

## CHAPTER 3: TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

### 3.1 ESTABLISHING A TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION (TRC)

In 1995, the South African Parliament, through a unique, democratically verifiable process – after a prolonged, consultative process – established the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), by passing *The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (No 34 of 1995)*.

From the year 1974 until the year 1994 no less than nineteen truth commissions have been established in many parts of the world, but the establishment of the South African TRC marked a unique moment in world history. It was the first time that a nation had created a truth commission through a public and participatory process, by way of an Act of Parliament (De Lange, 2000:14).

The TRC featured unique and historic characteristics. It was a public process – open to the general public, to come and listen to proceedings. Perpetrators had the opportunity to disclose their involvement during the struggle, while victims could share their grief and uncertainty about lost loved-ones. It was a process that started to put the country on the road to healing and reconciliation. Provision was made for amnesty as well as reparation. Truly, the South African TRC (with all its shortcomings) is a model for many in the world (Hayner, 2000:33).

According to Mr Dullah Omar, Minister of Justice, it is important to understand the context within which the TRC took place (Omar, 1996: 24). The Commission is based on the final clause of the Interim Constitution, which reads as follows:

This Constitution provides a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterised by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence and development of opportunities for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex.

The pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society.

The adoption of the Constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge.

These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not retaliation, a need for *ubuntu*, but not for victimisation.

In order to advance such reconciliation and reconstruction, amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions and offences associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past.

To this end, Parliament, under this Constitution, shall adopt a law determining a firm cut-off date which shall be a date after 8 October 1990 and before December 1993, and providing for the mechanisms, criteria and procedures, including tribunals, if any, through which such amnesty shall be dealt with at any time after the law has been passed. (The cut-off date was later changed to 10 May 1994. R)

With this Constitution and these commitments we, the people of South Africa, open a new chapter in the history of our country (quoted from TRC Report Vol. 1, 1998:55-57 in Omar, 1996:24, 25).

As regards the Interim Constitution, the editor of the Prayer Bulletin of The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA) made an interesting comment in the September 1996 issue when he said that “the Interim Constitution can be seen as a cease fire treaty that makes it possible to avoid a violent race/ethnic war, in favour of a give and take, win-win, political compromise”.

It is important to note that at that stage, before the establishment of the TRC, it was a well known fact that the then President, Mr Nelson Mandela, believed that it is not possible to suppress, or just forget, the truth regarding the violations of human rights in our country. It ought to be investigated, recorded and made known. Therefore the President supported the TRC. The new government to be elected committed itself to build up a culture of human rights in the country.

Dullah Omar stressed that the objective of the TRC was not to go on a witch-hunt or to drag violators of human rights before court to face charges, as many opponents of the TRC feared. He stressed that the commission was a necessary exercise to enable the people of South Africa to come to terms with their past on a morally acceptable basis and to advance the course of reconciliation (Omar, 1996:26).

Mr Eddie Makuen, General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), said that the SACC welcomed the announcement of the TRC. It was based on work previously done by the SACC, because there was a close connection between Mr Dullah Omar and Dr Brigalia Bam, former General Secretary of the SACC, because of the high esteem the government placed on the role the churches could play towards reconciliation in South Africa. He went on to say that the role of the SACC flowed from a commitment that had been made to the upliftment of the country based on a common South African identity and dealing with issues in the past. The SACC didn't sit back and wait for the government to establish the TRC, but took the initiative by engaging with the Minister's and appealing for such a body.

It became clear that the SACC changed from an organisation, which supported the struggle against Apartheid, to one that was working to make a success of a new nation to be formed – the Rainbow Nation of South Africa. Already at the National Conference in 1995, the SACC's members discussed the establishment of a TRC. The concern regarded the opening of the wounds, which was seen as an imperative for healing to take place. It was then pointed out that it would be a painful process, as indeed it was.

### **3.1.1 The mandate of the Commission**

The act that brought the TRC into being, *The Promotion of National Unity and reconciliation Act*, was thought to provide “a useful window into Apartheid and an important vehicle for determining justice and the truth”, by helping people to remember the past years of Apartheid. It was not always understood in public commentary on and

interpretation of the Act. People were still thinking in old South African legal categories, instead of seeing it as being designed to assist them in the upliftment of the moral and political scene of the new South Africa. One of the problems that arose was that the “Commissioners of the TRC will face moral dilemmas, because they are bound by an Act that makes no distinction between Apartheid and its opposite”. The fact is that the Act does not forbid such distinctions. The Act provides, in its section governing the actions of the Commission when dealing with victims, that “victims shall be treated equally and without discrimination of any kind, including race, colour, gender, sex, sexual orientation, age, language, religion, nationality, political or other opinion, cultural beliefs or practices, property, birth or family status, ethnic or social origin or disability” (Asmal *et al*, 1996: 14, 15).

The objectives of the Commission were to promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding, which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past by:

- establishing as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights which were committed during the period from 1 March 1960 to the cut-off date (later determined as 10 May 1994), including the antecedents, circumstances, factors and context of such violations, as well as the perspectives of the victims and the motives and perspectives of the persons responsible for the commission of the violations, by conducting investigations and holding hearings;
- facilitating the granting of amnesty to persons who make full disclosure of all the relevant facts relating to acts associated with a political objective and comply with the requirements of this Act;
- establishing and making known the fate or whereabouts of victims and by restoring the human and civil dignity of such victims by granting them an opportunity to relate to their own accounts of the violations of which they are the victims, and by recommending reparation measures in respect to them;

- compiling a report providing as comprehensive an account as possible of the activities and findings of the Commission contemplated in the three paragraphs above, and which contains recommendations of measures to prevent the future violations of human rights (Meiring, 1999:13,14; Villa-Vicencio et al, 2000: 22,23).

### **3.1.2 Constitution of the Commission**

It was decided that the Commission would consist of at least eleven and not more than seventeen commissioners, as appointed by the President. In December 1995 the seventeen commissioners were appointed by President Mandela and they had the mandate to appoint eleven committee members to their number, representing the different cultural, racial, political and religious communities of South Africa. From the beginning the churches in South Africa were very much involved in the establishment of the TRC. In an interview with Dr Brigalia Bam on August 27, 1999, she made several comments on the institution of the Commission. She was part of the panel that chose the members for the Commission. A very important fact that was highlighted was the very concrete outreach to the DRC. She remembered that President Mandela said to her, on several occasions. “If we are talking of reconciliation in the country, there is no way we can walk about it without involving the DRC. They have a strong following. They are influential” (Bam, 1999; 2003:26ff)

It is interesting to note that it was reported regarding Desmond Tutu that “he was presented with one of his greatest challenges, not only relating to the seventeen very varied Commissioners, but also the handling of the complex dynamics the work of the TRC implied” (Frost, 1998:144). And complex it was indeed.

The commissioners were allocated to three committees: The Human Rights Violations Committee, The Amnesty Committee and the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee. There was also to be an Investigation Unit.

The lifespan of the Commission would be two years after which a report of its findings must be handed to the State President.

According to the Government Act establishing the commission, it had no power of persecution, or any juridical function, but could subpoena witnesses and had search powers and access to all documents.

The *Human Rights Violations Committee* (HRVC), empowered to set up an investigating unit, had authority to record allegations and complaints, make recommendations and collect and receive articles relating to gross human rights violations. Information in its possession could be made available to the other committees. This committee should focus on all the victims in our country and create a safe place where they can come, in a dignified manner, to deal with very hard issues – such as their own personal pain. Therefore the HRVC had to allow victims to tell their stories in the language of their choice, the aim being to record not only the truth of their disturbing past, but, more importantly, to restore the human and civil dignity of those victims.

The HRVC collected thousands of statements from victims from all over South Africa during the two and a half years of its existence. Many were invited to submit their statements at public hearings conducted in a number of cities and towns in the different provinces.

“Gross human rights violations” had a rather restrictive definition. It was defined as murder, manslaughter, kidnapping, rape, severe ill treatment that left permanent scars, mentally or physically. That meant that not everybody who suffered under Apartheid automatically qualified for making statements.

Apart from the victims’ hearings a number of special hearings had been organised to look into specific areas, to try and establish as complete a picture as possible of major instances of protest uprising of victims of racist oppression in the past e.g. Sharpeville 1960, Soweto 1976, the Boipatong massacres in early 1990’s, etc. Also special interest groups were heard: prison officials, security police, women, faith communities, Christian Churches, etc (Meiring, 2002:281-282).

The *Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee* (RRC) was to consider matters referred to it by the other two committees, and to gather evidence about the identity, fate and

whereabouts of victims as well as the nature and extent of their sufferings. It could also make recommendations, which might include urgent interim measures of reparation. Reparation was defined as including “any form of compensation, *ex gratia* payment, restitution, rehabilitation or recognition.” One of the dilemmas of the committee was the huge gap between the expectations of victims and the understanding of reparation by the Government and its capacity (and even willingness) to deliver.

Five areas of need came to the fore: medical, emotional, educational, material and ‘symbolic’ (such areas as erection of tombstones, reburials, etc.) The TRC felt strongly about the matter of reparation: the victims of Gross Human Rights Violations had a moral and a legal right to proper reparation. If the amnesty process seemed to indicate that the TRC process was ‘perpetrator friendly’, the reparation proposals were to show that the process was ‘victim friendly’ (Meiring, 2002:284).

The Act placed limitations on the committee in that it became aware that it had no authority, infrastructure or resources to assist victims in any way. The defined mandate was to draft policy recommendations to be presented to the President. One difficult step was to recommend the ‘closed list’ approach which meant that anyone whose name was not on the list of the HRVC, would not be eligible for consideration as a victim and thus would not receive reparation (Orr, 2000: 242).

The *Amnesty Committee* (AC) also had an arduous task. Meiring reflected on it and said that it had:

“to receive applications from perpetrators – from all sides of the struggle – who desired amnesty. The offer of amnesty was extremely generous. It enabled perpetrators of gross violations, on making a full disclosure of the acts under consideration and by persuading the AC of the political and military nature of those acts, to walk out of the amnesty court with a clean slate. No legal actions or even civil claims could be brought against a perpetrator once he had received amnesty. The judges and lawyers together with their legal teams criss-crossed the country to conduct their hearings and then had to go through all the evidence to make a recommendation about the person(s) who applied for amnesty. The Committee had been given very strong powers to conduct their business, having the authority of a Court of Appeal.



Perpetrators from the previous government as well as those from the ANC and other liberation movements were brought before the Committee. From the ranks of the white people the perception grew that the TRC was no more than a witch-hunt, with the purpose to embarrass the National Party Government. On the ANC's part it was said that the perpetrators of the liberation movements operated on a higher moral level and they should be treated with more leniency" (Meiring, 2002:283,284).

The hearings of the Committee could be held, if necessary, in public, unless its members and the Supreme Court Judge chairing it decided otherwise (Frost, 1998:142,143).

