricity, telephones, proper education, welfare services and health care. It is a blot on the conscience of this nation that we still hear of cases of old people and the sick, the physically and the mentally handicapped, the poor and the dispossessed, who find themselves discriminated against because they have no access to the most basic social services. For them, the Bill of Rights is just another piece of paper. We are called on, as the people of God, to use the instruments that we have been given as a result of our pursuit of democracy, to make sure that *all* our people can look forward to realizing their potential as fully as they can.

One way of doing this is to create a bank for the poor. This proposal, tackled at diocesan level, would hopefully cascade into the national financial resource pool. The church's support for the establishment of financial organizations to enable ordinary men and women to own their own homes can be traced back to the formation of mutual building societies. These arose as early as the late 18th century in Britain, and about a century later in South Africa. These societies enabled people to purchase their own homes on terms which were affordable, yet in ways which held them accountable. In recent years we have watched in this country the demise of mutual building societies and the ascendancy of banks, with their stringent lending criteria. The cry has been ever present: provide some means whereby "ordinary people" can own a piece of their birthright – some land. Various schemes have been launched but, by and large, government and the financial services industry have failed dismally to respond to this call. The result is that we have an intolerable number of persons without decent homes. Many could afford basic accommodation, but as they have no credit record banks generally decline their applications for home loans. Many such people are part of the "informal" sector – that vast mass who are engaged in work, yet deemed officially "unemployed", such as hawkers and street vendors. The banks still refuse their applications for loans. People are trapped, by a new socio-economic milieu, in a vicious circle in which interest rates are high, growth is slower than the authorities would want, and the markets are volatile.

I want to suggest that a creative answer to our massive housing problem is a system in which the mutual and trustworthy use of communal funds can be applied to solve this national crisis. A mutual bank for the poor has flourished in more recent times in other countries, an example being the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. It is a question of having the will to succeed. While we call for governments to have the political will to combat poverty, we in the church must have the ecclesiastical and spiritual will to act in a cooperative manner to ensure the well-being of our fellows. If financial institutions and governments cannot act in a concerted way to solve a problem such as the housing shortage, then the time may have arrived for the church –

whether denominationally or ecumenically – to act. An attempt to do this in the form of a housing foundation was made at the beginning of this decade by one of our sister denominations and this was, in fact, far advanced until the untimely death of its main proponent. Regrettably, no one else has had the vision or the will to continue his work. But the *church* is still called to have vision and will – and others must keep aflame the candle of hope that has been lit.

I believe the church should be launching a programme aimed at the creation of a mutual bank for the poor. Care should be taken to ensure that we do so within the framework of the law, but we can no longer wait for the slow wheels of state and business bureaucracy to turn while our people shiver in the cold and drown in floods. Should commerce and industry wish to assist in this process we would, of course, be more than delighted to welcome them as partners.

I have no doubt that if a programme such as this were successful, we would find workers and their families empowered and rejuvenated. We would see a major decline in the crime rate and a return to the high social and moral values that we espouse as a church. Education would flourish, and a new generation would be prepared to create a new era of progress and development.

Issues of crime and violence

This past year has seen growing concern about the high levels of crime and violence, and society is being challenged anew to find innovative ways of combatting this scourge. Security forces on horseback, police on the beat, and the conspicuous presence of police in vehicles are amongst the best ways of contending with crime and violence and dissuading people from carrying out wanton acts of murder, revenge, theft or other criminal acts.

It has also been my privilege to have been part of an initiative that has led to an Inter-Religious Commission on Crime and Violence in the Western Cape. The commission's objective is to determine the reasons for the unacceptable level of crime and violence in our midst, and to suggest ways of dealing with it. This Commission will soon be launched formally; my plea is that you give it all the support it needs, both at community and regional level, and keep it uppermost in your prayers.

For prayer is a powerful instrument.

Renewing and reordering our diocesan life

After considering these opportunities for us witnessing for Christ on the national stage, let us turn to the needs in our own diocese. The *restructuring* of the diocese has been a subject of keen debate this year. It is clear that we need a structure to service the *mission* of the church in this place. Since assuming office I have been engaged in an open, transparent and consultative process which arose from petitions coming from two regions. There is a resolution before synod which results from this consultative process, and I hope that the diocese will commit itself to this new structure for the sake of the mission of the church.

But in addition, *equipping all our clergy* is necessary if our diocese is to flourish in the future – a future that will pose very different challenges from those of the past.

The new democratic order in South Africa has brought with it new freedoms and opportunities and these have, in turn, created fresh challenges for the church. The new dispensation and the transparent way in which public policy is formulated means that

clergy must be equipped to deal with this new situation with a new set of issues. For example, ethical and moral issues which have come into the open require serious and responsible handling. To this end we need well-designed, interesting and creative continuing ministerial education programmes to equip clergy with skills in social analysis, the use of the Bible, biblical interpretation, a methodology for Christian ethics, pastoral counselling and mediation skills. Such training will equip clergy to provide teaching and guidance not only for people at parish level, but also for those engaged in commerce, industry and other spheres of public life.

We want to encourage clergy to attend such programmes by offering incentives such as certification and a provision of an additional three weeks annual study leave for stipendiary clergy. Such a programme would be carefully monitored, and the progress of participants measured. It would recognize the crucial role clergy play in church and world, and encourage – and help – us all to “be good stewards of our gifts”. As servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, clergy have a great responsibility of nurturing and looking after God’s flock. This means we must care for their wellbeing, together with that of their families, by providing adequate support of all kinds for their work. Let us never forget that our clergy are amongst the greatest gifts we have as a church.

Turn to God: Rejoice in Hope!