The first hearings of the Human Rights Violations Committee commenced on 16 April 1996 in East London. This was but the first of 140 hearings, which took place during the two and a half years of the life span of the TRC, to involve the South African community. "During these hearings 21 400 victims submitted statements, the names of 27 000 victims were recorded, 7 124 perpetrators applied for amnesty. But not only were there hearings of the HRV Committee, but also sessions where business people, academics, medical doctors, jurists, religious groups and spiritual leaders, etc. could give their perspective on the past" (Meiring, 1999:370).

One of the most challenging stories for this researcher, as regards the process of reconciliation, happened during the first meeting in East London. Meiring remembered it as follows:

One morning before the hearing commenced, a black minister, rose to address the people around him. "There must be a mistake somewhere," he said. "I brought nearly my whole congregation along to be here today. They had to come and listen to what the victims say. They wanted to stretch out their hands to all the white people of East London, to forgive them, to be reconciled with them," waving his hand over the people in the city hall, over the many black people and the small group of white people. But I see nearly no white people to talk to today. There is nobody with whom we can be reconciled. Where are they? (Meiring, P 1999:28)

Yes, where were they? Where are the majority white people today, ten years after the starting of a process of reconciliation in the country? Maybe the problem must be sought at the doorsteps of the white faith communities, especially the Afrikaans Churches.



People turn to their religious leaders for counsel during times of need and uncertainty. What were the messages that came from the leaders?

## **3.2 ATTITUDE OF CHURCHES TOWARD THE TRC**

When the Minister of Justice, Mr. Dullah Omar, announced the possibility of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for South Africa, in August 1994, the English Churches accepted it favourably but there was an immediate reaction from the Afrikaans Churches. It revolved around the questions: What is truth? What type of reconciliation will it be? Must Christians – even churches – confess before a worldly commission? From all over there were ideas as to how one must interpret truth in the context of South Africa. Many individuals and some churches, through their official papers, gave their views.

### **3.2.1 From the Dutch Reformed Church**

When Mr Mandela, the first State President of the “new South Africa”, was invited to speak at the General Synod of the DRC in October 1994, he too commented on the institution of a Truth Commission. He said:

Legislation for the institution of a Truth Commission is at the moment in the process of preparation by the minister of Justice, Mr. Dullah Omar. Commentary by the church will be very helpful. Government will acknowledge the human dignity of victims of suffering and human rights violations. I want to invite the DRC to help government in its task to advance Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa (Acta Synodi 1994: 537).

In the Afrikaans press, both secular and in the church, there was an initial uneasiness amongst Afrikaners regarding the proposed TRC process. They wanted to know what was behind this seeking of the truth. Many, especially from the political right-wing adherents, were “abusive” towards the institution of such a commission and words like “witch-hunt, Nuremberg, retaliation, etc,” were heard. There was a fear that the church would skate on thin ice when it becomes involved in something like this.

Dr Willem Nicol, minister of the DRC Universiteitsoord, and well known for his positive actions in the past for normalising relationships between the different races in South Africa, reacted in the following manner when he heard about the appointment of the TRC:

“I thought it was a good thing, because I believe in opening up and talking about issues. But when the things started to open up at last, I had no energy left to continue putting pressure on the Afrikaners. We have pressured them to a point where the National Party and the General Synod agreed to put an end to Apartheid. At that stage I experienced that the Afrikaners were treated as the underdogs in this country. RDP came and our people have lost power. They were bleeding, and when the issues the TRC opened up became known, the people were unhappy about it and I didn’t have the energy to make a study of what was happening. So, I’m afraid that we as pastors, with respect to the TRC, didn’t really support our people. Later on, I wondered whether the TRC was necessary. At that stage I thought it was only to insult the Afrikaners. Now with hindsight, I have to admit that it was the right thing to do” (See Addendum 4).

*Die Kerkbode*, the official mouthpiece of the DRC carried the debate regarding the TRC, which was hectic at the time.

Prof. Danie du Toit from Stellenbosh Theological Seminary made the comment that there is no truth without a context and that such a commission should not be appointed without making sure about the context in which certain events took place in South Africa during the past. Facts regarding the truth cannot be established outside or above the history of the country. A Truth Commission can serve a purpose, but then impartiality from all parties is a prerequisite (*Algemene Kerkbode*, August 1994:1).

Prof. PC Potgieter reminded people that different culture groups have different views of what truth is.

Commenting on the speech of Mr Mandela at the general Synod of the DRC, Dr Sampie van Vuuren said that it is important to know that the church is by definition the institution that carries God’s truth. When the world is seeking the truth, the church is intensely involved (*Die Kerkbode*, 3 February 1995). This comment answers the question as to the church’s task. If the church wants to be true to its prophetic calling, then it cannot be quiet in this regard, even if speaking out would give rise to anger amongst some of its

members. Through the past decades the church didn't make it easy for its rank and file members to understand changes in its thinking and decision-making and there are many of them who want the church to clarify certain issues.

When the commission starts its work, they must seek to unveil the truth of the whole South African community. It would be unjust to probe for the truth regarding the former SADF and SAP operations, and not doing the same for the ANC and its adherents during the years of Apartheid. The previous government spoke about a war situation, as the ANC and its allies spoke about a freedom-struggle. If the commission should look only to the one corner and not the other, then clearly there will be a situation where truth will not be served, at least not according to Biblical standards. We must remember that Christ told us that those who do not want to forgive those who trespass against us cannot appeal for forgiveness themselves, as we read in Matthew 6:14, 15. This shows us that mutual forgiveness is more important than being selfish. To this truth the church must testify very powerfully, otherwise it will be guilty before God (Van Vuuren 1995: 6).

Frits Gaum, Editor of *Die Kerkbode*, official mouthpiece of the DRC, said that he was, from the beginning, convinced that the DRC must be part of the work of the TRC. The DRC had no other option, in the light of the confessions regarding Apartheid, which had been made. In a time like this, it is important that the church must be in the frontline to seek truth and reconciliation for all our people. We have to go and give our perspective on issues and testify on why we did what we did. That's why the Executive Committee of the DRC nominated seven persons with the hope that at least one would be chosen to be one of the Commissioners of the TRC. In the end none were elected, but Tutu himself invited Prof. Piet Meiring to be one of the Committee members. And Prof Piet Meiring did a great job and did his utmost to convince the DRC to have more trust in the TRC (Gaum, 2004: 56f).

In the *Algemene Kerkbode* 9/10 February 1996, a letter appeared, written by 46 ministers of the DRC, in which they declared their support to the TRC. In their letter they made, inter alia, the following comments:

“The aim of the TRC is to work for national unity and reconciliation amongst the citizens of this country. It is our opinion that the DRC must support these aims whole-heartedly. In practice it means:

- to get an overall picture of the causes, the nature and scope of the situation in which human rights were violated;
- that procedures for the giving of amnesty must be simplified;
- that the fate of victims must be made known and their humanity be affirmed in different ways;
- that a report must be made available with recommendations for the future.

We make the following appeal to the leaders of the DRC:

- *to pray regularly and in an organised way for the work of the TRC;*
- *to support the work of the TRC and to become practically involved where possible;*
- *to inform the members of the church with great enthusiasm about the reasons for existence, aims and way of functioning of the TRC;*
- to accompany members who have to testify before the commission in humility and to help and care for those who were victims.

The DRC has already, at different occasions, confessed guilt with respect to Apartheid. We also acknowledge that there were gross human rights violations. *We are now standing before the test to put these testimonies into practical acts.* One of these is a sincere support of the TRC and its aims. Any rousing of suspicion or steering clear of issues can jeopardise the moral grounds of our life as church in the future.

It is now time for the past to be opened up and as believers to start working towards the new future. *We trust that the church will have the courage and the humility to accept this difficult task. We cannot drop our members now* (Algemene Kerkbode, 9/10 February 1996: 11). (Researcher’s Italics)

When one looks at this letter and, especially the appeal to the leaders of the church, it is as if one can hear the echo of the summons of the church leadership to their members before the elections of 1994, that God Almighty will work a miracle in the country and that there would be no anarchy. And God answered the prayers. Then why was it not possible to get the church motivated for the most important act of faith in the history of this country – to get the different people groups to a point that they would walk the path of trust and reconciliation?

The researcher is of opinion that the same problem, as occurred so many times in the past, the choir of voices which rose up from pews and pulpits: Who are they to tell us

what to do? Through this attitude another prophetic message to the church was smothered in its infancy.

In an interview with Prof. Piet Meiring, committee member of the TRC, the reporter of *Die Kerkbode* asked the question: *How can the Afrikaans churches become involved in the work of the TRC?* He responded as follows:

“There is so much that the church can do. If the church openly identifies itself with the process and makes a call to their members to commit themselves to truth and reconciliation in our country, it will make a huge difference. At the end of the day it is the Christians in South Africa, who knew that they came to the truth through Jesus and believe that it is only He who can work lasting reconciliation between people, who can make a contribution. In every congregation there are victims who have to be accompanied in love. And in every congregation there are perpetrators who, in one way or another, have asked for amnesty. For these people and their families these things are very traumatic. To accompany them pastorally is a huge challenge. Above all the churches in the country must pray for the TRC, because if the Lord is not having his hand on this process, it will be in vain. “

*Question: What do you think about the number of requests that the DRC must make a submission before the TRC?*

“One of the first tasks of the TRC is to give a comprehensive overview of what happened in our country over the past three decades. While the deeds of the past are written down and evaluated, a lot of attention will have to be paid to the contexts of the event and the motives of the people involved. I believe that the DRC, as any other denomination in our country, can make a contribution. The DRC has been involved in a lot of things and had sometimes drafted strong viewpoints about developments in our country. At one stage our church made a big change in its attitude towards Apartheid. For future generations it will be good to hear how the church felt about some issues and why it did some things – or didn’t do. And if we have to put our hand on our own bosom while writing our submission, we will have to do it. Such a submission can become an opportunity to witness”.

*Question: Will the work of the TRC really bring truth and reconciliation in our country?*

“It depends on all of us. Over the past few months I came to the conviction that the staff of the TRC, under the chairmanship of Archbishop Tutu, are really trying to do their utmost for this process to be successful. As regards the hearings and the examples of reconciliation that have flowed from that, there are enough to give us hope. But whether the process will, in the end,

be successful, depends on the people of South Africa and whether they will take ownership of it or not. Above all it is in the hands of the Lord” (Algemene Kerkbode 13/14 September 1996: 5).

Members of the Moderature of the General Synod of the DRC visited Archbishop Tutu, the chairman of the TRC, during the last week of February 1996. The aim of their visit was to clarify some of the issues regarding the work of the TRC. These discussions brought some clarity in the minds of the leaders of the DRC. According to Tutu the aim of the commission was: (1) to try to bring reconciliation and healing in our society and not to begin a witch-hunt; (2) the commission wants to bring justice and wants to do its work unbiased and doesn't want anybody to tell it what to do; (3) it will take approximately two years to uncover atrocities of the past and then the commission will close the books and let the past to rest and (4) It will be a traumatic time for all of us, but when done right, it will be a time of purification, a catharsis which can lead to healing in our torn society.

Tutu made it clear that he understood the questions about the composition and the task of the commission. He said: “*For people with questions and objections I say: Give us a chance! We want to show with our own deeds that we want to make a positive contribution to a better South Africa*” (Die Kerkbode 1 March 1996: 1, 6).

### **3.2.2 From the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHK)**

It became clearer and clearer that there was a discomfort in the Afrikaans churches regarding the work of the TRC. Some of the fears that were voiced by spokespersons of the church were: The TRC will be a politicised endeavour, contrary to the reconciliation we read about in the Bible. This could lead to a use of Biblical reconciliation themes, like confession of sin and forgiveness, in a political way. Another concern was that of truth. What truth? Truth according to whom?

Dr Daan van Wyk, former Editor of *Die Hervormer*, official publication of the NHK, said that the commission was so politicised that a person of the cloth cannot be the chairperson. This remark was made because of rumours that the commission would be led by Bishop Stanley Moghoba (As we know Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the

chairman of the commission in the end). The NHK cannot be against efforts to investigate criminal offences of the past, but it is important that it must be in an attitude of forgiveness. The question that lived in the hearts of many was: Is it the goal of the commission to work towards forgiveness, or will it be a witch-hunt against one part of the community? (Die Kerkbode, 28 July 1995)

In Die Algemene Kerkbode of 10/11 May 1996, Dr Wim Dreyer, Editor of *Die Hervormer*, made the following comments regarding the TRC:

“Important for us as Christians is that the TRC must use Christian terminology throughout. The Bible tells us that man, because of sin, is guilty before God and thus lives in a broken relationship towards God. Therefore the TRC must not only use Biblical language, but also themes of confession of sin and forgiveness, which lead to reconciliation. Against the background of political theology, by which we are bombarded more and more, it is not strange that Christian terminology is also politically interpreted. Let us be frank about it: although some churches and church leaders want to make the TRC something Christian-like, it is a political instrument. The reconciliation the TRC is looking for is political reconciliation.

“The Ned Herv Kerk van Afrika has, in principle, no objection against truth and reconciliation. On the contrary, the church has, in the past, asked for less propaganda and more truth in the media and that political leaders must be more honest with the citizens of the country. But we must keep to this perspective: real Christian reconciliation is reconciliation between God and man in and through Jesus Christ. ... No commission has the right to do the work of the church for it”.

It is correct to say that the church must do the work of reconciliation, but when the church is not doing it in such a way that people come closer to one other and allow one another part of God's sun, then nobody can take exception when a body like the TRC is trying to help with it.

“The General Church Meeting of the Ned Herv Kerk took the next decision in 1995: ‘From its theology, the church understands its ministry of reconciliation as a commission from Jesus Christ its Lord. This ministry is to the glory of God. It wants to bring all people to faith and wants to establish that faith. The ministry of reconciliation is through the preaching of the Word of God’ (Die Kerkbode 10/11 May 1996:7)



In *Die Hervormer* of 1 May 1995 Rev. APJ Beukes asked the question: *Why a Truth Commission?* He made a few remarks in his article on the importance of truth and especially truth as it is understood in Christianity. As regards the TRC he said that firstly we must remember that this commission operates in the political context, because of that ideology plays a role. Then truth is not truth per se, because there are always alternate purposes. Truth becomes relative. Secondly, it seems as if there is already a distinction between those who defended Apartheid and those who attacked it. Atrocities that had been committed in the past can never be judged without understanding the context in which they took place. Thirdly, the truth can also be relative. That which is truth to one can be a lie to another. The unveiling of facts is not necessarily the truth. The minister had said repeatedly that the aim of the TRC is that people want to know about their loved ones. This is understandable. But we can be caught in a spiral of revenge and retaliation. Maybe it would have been better if there was no TRC. From a Christian perspective the truth is that we must make a new beginning in the spirit of forgiveness. The wrongs of the past cannot be glossed over, but to start a witch-hunt that will get one party into trouble is unsatisfactory and the truth will still be covered up (*Die Hervormer*, 1 May 1995:3).

Considering all these statements and many more made in the letter columns of newspapers etc. it is no wonder that there was a general despondency towards the work of the TRC, which led to a general feeling that the Afrikaner was targeted by the government as the skunk in the story. The result? People, Christians, gave themselves over to apathy and hiding behind walls and big dogs.

The editor of the monthly periodical of the NHK, *Konteks*, asked this question in December 1995: *What will our children say about this?* (Wat sal ons kinders daarvan sê?) With very sharp words and a cynical voice, he said that our own Truth and Reconciliation Commission is busy with their work and for the following six decades or more, South Africa will be a place of abuse for the Afrikaner. He said that everybody who was part of the struggle was part of a holy struggle while the rest are guilty of sin against humanity! Must one ask forgiveness for that? He then went on to say:

The latest is the painful letter of a 33yr old Afrikaner minister who cried before the TRC about all that had happened. He asked: ‘how is it possible that so few tried to do something? How is it possible that I could only be an onlooker? Then I wonder how can I live with this guilt and shame in my inner self?’

Then the author of the article came to his question as to what to tell his children regarding all this. He said there is a rising suspicion against the whole life of the Afrikaner.

Everything that has been done in this country carries the mark of cruel oppression. He concluded his article by saying that each (Afrikaner) parent must tell the history to his or her children with the necessary vibe and passion. We must prevent by all means that they believe the lie that everybody from the past were hooligans and exploiters.

### **3.2.3 From the Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA)**

The initial response from the RCSA was similar to that of the NHK. A few of their well-known ministers commented on the TRC and its process.

Dr P Bingle, of the Reformed Church (Gereformeerde Kerk), asked that truth must be handled in love. One cannot go about in a cold, clinical manner when you are seeking the truth. According to the Ninth Commandment, justice must rule when someone speaks the truth. Dr Bingle also drew attention to the fact that there is a spirit of reconciliation at work in the country and that the Truth Commission’s job description should be worked out with great care (Algemene Kerkbode, August 1994:1).

Prof. Amie van Wyk made the following comments on the constitution of the TRC:

My first reaction was positive, because it was one of the first efforts in the world of a divided society where an official attempt was made to bridge poles, to bring about peace and to work for reconciliation in society as far as possible. Later on there was criticism as to the way that the TRC went about its work, but the effort in itself, I personally appraised.

As regards the reaction of the church leadership of the Gereformeerde Kerk it is not so easy to talk about. Unless somebody put it on the table it was not on the agenda of a church board, or classis, or regional synod, or the national synod. It is true of any church. How do you get such a thing on the agenda of any meeting? The TRC didn’t do it, because they didn’t send a letter to all the churches. So, because it was not on the agenda, it is very

difficult to know what the church leadership thought about it (See Addendum 3).

The Editor of *Die Kerkblad*, 20 December 1995, said that not only is it important to know who will be the members of the TRC, but what will be the aim of the Commission. The fact that the TRC must determine the truth has in itself the presupposition that there exists something like objective truth, outside of man. The question is then aired whether it is possible to find such truth. He then went on to concentrate on the fact that there is a trend in religious circles namely *relational truth*. It boils down to the fact that what is truth for one is not necessarily truth for another – for Islam truth is something else than for the Hindu, etc. Over and against this, is the Reformed Christendom, which said the Word of God is the only, unmoveable truth. He concluded his article by saying that each person must find for himself or herself answers to these objections.

Prof. S Postma made the suggestion that time is the best remedy to solve problems and used the example of the Afrikaners who are not holding a grudge against the English for the Anglo-Boer War anymore. He has reservations about the possibility that the commission won't have enough time, and juridical knowledge to differentiate and test testimonies. He is convinced that the TRC carries in itself the embryo not to work reconciliation but embitterment (Postma, 1996: 6, 7).

Dr Tjaart van der Walt wrote in *Die Kerkblad*, 24 April 1996, that the church could not shrug its shoulders against the task of reconciliation and dump it on the TRC. The church must not only prophetically call its members to repentance, but must also accompany them to become new creatures through the Grace of God. Then he called on the church to pray for the TRC as well as all the people who will be testifying. He asked that people must not write off the commissioners before hand, because there are non-Christians in their midst. He also asked that people must not expect more from the TRC than what one would expect from any State department.

In a short comment in the September 1996 issue of The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa's (TEASA) Prayer bulletin for reconciliation, Prof. B J van der Walt of the University of Potchefstroom said: "The individual Afrikaner, the Afrikaner as a group, the Afrikaner Churches and Afrikaner political and other organisations should categorically and unequivocally confess regarding their role in supporting Apartheid. Without this no true and lasting reconciliation in South Africa will be possible".

### **3.2.4 From the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM)**

The AFM is a Pentecostal church with  $\pm$  50% Afrikaans speaking members (this figure includes  $\pm$  40 white Afrikaners and another  $\pm$ 10% coloured Afrikaans-speakers). Dr Frank Chikane had his reservations about calling the AFM an Afrikaans church. It could rather be called one of the South African churches with high levels of Afrikaans speaking members (See Addendum 14).

As seen previously, they shared the same questions and reservations as the other churches in South Africa.

Dr Isak Burger, President of the AFM, was asked about his reaction when he heard about the constitution of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

He responded in the following way:

The TRC started its work in February 1996. It was the same year that our church structurally became one. That happened in April 1996. At that stage we were still not one, but a white division and a black division. I was the president of the white division. When you ask me about my reaction, I think I felt like the average Afrikaner at that stage. I wanted to wait and see. As the process went on, one felt that this would be a process of endless probing into the past and digging up and making public the sin of the white population. It was a time one felt ashamed and embarrassed about the things that were unveiled. But as the process went on, I experienced that it became more trustworthy. I think it was especially the role Archbishop Desmond Tutu played in the commission. I met him during the organising of the Rustenburg Consultation, when we were on the steering committee. His involvement and the way he communicated through the media brought great peace to my mind. If you ask me about the church leadership, especially that of the white division, their feelings were about the same as mine. (See Addendum 1)

Pastor George Mahlobo, General Secretary of the Apostolic Faith Mission commented also that in general the AFM was satisfied with the proceedings of the TRC, although it is difficult to hear of some of the atrocities that took place. As already discussed in paragraph 2.2.4, the AFM is “open” to all cultural groups, but we find that the Afrikaans churches are still Afrikaans and are keeping to it. The prayer is that the Holy Spirit will reveal to all members of the AFM what His will is for the church.

### **3.2.5 From the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk (APK)**

The question was addressed to Prof. Isak Brink of the APK: *What was your first reaction when the announcement came about the constitution of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission? Did a change occur in your mind during the work of the commission?* His response was that it didn't bother him. It was upsetting to hear some of the things that went on and that every child of God should be upset about it. Whether or not all the things happened as it was said, is difficult to say, because few of the testimonies were tested. The things that were reported did not have an influence on him personally. There was no change of mind. As church they heard it, but it did not give them suddenly another message. They didn't have guilt feelings, because it is the more conservative Afrikaner that has no problems with his workers etc. He personally thinks that the commission was there to lash out against the Afrikaner and not always to investigate the real truth (see Addendum 2).