So we come to reflect on our calling in this age to be servants of God, to proclaim our Lord and Master and to publish his name abroad. As we rejoice in the great privilege of responding to God’s call to fulfil his mission in a new age, we turn also to God for guidance and empowerment. Thus it is fitting to conclude with thoughts on the theme, “Turn to God – Rejoice in Hope”, which will also be that of the WCC’s eighth assembly in Harare.

Receiving guidance and empowerment from God, we are bold to continue our pilgrimage in faith, knowing that there is a loving Father who will always care for us.

Eagles like to build their nests high on the sides of mountains. The inside of the nest is lined with soft down and feathers. When the eaglet has been hatched, an amazing process begins. At the right time the mother literally “stirs up” the nest. She does so by removing, piece by piece, the soft inner lining, leaving only a prickly nest of sticks and twigs. She makes it uncomfortable for her young as she prepares it for its reason for being. Presently she will take her young to the edge of the nest, to the edge of the mountain, and throw it into the void.

Awkward and gangling, falling through space, the eaglet cannot fly, but its instinct is to flap its wings. At the very last second, before it is dashed to pieces on the rocks beneath, the mother swoops down under its young and catches it on her mighty pinions. It carries the eaglet back to the ledge, and throws it off again – and again – until the eaglet learns to fly, taking responsibility for its own life.

The Scriptures tell us that God deals with us like an eagle that stirs up a nest. When God in his sovereign grace chose to make the path his only son would travel a difficult one, Christ had to walk the way of sorrow and obedience. But he was raised in triumph to be crowned the King of kings, and Lord of lords! And to lead us to ever new experiences in his name.

Therefore the future must embrace the essence of a life born in faith, and acted out in the joy of discipleship! This demands that we face the future with God, and that

we understand fully that his arms, like the wings of the swooping eagle caring for her young, are always there to protect and guide us.

Turn to God

A prerequisite for doing God's mission is to turn to God. Accepting God as God means that we submit completely to him as his church, his body on earth. We must come to him in penitence, in the assurance that he forgives us and accepts us as we are, promising us wholeness of life, as surely as does the eagle her young. And as the eaglet, learning to fly, soars into the distant, unknown future, so we should be reassured that we too can rise to new heights of missionary endeavour in the name of Jesus.

As Charles Wesley's great Easter hymn puts it:

Soar we now where Christ hath led,
Following our exalted Head:
Made like Him, like Him we rise;
Ours the Cross, the grave, the skies.

If this great experience is to be ours, then we also have to recognize a claim on our lives, and hear a call to us; to show repentance in our hope: "...if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14) In this act of repentance let us remember that to have found God is not the end of our search, but only the beginning. Paradoxically, as we search for God, God also searches for us. St Augustine reminds us that "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him".

We too are called to "find our rest" in Jesus – to let him be in us. We are called to do small things, so that great consequences and beautiful futures can follow for all humankind – small things like giving up a meal a week so that we can feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend the wounds of the ill and show care to the disabled. It is, of course, costly, like climbing a mountain can be "costly" in terms of tiring us. But the scenery and the views, the great vistas of the world that fall before us, always make it well worth while.

We come to God to find inspiration and strength. We come to worship to ensure that we can make the world a better place, being renewed through the blood of our Lord. The South African theologian Gabriel Setiloane puts it in this deeply spiritual way: "He is that Lamb of God whose blood cleanses not only us, not only the clan, not only the tribe, but all, all humankind!" It is this loving God who is the basis of our confidence in the midst of the challenges and opportunities that we have. It is in him that we have our foundation, for the prophet assures us, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Isa. 30:15).

We are called to a personal relationship with our Lord. It is a call to a relationship that moves from the personal to the communal, to a life of compassion and service, witness and worship, so that the whole of society shows more Christ-like qualities. Thus comes resilience for our journey. The prophet speaks of this resilience (Isa. 40:31): "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." On our journey God lights the way, giving us strength and energy to continue even when the going gets tough.

Rejoice in hope!

We are called on to evangelize anew and to take the word of God, rejoicing in hope (cf. Rom. 12:12), as it unfolds afresh for us in our developing society. We have a responsibility to interpret God's word so that future generations will worship and honour him with the same faithfulness and commitment to humanity as the saints departed have done, so they will be imbued with the same sense of hope and faith. God's agenda is open-ended: we journey into an unknown future, but we "rejoice in hope" and trust that he is always with us. Our rejoicing must be in the great and age-old truth that we have been saved by Christ. We are under grace, we are sons and daughters of God and heirs of his kingdom. Our relationship with God must be such that when our spirit cries "Abba, Father!" we know that our spirit is linking up with our Creator. Our happiness is the fulfilment which comes from knowing that we are held in the arms of a loving and living God.

We are challenged to launch out into the deep, in perfect faith, as did Simon Peter and the apostles when they went fishing (John 21:1-3). Once they were on the lake and saw Christ, they became secure in the belief that the best was yet to be. A transformation occurred, and with great anticipation and hope they carried on.

In our land, we don't always share their anticipation and hope. Many still despair, and sometimes the odds we face so overwhelm us that we lose hope. Yet we dare not be hopeless, for Christ is our hope and the risen Jesus is our strength. We claim him as our God, through our baptism, as one Lord, who came that we, in unity, might be one people in this diocese.

The Commission on Faith and Order stated emphatically at its 1978 Bangalore meeting: "The Christian hope is a resistance movement against fatalism. Those who believe in God know the power of his love. It is this love that recreates persons and societies. In Christ you are a new creature. The old has gone away and the new has come."¹

God first loved us. Now we must go out and love others, that they too might live. People of this diocese, pilgrims for the risen Christ, workers in the new order: let us go forth into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit to live and work to his praise and glory.

NOTE

¹ *Bangalore 1978: Sharing in One Hope*, Geneva, WCC, 1979, p. 8.