The researcher could not find any other official views on the TRC from this church in any of the monthly publications of the APK, *Die Boodskapper*, or in the publication, *God let Grow (God laat Groei: Feesbundel ter herdenking van die tienjarige bestaan van die Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk 1987 – 1997)*

In a short article in *Die Boodskapper*, June/July 1996, under the heading “*What is the TRC doing with the Truth?*” (Wat maak die Waarheidskommissie met die waarheid?) the author, Rev. Theo Danzfuss, who is a minister of the DRC, discussed how he

experienced the meeting of the TRC for the dedication and blessing of the commissioners in Gauteng. To him the interfaith service was a blasphemous meeting and he concluded his report with two statements that churches must say to the TRC:

1. If the TRC expects the blessing of Jesus Christ, Who said “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life...” then it should stop praising other gods.
2. If the TRC expects the co-operation and support of the true Christians in South Africa, then it should show more respect for the fact that we are not willing to equalise our God with the gods of other religions... Their task in South Africa is not to reconcile religions with each other, but to execute a certain politically motivated task.

In *Die Boodskapper*, January 1996, report was given of the Seventh General Synod held in September 1995. No mention was made of the then Truth and Reconciliation Commission-to-be. Things that were discussed were, inter alia, how to celebrate the Day of the Ascension, Day of the Covenant and the 6th of April as Christians; the necessity to have daily family devotions; the necessity of Christian schooling or home schooling; etc. No word was said about the things that were of utmost importance for the country as a whole.

This same tendency was found in *Die Boodskapper*, August 1997(4, 9), in which a preview was given of the General Synod to be held during September 1997. The work of the different Commissions of Synod will be discussed – things that need to be done, as in any other church – but things that need the attention of people in a “new” country, was nowhere to be found.

In *Die Boodskapper*, April 1997, two articles drew my attention. In one, written by Prof. J J Pienaar: Transformation – the deathblow to true Christendom (*Transformasie – die dolksteek vir die ware Christendom*), he discussed truth and reconciliation as characteristic of transformation and said, inter alia, (researcher’s translation):

On the horizontal level the false Christian and the heathen must be reconciled with the true Christian with regard to the so-called injustices. It’s like the Calvinist with someone from the Islam, etc. Only when the horizontal reconciliation is finished, then will the truth come through. At the moment the TRC is busy with this false reconciliation task in the RSA. Everybody must be “reconciled” with everybody to open up the truth in the

end. The truth that is referred to here is the holistic world, the New World Order...

The second article was a declaration of a certain society called Society Bible and Nation (Vereniging Bybel en Volk), in which the Executive of the Society raised objections against the TRC because of their neglecting to handle the amnesty applications of Afrikaners in prison. The Society insisted that the TRC must give precedence to the amnesty applications of those suffering in the prisons before they listen to those outside the prisons.

### **3.2.5 From the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC)**

In the family of the Dutch Reformed Churches, it was especially from the DRMC that the TRC received a lot attention.

Dr Pieter Fourie, Editor of *Die Ligstraal/Ligdraer*, publication of the DRMC, was strongly in favour of the constitution of a Truth Commission. Wounds cannot heal unless they are cleansed. From a Christian perspective a Truth Commission is desirable to prevent the things of the past from happening again in the future (Algemene Kerkbode, August 1994).

Dr Allan Boesak, in his book *The Tenderness of Conscience*, described, inter alia, how he felt about the introduction of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ANC discussed the question of how to deal with the past, not only of white South Africa but also that of the ANC. In 1993 the incumbent State President, F W de Klerk interrupted the work of the NEC to ask that the intended commission must not be the Truth Commission, but the Truth *and* Reconciliation Commission. The ANC conceded to that.

Boesak went on to say that he was not against the idea and in the light of his own Christian conviction he welcomed it. Because he knew the Afrikaner, he was cautious to expect too much of the National Party's declarations on this whole issue of truth and reconciliation. He did not believe it had to do only with political motivations but with



religious and theological motivations as well, because, according to Boesak, in the Afrikaner's mind these two things go together. He said that the "truth" about Apartheid alone would be too confrontational; too merciless an exposure of what the NP had hoped would remain forever hidden. Adding the "soft" touch of reconciliation with its gospel imperatives of forgiveness and acceptance would, in turn, allow the softening of that truth, should the country ever be confronted with it.

Although the TRC came into being as a legal entity, by an act of Parliament, it was deliberately decided to move it away from Parliament and embark on a process of truth and reconciliation. The presiding president, Mr Mandela, appointed Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the "priest and father confessor" as Chairperson. Boesak said that the politicians calculated that these decisions would help to convince the millions of South Africans who are Christians, as well as enhance the acceptability of their own political agenda. The complaint that the TRC was too spiritual must not be laid at the door of the Commission or the church, or even with Tutu. Desmond Tutu is known for his Christian convictions, and his direct Christian testimony causes great discomfort (Boesak, 2005: 181f).

In general the attitude of the Afrikaans Churches to the TRC was negative, although there were voices and leaders who were positive. Right throughout the process, up to the final report, there were those who would have wished away the TRC if they could.

### **3.3 THE CHURCHES AND SPECIAL HEARINGS.**

#### **3.3.1 Introduction.**

During the course of the work of the TRC, the Committee on Gross Human Rights Violations invited thousands of victims, as well as perpetrators, from many communities to submit their statements. It was done at 140 hearings held in many parts of the country. Then the TRC invited representatives of special interest groups – the medical corps, lawyers, etc to do the same. The very last of these 'special hearings' was devoted to the

South African faith communities. These special hearings took place during 17 – 19 November 1997.

There was a serious debate in the ranks of the TRC as a number of commissioners questioned the wisdom of having such a hearing at all. Surely the faith communities – even the Afrikaans Churches who for many years publicly supported the policy of Apartheid – were not guilty of gross human rights violations? What would they confess to? But the rest of the commissioners felt that the churches as well as the other faith communities were so closely involved in everything that happened in South Africa, on both sides of the struggle, that it was inconceivable not to invite them to address the TRC. The pastors, priests, bishops, moderators, imams and rabbi's needed an opportunity to tell their stories; stories of guilt and shame, of pain and suffering, but also stories of courage and conviction, of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In total forty-one faith communities made written submissions or gave representations at the hearing. Each of the representatives was asked to address primarily four questions: (i) to what extent has their community suffered under Apartheid? (ii) were there some in their community that overtly or covertly supported the racist policies of the past? (iii) Was their community – or some in the community – involved in the struggles against Apartheid? (iv) What contribution may be expected from their community in the process of nation building and reconciliation?

(Taken from the TRC Report 1998, Vol 4:59-; Meiring, 1999: 265-285)

### **3.3.2 The Churches' reactions**

#### ***3.3.2.1 The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)***

In the General Synodical Commission (GSC) of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) there were heated differences of opinion on whether the church must make a submission to the TRC or not. First of all there were negative feelings because not one of the seven persons who were nominated was elected as a commissioner of the TRC. Therefore the compilation of the TRC were seen as one sided. Furthermore, for many, it was

unthinkable that the DRC must again go and confess, because it had been done a few times in the past at Synod level and in Rustenburg.

Rev. Freek Swanepoel and Prof. Pieter Potgieter had opposing viewpoints in the GSC as to whether they must make a submission or not. Swanepoel, the chairman, thought it would be a good idea, but Potgieter opposed it. There was a vote and, with a majority of three votes, the meeting decided against a submission. Swanepoel didn't want to accept the result and told the waiting press exactly that (Gaum, 2004: 57ff).

In an interview with Swanepoel, he commented on this matter. While there was this difference of ideas in the GSC meetings, the presbytery of Stellenbosch and the submission of the theologians of Potchefstroom continued, and that was news. In the end it was decided that he would write a submission and deliver it at the special hearing for faith communities of the TRC, but that he had to make it clear that he is not doing it on behalf of the entire DRC. In the meantime a beginning was made on the writing of *Op reis met Apartheid* (Addendum 11).

After many discussions, the GSC decided in the end that the DRC must prepare a publication regarding its own trip on the road of Apartheid. In 1997 the booklet, *Die verhaal van die NG Kerk se reis met Apartheid*, was published. It was accepted by the church as a document, not for all times, but for a specific period in time. Of importance are the 26 statements at the end of the booklet which looked back on the road travelled and in the last chapter mention is made of a new journey: a journey of reconciliation (Gaum 2004: 60; Ned Geref Kerk 1997: 72,77).

### **3.3.2.2     *The Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk in Afrika (NHK)***

For many Afrikaners the name Desmond Tutu is synonymous with the anti-Christ. This is due to the fact that during the Apartheid years, he was one of the leading figures in the struggle for the freedom of the majority people in South Africa. The fact that he was

appointed as chairman of the TRC made it no easier for many to accept the bona fides of Tutu and the TRC.

In Paragraph 3.2.2 the reaction of the NHK to the work of the TRC was discussed and it didn't change officially during the two and a half years the TRC had been doing its work. But from time to time it became clear that for the leadership of the church and for many congregations, feelings towards the TRC were negative and clarified how a great number of congregants may feel.

In an article about Nation building (*Nasiebou: Wensdenkery of werklikheid?*) a discussion on the work of the TRC came to the conclusion that the TRC apparently didn't succeed in its goal. It seems as if there is only further division instead of reconciliation. The task of the commission is not an easy one, but the question is whether it will, in the end, work reconciliation and greater national unity and, in so doing, help with the programme of nation building. Most South Africans wanted the TRC process to conclude, so that they can get on with their lives, because all the public confessions and unearthing of monstrosities of the past, tended to drag people into a pit of depression instead of towards peace, reconciliation and forgiveness. This part of the article concluded that it seems as if the TRC cannot really make an impact on the process of building a new nation (*Die Hervormer*, 1 October 1997: 6).

Articles like these and others don't really help Afrikaners to develop a positive outlook on the future. The task of the church leadership at a time like this is to help their members understand that we are in a new dispensation. The only way to make South Africa a better place to live and work is for all of us, especially the Afrikaner with his talents and ability for hard work, to work together and take the first steps on this road.

In *Die Hervormer*, mouthpiece of the NHK, an article was published on the theme of *Tutu's Confession (Tutu se bieging)*, in which the author is against Tutu's confession on behalf of the Christians of South Africa, who had thought that their religion is unique and that South Africa is a Christian country. This confession was part of the submissions of

faith communities before the TRC on 18 November 1997. The question the author wanted to ask Tutu was: Is it possible for the Church in South Africa to negotiate regarding the truth of the gospel? Can the church confess for its preaching that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life? Can Tutu confess on behalf of all Christians? In his discussion of the topic, the author stated, correctly, that no religion could say that it has all the truth. That would be very naïve. There are other religions, which have already existed for centuries, and their traditions must also be upheld. Against this background Tutu didn't have a choice but to confess, but this downgraded Christianity to one of the many religions which can help people morally. This means that every person can choose which religion suits him the best. In further discussion, the author showed the centrality of Jesus Christ as Son of God in the Christendom, and therefore he concluded that the Church (the NHK?) does not want to be part of this confession (Die Hervormer, 1 December 1997:1).

Officially the NHK has distanced itself from the proceedings of the TRC. (See Chapter 4)

### **3.3.2.3     *The Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA)***

In January 1997 the synod of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA) had its meeting in Potchefstroom. Although it is the second smallest of the Afrikaans speaking Churches in South Africa, it has, through the years, played an important part in Afrikaner ranks. At their meeting, the delegates had to decide on a proposal prepared by one of the regional synods, to decide whether the RCSA should accept accountability for the establishment as well as the practice of Apartheid. There were objections from some delegates because, according to them, the proposal did not specify precisely which of the past RCSA decisions were in contention.

The chairperson of the Synod, Dr Jan Visser, took a strong stance when he said that the church should be very careful how it lives in a country where there is a climate of a guilt psychosis. The church must not become unhinged in such a situation. He said that he did

not feel any responsibility at all for the horrors committed in the name of Apartheid (Meiring 1999: 100,101; Die Kerkbode, 24 January 1997: 7, 16).

Prior to the meeting of the Synod the editor of *Beeld* (10 January 1997) devoted an editorial to these upcoming discussions. He stated that it would be difficult for the church to appear before the TRC, even to make a written statement. Although many of the congregants would be shocked, that must not withhold the RCSA from taking part in the process of truth and reconciliation. The RCSA would make a historical mistake if it excused itself from the process. The challenge was put before the church to use the time to make a clear statement, a courageous Biblical testimony (Quoted in Meiring 1999: 101).

The editor of *Beeld* wrote, inter alia, in the article: *A Cross-road* ('n Kruispad):

The national synod must decide whether the church should say something about the Apartheid past and its role in it. The Reformers boast about the fact that they never tried to give a Biblical foundation for Apartheid. That is to their credit. But did they ever try to denounce Apartheid as unbiblical? If they did it how energetic was it and at what level?

There is opposition from a wide front, not only in the Afrikaans community. There is also a fear that even a hidden 'affirmation' can look like a confession.

Churches, not only the RCSA, must look at the situation from a broader perspective. The churches didn't stand aloof from the Apartheid era. Therefore they cannot stand aloof from the current societal order and events.

The RCSA ought not sweep the problem under the proverbial carpet by directing it to commissions or study groups. Its witness must be heard now. Not in three years time, because then the country would have moved on and another issue will be at stake which will ask for a new witness from the church" (*Beeld*, 10 January 1997: 8).

On 15 January 1997, Dr Theuns Eloff, former minister of the RCSA and currently vice-chancellor of the North-West University (Potchefstroom), reacted on the debate about the RCSA and the Apartheid past. In an article in *Beeld*, *Wat het die Gereformeerde Kerk met Apartheid gedoen?* (*What have the Reformed Church done about Apartheid*) he looked at the whole situation:

Like all Afrikaners of the time, the Doppers, in the thirties and forties of the previous century, were in favour of separation of races and people-groups as the solution for South Africa's 'colour problem'. Members, ministers and theologians of the RCSA had a great share in the creation of a philosophy in which the roots of Apartheid started to grow.

The church itself, via its synods or congregations, never went to the government (like the DRC) with public requests to pass Apartheid legislation. That would be against the way the RCSA saw the church.

Reformers used their influence to get Apartheid officially on the scroll through the so-called national congresses (especially 1941 and 1950).

In spite of this the synods of 1961 and 1964, against the prevailing ideology of total separation, decided to inaugurate a general synod, consisting of equal delegations from the four 'national synods'. Even if it was not the ideal situation (because race was still the guiding line for the white and coloured synods although it has changed in the meantime) in principle it created one Reformed church.

At the moment there are still two other synods: Soutpansberg for Venda-speakers; and Middelland for Sotho- or Tswana-speakers.

Differences between the different national synods as regards Apartheid and the application thereof are still there. On principles like justice, unity and diversity, and love of one's neighbour, there was (and is) agreement.

In 1970 the white Potchefstroom synod decided 'the policy of separation of races will be promoted'. This was the first time that a synod of the RCSA made a declaration for or against a specific political policy. This decision was recalled in 1985 because it implied that the RCSA supported a specific political model (Apartheid) and not because synod meant that the policy was unscriptural.

At the General Synod of 1980 it was decided to ask government to see to it that there will be a political model within which every citizen of South Africa will be able to accept his or her responsibility as person, created by God, and also to enjoy such treatment from others. This was the first time that a synod of the RCSA indirectly critiqued the ruling government policy.

During the sixties and seventies, there were quite a number of leaders and philosophers from Potchefstroom, who were very critical about aspects of Apartheid. The same critique also came from some other non-Dopper academics.



The Koinonia Declaration of 1977 was another example of people willing to stand up in public against Apartheid and to live with the consequences of their decision” (Beeld, 15 January 1997: 9)

From the rest of the article it is clear that the problem with RCSA synod was that they never rejected Apartheid unambiguously. Eloff concluded his article by saying:

“At the current assembly of the synod there must be a report. Then it will be seen what the Doppers (at least the Afrikaans speaking members) have done with Apartheid in the end” (*Beeld 15 January 1997:9*).

The RCSA considered the invitation of the TRC to make a submission, but they decided not to participate – although four theologians from this church (Revs. Alwyn du Plessis, Bennie van der Walt, Amie van Wyk and Ponti Venter) made a submission in their personal capacity. (TRC Report, Vol. 4: 60). (See next chapter)

*Beeld* reacted to this by saying that the RCSA let the opportunity pass to give guidance regarding the Apartheid past in a clear voice. He went on to say that it may be true that many in the RCSA (as in the other ASC’s also) did not know about the atrocities, but then it should have been a good time to confess the ignorance and negligence.

#### ***3.3.2.4 The Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFM)***

In a letter to the Chairperson of the Human Rights Violation Committee of the TRC, the Executive of the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFM) made known their decision to make a submission to the TRC. Both the leader and co-leader of the AFM, Dr Isak Burger and Rev. Frank Chikane would appear before the Commission to make their submission.

#### ***3.3.2.5 The Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk (APK)***

The APK has distanced itself from the proceedings of the TRC. See Ch. 4

### 3.3.2.6 *The Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa (URCSA)*

The URCSA accepted the invitation to appear at the special hearings of the TRC, although it was in a difficult position, because it was a united church of the formerly DRMC and the DRCA. As such they carried a double burden because many of their members had a problem with co-operation with Afrikaans churches. Their submission was the longest of all the faith communities.

By the time the hearing for the South African faith communities had to be held, the Afrikaans Churches had, in some way or another, discussed the issue. Some were willing to go and make a submission, while some decided that they didn't want to have anything to do with it at all, as pointed out above.

As has been shown in previous chapters, a God-given opportunity was, again, at hand for the Afrikaans Churches to break with their Apartheid past, but some of them decided not to participate and turned their backs on the extended hand of the rest of the South African people – an action that, even today, makes it difficult to talk about peace and reconciliation. Not even to mention forgiveness.

## CHAPTER 4: HEARINGS OF THE FAITH COMMUNITIES AND SUBMISSIONS OF THE AFRIKAANS CHURCHES

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This researcher agrees with Terry Dowdall (1996:27ff) that at heart of the work of the TRC was psychological change. This is true, whether one is looking at the individual traumatised survivor, the perpetrator, the onlooker in society, the local community, the country or the family of nations. This researcher is of the opinion that this was also true of the individuals, groups and churches that came to make submissions to the TRC. For both perpetrators and victims there were more positive than negative things to come out from the hearings. So, also, for those who stood in front of the commissioners and gave testimony as to how he or she, or his/her church or group acted in the past.

*Why was it necessary to have a special time to listen to submissions of the different faith communities in South Africa?*

Cochrane investigated the problem of defining faith communities, as it is a problem in a country like South Africa, with the diverse composition of its inhabitants. It seems that there is a degree of homogeneity amongst organisations, but this is far from the truth when one look at 'faith communities' like the SACC, on the one hand, and the Ramakrishna Institute on the other; or followers of traditional African religion compared to members of the DRC. So it was very difficult to pinpoint an exact norm for a faith community (Cochrane et al. 1999:17-20). It seems safe to say that one speaks of religious communities as synonymous for faith communities (TRC Report Vol. 4 Ch 3).

Since the official founding of South Africa as a country in 1652, religion has played a major role in the lives of its people. It was particularly the Christian faith that had penetrated into the country and also towards the North of Africa. But as the population has grown, so also have other religions and faith groupings. Through the years it has become apparent that, on the one hand, there were faith communities who gave their blessing to Apartheid, whilst on the other hand, others condemned it. Thus one finds that

from churches, mosques, temples, synagogues etc. have come blessings as well as curses toward the same object (Cochrane et al. 1999: 15, 16).

It was therefore necessary to bring faith communities into the process of the TRC, also “to remind themselves of their obligation, testified to within their own traditions, to participate in social transformation and the national process of reconciliation” (TRC Report, Vol. 4 Ch 3: 59).

Those Christian churches that testified to the commission, could go back and look the new South Africa in the eye, lift the eye to the horizon and walk steadfast into a new future.

And so 17-19 November 1997 were the days of the faith communities. According to Meiring letters were sent out to the different Christian denominations and other Christian groups in South Africa, as well as to other faith communities like Muslims, Hindus, etc. It was not all plane sailing to get the churches there. In some cases letters of invitation and even telephone calls were ignored. Amongst the Afrikaans Churches the RCSA abided by the decision of its Synod which ruled that the church would not make a submission. The NHK did not respond to the invitation and we have seen that the APK distanced itself from the TRC. The AFM, however, immediately decided to attend and so too the URCSA and, eventually, the DRC. Many of the Churches also provided written submissions (Meiring, 1999:266ff).

During the submissions it became evident that there was no church or faith community that didn't have to confess in one way or another. Professor Bennie van der Walt, from the RCSA, commented on the process and said that it is not easy to look critically at oneself, especially when it is in front of the blinding lights of television cameras. But it is important for festering wounds to be opened so that healing can start. He went on to say that we must (1) acknowledge our responsibility, (2) repent, (3) confess our sins, (4) ask forgiveness from God and the people we aggrieved; (5) make restitution where it is

possible so that (6) there can be reconciliation. Just trying to forget the past is no solution (Van der Walt, 1998: 18f).

Then the time arrived for the submissions.

## **4.2 SUBMISSIONS**

For two years many people told their stories to the TRC and now it was the opportunity of the faith communities to step onto the podium to stand before the people of South Africa. The questions in the minds of the people were: Were the churches and the other faith groups guilty of atrocities? Did they have something to confess? Were all the churches involved in deeds of Apartheid or were it only the Afrikaans Churches, and by name the DRC, as the largest group amongst the Afrikaners?

According to Meiring, letters were sent to 101 different Christian denominations and ecumenical bodies in South Africa, as well as to other faith representatives. From the beginning it was relatively easy for the English mainline churches and the Charismatic and Pentecostal groups to participate, but it was another matter to get the Afrikaans Churches to co-operate by providing a submission to the TRC. The researcher believes that another golden opportunity to really stretch out the hand of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation had passed them by. In the end none of the submissions from the Afrikaans Churches had the backing of the whole church. What does this say about the “preparation” of members with respect to a new dispensation? (Meiring, 1999: 266)

### **4.2.1 The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)**

The DRC took intense notice of the work of the TRC. The church promised to support and intercede, but also made a serious request that the TRC would act fairly to all sides. Although there were many voices within the DRC not to partake in the hearings of the TRC, there were also those who supported the work and asked the church to let its voice be heard.

Prof. Julian Müller of Pretoria also suggested that the DRC must confess before the TRC. According to him the fact that consensus eluded both sides, is because we work with two views of confession of guilt – a past perspective and a future perspective. The one is a specific event and the other is a process. That means that some members of the DRC have the idea that once you have confessed, everything is well. The baggage of the past is thrown off. There are others, however, whose belief is that confession is not a once and for all exercise. For them the process of healing is only possible through confessing again and again. When we see it like this we have more to do with the future than with the past. He went on to say:

“Therefore, according to me, the DRC should think very seriously about confession before the TRC. Thus it will again provide the opportunity to confess its share in the injustice of the past...

In the past the DRC played an important part in society and will hopefully do so in the future. For many the contribution of the DRC in the Apartheid era is still a big problem. If a continuous confession of guilt, on whatever platform, can serve the purpose, the church must not shrink back. (Müller, *Die Kerkbode*, 6 September 1996:13)

The submission of the DRC, at the hearings for the faith communities, was not the first time that this church was in front of the TRC. On 15 October 1996, while the TRC had a human-rights hearing in the Paarl, two ministers of the DRC, from the Presbytery of Stellenbosch, came to make a statement on behalf of the Presbytery. At the beginning of their presentation, Archbishop Tutu said to the audience:

“It is remarkable that of all the churches it is the NG Kerk (DRC), in particular, who comes to the Truth Commission first. It is appropriate, because the church had played an important role in society in the past. But I hope that many churches will follow this example” (Meiring 1999:82).

The Presbytery wanted to make a contribution towards the process of healing and reconciliation. They shared some information on the history of more than three hundred years, since the DRC started working in Stellenbosch. As a church it is very important to live in obedience to the Word of God. The church is part of the Reformed tradition of Christendom and believes that Jesus Christ is the Lord of lords and that the sovereignty of God must be proclaimed in every aspect of the community. They believe that the

Church of Christ has to be, in every situation, a witness to the truth, justice, reconciliation and love. They went on to say:

When we look back, we realise that there were times in the history of Stellenbosch that we as Presbytery didn't live out the prophetic responsibility that the Lord gave us or we were reluctant to do it. We are thinking about the last forty years when the government policy of Apartheid has broken down the human worthiness of people in our area, which has led to gross human-rights violations. In the area of our Presbytery there were those who built on the ideological framework through which these violations were justified. Views within the Presbytery and decisions that had been taken, very often functioned within this framework (ibid.).

The delegation from Stellenbosch confessed that people in Stellenbosch have been worked out of positions of influence in the past, because of the colour of their skin. This brought much pain to people to whom the church was not always sensitive. It was this insensitivity and political blindness that caused members of the Presbytery not to understand the cry of their brothers from the DRMC as is portrayed in the Confession of Belhar. Because they were dwelling amongst one another, the white people should have known the pain they bore. (*It was only in 1989 that the Presbytery could identify itself with the Confession of Belhar and in 1996 the Presbytery decided to accept the Confession*)

They said that efforts were made in the past to bridge the gap between the white church and the other members of the DRC family. There was even a combined Presbytery constituted, but all these initiatives failed. In spite of many positive efforts, the times they had to talk, they flinched away, for example, on issues such as detention without trial.

“At last we came to new insights. Therefore the Presbytery confessed in 1985, by means of a decision, our conduct during the time of Apartheid. At this stage we are confronted by the TRC with the pain and heartaches of fellow South Africans during the previous regime, and therefore *we have the need to confess* again our guilt before God and men. We wanted to do it at this hearing of the TRC, here in our own vicinity where our own people are sharing their pain and heartaches. *We confess* that we kept quiet at times when we should have spoken. *We confess* that, although we tried sometimes to protest against injustices, it was not bold and loud enough. Sometimes we commented on certain things, but many times we didn't see our way open to speak against the system. Many times we capitulated against opposing forces. We became tired and stopped protesting in times when we should have carried on.



Today *we confess* these things anew before the many people of Stellenbosch and the surrounding areas. *We confess* before the youth and children of our own church and congregations who feel that through our actions we have failed them (ibid.).

They ended their submission on a high note by giving hope that the Lord could work true forgiveness, reconciliation and healing in the country, because the Lord is a Lord of transforming grace. They hoped that He would use the Presbytery and the church in the future as an instrument for reconciliation.

“Therefore we commit ourselves to work and seek together with fellow believers for the will of God in our whole society” (ibid.).

At the end Tutu was visibly moved:

I am sure that I express the feelings of everybody in the hall when I say how thankful I am to God for what happened here today. I am deeply humbled. But this is what the grace of God does with a person. If you, like Isaiah the prophet, experience how guilty and full of shame you are standing before God, you also experience how God comes to join you in the fire, as it happened with Daniel’s three friends! The God of glory is also the God of the Cross... You are here today as wounded menders, the kind of menders that God can use for his purpose. I think God has a wonderful sense of humour. He looks down and says to us: ‘But what did you think? This is my world! Everything will turn out well!’ (ibid)

What struck all the people was that the ministers did not try to rationalise, that they did not balance their confession with the well known “Yes, but...” It was not necessary for them to remind the audience of all the good things the DRC has done through the years. Tutu did it when he told the people that the DRC was not only guilty of Apartheid, but that the church had done good things as well, things that could serve as an example to the other churches in the country (Meiring 1999: 85, 86).

The Synod of the Western and Southern Cape of the DRC also made a submission. After the finishing of the witness of the DRC *Reis met Apartheid*, it was decided by the above mentioned synod to take this and hand it over to “Drs Desmond Tutu and Alex Borrairie in the offices of the TRC in Cape Town. We talked openly with one another and Tutu was openly pleased that the Synod did this. He was, however, not very happy with the

negation of the so-called liberation theology, because he called himself a liberation theologian” (Gaum, 2004: 60).

It was thus very clear that there were voices within the DRC who couldn’t wait for the “official church” to get on with its task and make a submission.

On Wednesday, November 19, 1997, Rev. Freek Swanepoel, the incumbent Moderator of the DRC, took his place on the podium of the TRC. He didn’t actually have a mandate to speak for the church as a whole. A few days earlier, the General Synodical Commission decided that he should go to represent the DRC, and make a submission to the TRC, but that he had to bear in mind that he would not speak on behalf of the General Synodical Commission or the DRC. (Meiring 1999:277; Meiring 2003:250; Gaum 2004: 61) He began his speech with a few general comments:

Mr Chairman, I am thankful to the TRC for the invitation to take part in these faith community hearings. I truly believe that this will strengthen the essential process of reconciliation, firstly between faith communities and thereafter also in the broader community.

He mentioned that the commitment of the DRC towards reconciliation could be summarised by the two words, *reformation* and *transformation*. These imply a change and renewing of thinking on practical affairs as well as a transformation of structures and activity in the community. The DRC wants to be part of the solution of the country’s problems and not (as in the past –*Researcher*) part of the problem itself.

“Mr Chairman, my witness can be summarised as follows:

1. The DRC are committed to reconciliation.
2. We need other religious communities in this process.
3. How do we see the practical implications of reconciliation?
4. The past and the future” (ibid.).

He continued his submission in Afrikaans. He also said that he does not speak on behalf of all the members of the church, because there are often different groups in a church, those who support and those who oppose an issue. But he believes that the groups, who are positive, are in the majority.

He went on to say that the majority of members commit themselves to a future of reconciliation and prosperity between all people. The church wants to play a servile role,

to transform decisions on reconciliation, love for neighbours and involvement in the needs of people, into practical deeds.

In the past we were used to doing our own things, but we realised the necessity to take up the theological responsibility in collaboration with other churches and admit that, as regards mutual spiritual goals, there must be co-operation without prejudice.

As regards the practical implications of reconciliation, Rev. Swanepoel went on to say:

Reconciliation on a horizontal level is always between people. Therefore, in reconciliation there is always a personal element. For the DRC, reconciliation starts with building people up and therefore the preaching of the gospel will always be up foremost. There is a great need for the spiritual upliftment of people with regard to human dignity, co-existence and neighbourly love. People must learn values like acceptance, longsuffering, respect, honesty, etc...

Reconciliation also requires the development of the environment in which people live as well as their living conditions. Already during the General Synod of 1994, the DRC acknowledged that South Africa needs a program for the upliftment of communities and decided to enrol in the RDP program.

The DRC acknowledge the problem and extent of poverty in a large part of our population. The church is concerned about that part of the population where it seems there is no change in the situation (ibid.).

To build a strong future, Swanepoel continued, it is necessary that the past must be brought to a close. The DRC wants to talk honestly about the past, if its contributions towards reconciliation are accepted. The DRC has had its own struggle to reject Apartheid. Already in 1986 the church confessed regarding the mistake of giving a Biblical sanction to Apartheid. This was followed in 1990 by a further confession as was again done at Rustenburg, where the delegation of the DRC identified wholeheartedly with the confession of Prof. Willie Jonker. He went on to say:

In 1994 the General Synod acknowledged those members, office bearers and church meetings which allowed a loud and clear voice be heard against Apartheid.

The church also acknowledged that its rejection of Apartheid had also been influenced by these meetings as well as discussions with brothers and sisters of the family of Dutch Reformed Churches.

Perseverance on this standpoint has led, from time to time, to the loss of members and office bearers.

He said that in many congregations there is already a spirit of reconciliation working. He also gave as example the GCOWE-consultation of 1997 in Pretoria. This worldwide conference were attended by approximately 180 ministers of the DRC and, at the end of the conference, they publicly declared and confessed regarding wrong attitudes and deeds in the past and they committed themselves to work alongside other churches for salvation, unity and justice. The movement of reconciliation is growing.

The church has also continuously looked with compassion to the great numbers of people who have been aggrieved during the time of Apartheid, leading to poverty and suffering. Reluctance, disobedience and a lack of insight on the part of members and officials, regarding the need of society, have also been confessed before the Lord. The DRC asks for forgiveness from these people and acknowledge that its voice of protest and compassion had been too small.

It is therefore the wish of the DRC that work must be done in a dynamic way to bring about a radical change for the better in the living conditions and future opportunities of people who, for so many years, were without it.

He concluded his submission with the words:

The church lives in the hope that the Almighty Lord will bless our country with true peace, liberty and diligence. We dream of a country in which people accept one another and where every person can make his or her contribution towards peaceful co-existence. As a church we would like to be guided by God's Word: 'Try to be at peace with everyone' (Hebrews 12:14).

Signed: Rev. Freek Swanepoel; 14 November 1997.  
(Complete submission in Addendum 18)

Time was allowed for discussion and questions and after this Rev. Tutu turned to Rev Freek Swanepoel and thanked him for coming to say that the DRC are sorry. He also said that he prayed that the DRC will be used by God in the future. It is good to know that the church, which in the past was guilty of so many things, turned around, confessed to its members and the nation and is now on a new road (Meiring 1999:279).

Was this the best the DRC could do, one wants to ask? Maybe, under the circumstances, playing the cat-and-mouse game of 'should we or shouldn't we go to the TRC' into consideration, this submission could have come from any other church. The fact that it

didn't have the support of the DRC as a whole made it like so many other confessions in the past – a play with words. At the time of the submission the big issue of unification within the family of churches in the DRC was still hanging in the air – the so-called acid test hadn't proven anything yet. The submission didn't really give hope to people who had waited for something like a word of restitution or reparation on the part of the DRC.

The researcher believes that the fact that the DRC did make a submission to the TRC has given the church, once again, a little hope of credibility in the eyes of society at large. The important fact is that the Church said that it was sorry because it did not comprehend or offer to help ease the plight of the majority of people in the country.

#### **4.2.2 The Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHK)**

Although an invitation was extended to the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk van Afrika, they did not respond to the invitation. (TRC Report Vol. 4: 60; Meiring 1999: 274)

In a personal interview with Prof. Theuns Dreyer, the question was asked:

*According to the TRC, the NHK had not acted on their invitation to have a submission made before them. What would you say was the reason for not partaking in the process?*

According to Prof. Dreyer, the Moderature of the General Church Assembly discussed this at length when they received the invitation. He then gave some reasons why they decided not to react by saying 'yes' or 'no'.

According to him they had a problem with the composition of the TRC, in which was seen prejudice because political parties like the ANC and others, were behind this thing, and the Afrikaner and the Afrikaans churches did not really have a voice. From the outset the NHK perceived that it was clear to them that the whole thing would be driven in a specific direction.

He pointed out a second reason for not participating, namely that the process took on the idea of a juridical process with the exception that there would be no testing of the testimonies and no cross-examination of witnesses. In such a case, how would one know what was the truth?

The third reason was that because the whole idea of reconciliation had already been given a political flavour, we said to ourselves that it is important that reconciliation should take place. But reconciliation is in the first place an issue of faith or a church issue and thus we must use the church to bring people to reconciliation. In the political arena, the word reconciliation has evolved a different meaning than in the church. We see reconciliation in the first place as between Christians because of their relationship with God in Jesus Christ. This is a thing that must flow spontaneously from faith.

If we would say ‘yes’ and we went to the TRC, then we would be in the whirlpool of political prejudice and we couldn’t loosen ourselves from that. If we would say ‘no’, then the media would have made such a fuss about it that the NHK refused to work with the TRC, with the implication that the NHK didn’t want reconciliation. So we decided to only take notice of the invitation, because by saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ we would have hurt the church. In 1998 we did make a decision on confession of guilt. In the first place it had to do with confession of guilt before God and the church called all those who had to do with past practices which could violate human rights to confess their guilt before God and neighbour. How could one confess as a church, for all the people, because so many didn’t even know what was going on? The church also said that we must confess as a whole, if there was something that we did wrong, but we couldn’t think of any wrong doing at that stage (Addendum 6).

At last it was clear why the NHK has stood aloof from the whole TRC process. It is, however, a pity that so many Afrikaners, who are members of that church, have to live and work with so many other South Africans who knew how they felt and that they are not truly free. As someone once said: “The Afrikaner is the one who needs to be liberated from the past.”

### 4.2.3 The Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA)

During 1997 the synod of the RCSA met in Potchefstroom. Although it is the second smallest of the Afrikaans speaking Churches in South Africa it has, over the years, played an important role in Afrikaner ranks. At this meeting the delegates had to decide on a proposal prepared by one of the regional synods, to decide whether the RCSA should accept accountability for the establishment as well as the practices of Apartheid. There were objections from some delegates because, according to them, the proposal did not specify precisely which past RCSA decisions were in contention.

The RCSA considered the invitation of the TRC to make a submission, but they decided not to participate – although four theologians from this church (Revs. Alwyn du Plessis, Bennie van der Walt, Amie van Wyk and Ponti Venter) made a submission in their personal capacities (TRC Report Vol. 4 Ch 3 p 60). At the hearings only Bennie van der Walt and Ponti Venter could be present and they submitted their confessions.

In a personal interview with Prof. Amie van Wyk, he shed light on the submission they had brought to the TRC (see Addendum 3).

I drew up the draft of the confession, and the others helped to finalise it. In the end only two of us could present it at the TRC. The writing of that confession undoubtedly had an effect on me. It was something of a cry of distress, and when *Beeld* heard that something is going to be said, they wanted to publish it immediately, although we wanted it to be published first of all in *Woord en Daad*. In the end it was done as we asked.

As the representatives of the four theologians from Potchefstroom, Bennie van der Walt and Ponti Venter submitted their testimony before the TRC:

#### **A Public Confession from Potchefstroom**

The undersigned hereby make a public confession of guilt regarding their share in, and neglect with regard to Apartheid. The dictates of their conscience have urged them, more and more, to do this”.

The confession was drawn up under the headings of *Confession of guilt* and *Justification*. First of all they confessed that they were disobedient to God by not speaking out against the execution of the ideology of Apartheid and wanted to stand in the gap like Daniel



(9:5) on behalf of the people of Israel: “*We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws.*” (NIV)

They went on to declare that they were not faithful enough in their prayers, love and empathy for the people in distress and the victims of social injustice. They were guilty of the violation of basic human rights and all these injustices could only be removed by mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation. They not only pleaded for forgiveness from God, but also from fellow-believers and fellow-citizens. They went on to say:

On our part we undertake, as far as humanly possible, to make amends, in word and action, for the damage that we did to them through the unfair discriminatory system.

Regarding *Justification* they said:

There is no doubt that the ideology of Apartheid should be regarded as a sin, and the Biblical justification of it as heresy (*Proceedings of the synod of the Reformed Churches in South Africa, 1991:160/169*). Apartheid, after all, was a system of legitimised domination, discrimination and social injustice, which caused enormous suffering, humiliation and even death. The question is therefore relevant as to what should be done with the above acknowledgement of sin and heresy.

In the next part of their submission they went into the whole issue of confession of sin and the Scriptural grounds for that. They also showed that people like Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel stood in the “gap” for the nation of Israel.

They made it clear that their confession of guilt must not be seen as an attempt to testify against the guilt of the Afrikaner, but as an attempt to work for their liberation.

They went on to say that there are great areas of concern in our country at present; such as the increasing crime-rate, corruption and environmental pollution.

They made this confession, not out of external pressure, but because of internal conviction.

They end their submission with these words:

With this confession of guilt an attempt is made to serve the cause of the Kingdom of God in South Africa. We are convinced that confession of guilt encourages forgiveness, promotes reconciliation and therefore contributes to personal, ecclesiastical and social healing (Psalm 32).

Signed by: *Alwyn du Plessis, Bennie van der Walt, Amie van Wyk and Ponti Venter* (for complete submission see Addendum 17)

Bennie van der Walt reflected on this wonderful opportunity and said that it was touching to hear how the leaders of different churches confessed towards other churches about how they had condemned them in the past and how they asked for forgiveness.

Sometimes he grieved when he thought about the fact that his own church was not there and was “represented” by only two members. Sometimes he was despondent when he realised how little power the Reformed Christian faith showed in our country over the past fifty years. One asks oneself if it is possible that the Lord can use the church in the future of our country (Van der Walt, 1998: 18f).

#### **4.2.4 The Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM)**

Dr Burger and Rev. Chikane started their submission by saying that it was not easy for them to come to the meeting. Just as there were members who had voted against unification, there were also those who opposed the decision to send them here to make the submission. Some members even resigned from the Church. Dr Burger and Rev. Chikane said that the AFM is grateful to present a truly rainbow submission in which black, coloured and white members jointly accepted responsibility for the past (Meiring, 1999: 277).

The submission referred to a short Historical Overview, which highlighted the fact that the AFM started out as a multi-racial, multi-lingual, Pentecostal church, reaching out to all sectors of the South African community. Because of ideological issues, the church split up into Coloured, Black, White and Indian factions. In spite of this, interaction endured between the different factions. During the eighties, however, there was a stirring within the AFM family to become united. This was not without its problems and pains, but God’s will prevail, and by Easter 1996, the AFM was, once again, one church.

In a moving ceremony, the newly elected President of the united church, Dr Isak Burger, on behalf of the old white church, sought on behalf of the white people, forgiveness from the former Coloured, Black and Indian churches. The then newly elected Vice-President of the AFM, Dr Frank Chikane, accepted Dr Burger’s pleas and, on behalf of the churches of colour, apologised for possible hurt caused by these churches. They went on to say:

But it would be dishonest to deny that there still are pockets of racial discontent in some areas. We are working on that and have no doubt that God, in his great providential nature, will also turn the thinking of those still entrapped by their past.

In a paragraph entitled: *Political Overview*, the submission went on to declare how South Africans were prisoners of a political system in which the Black, Coloured and Indian communities were looked at as objects, rather than members of the human race. This paragraph concluded with the statement:

For that we all have to seek God's forgiveness and pray that such inhumanity would never again touch the shores of this great land.

Dr Burger then talked about the AFM and the System in which churches had to live out their prophetic calling. The AFM realised that many of their members were hurt by others who were part of the government and had to be obedient to those who were their superiors. As a church the AFM is trying hard to bring about healing and reconciliation in their ranks and to help and assist those who were physically and psychologically hurt by violation of their human rights. It is important, Dr Burger went on, to uphold the principle that forgiveness and reparation are inter-linked in the AFM. He went on to say:

What the AFM cannot deny, is that thousands of its members were employed in the structures of the former government. Many of our members held top positions in the former government organisations. The Police alone employed tens of thousands of our people, Black, White, Coloured and Indian. All our white young men were called up for military duty. We do not know how many committed evil deeds – and probably will never know.

Dr Burger said that the AFM had to admit that many of its members worked in structures where they could never foresee the misery and hardship caused by the executors of the government's policies.

This submission is necessary, because during the dark days of Apartheid many sought answers to the myriad of questions posed by members of the AFM. Answers were given by fellow Christians, who were even members of the AFM and because they were trusted, it was accepted without ensuring that it was the truth.

A plethora of laws made it impossible for the ordinary man to delve any deeper. We are today deeply hurt as we become aware of the injustices of

the past, as they are being brought to light by our own Commission, by our Courts and the media. We are baffled, stunned and confused. In the AFM there is not a section that did not in some way assist the old system to flourish and there is not a section that did not harm fellow believers.

As Dr Burger continued with the AFM's submission the audience heard that the AFM failed in its duty to question the system more, especially in the light of its continual preaching of love, charity, hope, justice and peace. The AFM missed the mark, because it was blinded to all the evils that had been unearthed in the past months by the TRC.

For that we need to apologise sincerely to all those out there who suffered. We can never reach each one of them ourselves. We are thankful for a forum through which we can express our sorrow.

We also owe it to them to plead with each member of the AFM to search himself/herself and to put right personally anything that has to be put right. We owe it to them to become more faithful watchdogs of what are happening in this country and to ensure our past history is never repeated and that future generations never be allowed to forget our past and perhaps stand accused of even worse transgressions than we had committed".

In conclusion Dr Burger declared that the AFM would like to reach out to those whom they can assist, to overcome the hurt of the past. The doors of the AFM will never be closed to such persons (see addendum 16).

In a personal interview, Dr Burger revealed to the researcher how he felt when he finished his paper at the TRC:

Let me tell you a story of what happened. I had the document that I presented to the TRC. When I finished, I asked the Chairperson whether I could show a short clip from the video that was made of the conference during the uniting of the church. It was the part where Frank Chikane and I were hugging each other. The cameras roamed over the people. You could see tears streaming from the eyes of black and white. What a psychological impact! People hugged each other. One black man came running to the stage and hugged me. Last Saturday a brown member told me that that day he was liberated from the racial hatred that he had in his heart. Spiritually and psychologically, that moment was the culmination point in our church. That was the moment of reconciliation between the black and white divisions of our church. When we finished, Rev. Tutu stood up and made the comment that they were on holy ground. He started to sing a

spiritual hymn in which Jesus was glorified – and that in front of the Muslims, Hindu's etc. (see addendum 1).

Dr Isak Burger and Rev. Frank Chikane were honoured with the Ubuntu-award in 1997, sponsored by Mageu 1, a division of Malbak. They received the award because of the role they played in the promotion of church unification and reconciliation in South Africa (Die Kerkbode 21 March 1997:16).

#### **4.2.5 The Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk (APK)**

During an interview with Prof. Isak Brink of the APK, it became clear that the leadership of the church didn't want to be involved, in any way, in the work of the TRC. They just took notice of what was happening but in no way did they partake in any of the activities of the TRC or pay any attention to any challenges directed to the faith communities (see addendum 2).

#### **4.2.6 The Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa (URCSA)**

The Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk (URCSA – Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa) had submitted one of the longest and most comprehensive submissions to the TRC.

The TRC had given a guideline to help in giving direction to the submissions and the submission of the URCSA followed that guideline, but very comprehensively. After reviewing the history of the URCSA, Rev James Buys, who was the spokesperson said, *inter alia*:

The amalgamation of the two churches represents a watershed in the history of the DRMC and the DRCA. This union represents a *kairos* moment in the life of the church in which it departs from Apartheid and contradicts the justification of racially divided churches. The event of unification, furthermore, had great symbolic value in view of the historical context in which it took place, namely, 10 days before the first free and democratic elections in SA.

It was clearly stated in the submission that it was not possible to reflect on every decision and action taken by the church. In broad strokes it gave an overview of what they understood under the violation of Human Rights. It said:

“The URCSA never condoned but rather sought to criticise the Apartheid government for the violation of rights. In this regard, it can be indicated that the church’s decisions and synodical debates (that are not always reflected in minutes) exposed members to persecution. In this sense members became the victims of violations. When, with the benefit of hindsight, we ask ourselves whether the church had done enough to prevent and oppose human rights violations, we emphatically answer: No!

The submission went on to pay attention to the following points of concern:

Group areas and homeland policy; Migrant labour; Mixed marriages; the Apartheid war: Chaplain Services; Apartheid structures.

Because the Chaplain Services of the Afrikaans Churches, during the “war against terrorism and Communism” by the previous government, was mentioned from time to time during the process of the TRC, it was necessary to hear what the URCSA had to say about that:

Although individual members of the synods opposed the idea of participation in the chaplain service, the church continued to support ministers with this service. Through this act the church participated in this “holy war” and even blessed it. It neither resisted it nor guided its members in opposing it. Thus the church contributed to gross human rights violations, polarisation and indescribable suffering and grief.

The reason for the failure to live up to the principles of faith, opposing the human rights violations could be found in the fact the URCSA is rooted in the reformed tradition and it relies strongly on the Calvinist doctrine on church-state relationships. This doctrine clearly teaches the responsibility of the church, as an institution and as individual members. Therefore:

The failure to denounce, resist and incite to resist Apartheid and its resulting violations of human rights constitutes the failure of the church to live up to its faith convictions.... Many decisions were taken but no challenge to action by its members followed. In the main the church’s voice in this regard was relatively quiet before 1980.

A confession of guilt and a plea for forgiveness were worked into the submission. It stated:

The URCSA wishes to use the opportunity

- (a) in view of acts of commission or omission to consequently oppose human rights violations;
- (b) in view of its subtle recognition of the illegitimate Apartheid regime through liaison, representation and negotiation;
- (c) in view of its silence and conscious and unconscious lack of clarity in word and deed, to confess unreservedly its and, vicariously, its members' guilt.

We herewith plead for the forgiveness of our fellow citizens and the Supreme, Triune God.

A question regarding this confession of guilt has arisen in the mind of many white South Africans, especially those in the Afrikaans community: "Was it also addressed to them and their pain and loss at the hand of the "freedom fighters?"

To end its submission, the URCSA proposed a few actions that may contribute to reconciliation. This will be reflected on in the next chapter.

During an interview Rev. Buys, who did the submission on behalf of the URCSA, commented on the TRC and this opportunity. He said, inter alia, that with the TRC a process was introduced that highlighted a few dimensions. Firstly there was the opportunity for people to witness in front of the commission regarding the period of Apartheid and what could be done to work reconciliation in the country. Combined with that were the hearings of persons who applied for amnesty. What is striking about this process were the cases of people who had lost somebody and come into contact with the perpetrators. Just the knowledge of what happened to the victims, the circumstances and the attitude that was cultivated in the commission, is something that wouldn't have been possible otherwise.

#### **4.2.7 Open letter of Dr Beyers Naudé**

During June and July 1997, an Open Letter of confession was sent to pastors and church leaders. In all, 610 pastors had responded by signing the letter. The letter, with the signatures attached to it, was submitted to the TRC on 15 November 1997 (Du Toit, 1998: viii).



The letter was submitted by Prof. Nico Smith, who, with Dr Beyers Naudé had drawn up the letter. Since it is of such importance for the church in our country, the letter in its entirety is quoted here.

### **An open letter to pastors of all churches 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 pulpits 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, liturgies and sacraments that disturbed the consciences of those who were directly involved in 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 did not feel confronted by our preaching. We are guilty of having allowed the rules to execute the ideology of forced separation for the sake of the 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 represented itself as justifiable from the Bible. We lacked the gift discerning the spirits, because we had no 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, did not 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 the National Party rule. Many of us, therefore, could not and would not 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 co-operation 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 on their political and socio-economic responsibilities.

We also want *to make amends* for neglecting the needs of the poor and 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 with 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 pastors have stood bravely in the struggle for justice, it is our hope that every church pastor 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 in a process of healing and rebuilding our nation, send your reply before the end of June, to the following address:

(Address given)

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 pastors. We hereby also wish to extend this invitation to spiritual leaders of other regions, to participate in this 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. (Researcher's Italics)*

**Drafted and signed by:** Beyers Naudé, Nico Smit, Cornel du Toit, Tinyiko Malukele, Moss Nthla, Nico Botha, etc.” (Du Toit 1998: 9-11)

After hearing this, Prof. Piet Meiring made the following comment: “If Oom Bey, of all people, said that he suffered fervent remorse – what about me? If he was beseeching his fellow South Africans to forgive him, shouldn’t I be doing far more myself? I was convinced that I was not the only person who felt like this” (Meiring 1999: 280). Indeed, he was not the only person.

Many critical voices were heard after this letter was submitted. Not all theologians agreed with Beyers Naudé and his colleagues. Right from the start of the proceedings of the TRC, there were many theologians and ministers of churches who lifted their voices regarding the incompetence of the TRC. The TRC was definitely not the mirror many churchmen wanted to face. Bouke Spoelstra, from the Reformed Churches, joined the debate. He was a retired professor emeritus from Potchefstroom. He had serious objections against the TRC and the roles of Tutu and Boraine. The actions and the composition of the TRC made Spoelstra think of the “witch-hunts and the inquisition of the Middle Ages...”. According to him, Tutu and Boraine and their colleagues on the TRC were incompetent and ill equipped to undertake the journey to truth and reconciliation” (Meiring 1999:158)

The conference that was referred to in the letter was hosted by the Research Institute for Theology and Religion at UNISA on 23 and 24 March 1998. The aim of this conference was to present a forum in which there could be reflection on all aspects pertaining to the church and confession. The idea surfaced that it would be a sad day for religion in this country if the TRC hearings, with all they revealed, passed without the churches’ responding to them. The sad fact is that most church leaders seemed reluctant to reflect on the role the church played during the Apartheid era. This corresponds to the hostility expressed by so many church members toward the TRC. It is difficult not to be sceptical

regarding the initiatives that white mainline churches will take to further the reconciliation process (Du Toit, 1998: viii).

#### **4.2.8 Did the submissions by the churches serve any purpose?**

Meiring asked the question whether the three days of church hearings was a worthwhile event. It is not easy to give a clear-cut answer to this question. Since this study is about the role of the Afrikaans Churches, it is difficult to say, because not all the churches under discussion brought submissions to the TRC. In reality it was only the URCSA, which, as far as we know, had the backing of their church. Even the AFM didn't have the backing of the whole denomination and neither had the DRC. The NHK and APK didn't have anything to do with the TRC, while from a corner of the RCSA a submission was made by four theologians, as their General Synod decided against participating (Meiring, 1999:281).

As stated earlier, the researcher believes that the psychological effect of making a submission to the TRC could be of great value, not only for the person who did it, but also for the denomination, even if it was with reluctance.

Meiring made it very clear that those churches and other religious groups played different roles during the past. As regards the Afrikaans Churches it was very clear that they gave active support to the previous regime and even gave a theological foundation for Apartheid. In those churches' submissions, confessions were made and the victims were asked for forgiveness. The researcher believes that in the case of the DRC, where confession had actually started in the synods of 1986 and again in 1990, at Rustenburg and other opportunities, it was, at this time, certain that those who made the submission meant what they said (Cochrane et al 1999: 37-43).

In the TRC report it was mentioned that for some churches it was an act of omission – of not letting their voice be heard when it should have (Report TRC Vol. 4 Chapter 3).

Could the churches now sit back and rejoice because reconciliation had arrived? No!!

The TRC was just a catalyst to open and close the books of the past, so that the communities of South Africa could come to grips with the issues at hand. This paved the way for the years to come, especially for the churches, and again especially for the Afrikaans Churches, for their own sake and trustworthiness. Will it come easy? No!! It will need hard work. Will there be guidelines as how to go about it in the years to come? Yes! This will be discussed in the next chapter.