

Meiring, PGJ (Piet)<sup>1</sup>  
University of Pretoria

## Remembering Cottesloe: Delegates to the Cottesloe consultation tell their stories

### ABSTRACT

The Cottesloe consultation (December 1960) was a watershed moment in the life of the church in South Africa, especially in the life of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). The eight South African member churches of the World Council of Churches were called together to reflect on the churches' role during the emergency in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre earlier that year. In the article the author looks at the consultation through the eyes of the delegates, allowing them to tell their stories about the proceedings – and about the many crises that followed in the wake of the consultation. Cottesloe's message was strongly critical of apartheid and the fact that the DRC delegates aligned themselves with the message, was unacceptable to many. In the last section of the article the “bitter fruits of Cottesloe” are discussed. Finally the question is asked: Has the ghost of Cottesloe been put to rest?

### 1. DYNAMITE!

“Do you realize that this statement contains dynamite?”, a journalist at the press conference at the conclusion of the Cottesloe consultation asked Dr W. A. Visser 't Hooft, general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC).<sup>2</sup> How true his observation was, and just how strong the explosion was that was to follow in the next days, neither of them, probably, would have foreseen. In itself the Cottesloe Resolutions were not that remarkable. “Not a very striking document”, Visser 't Hooft observed in his report to the WCC. Dr Franklin Clark Fry who chaired the consultation added in his report: “While many statements it contained might seem commonplace outside South Africa, they were in fact very significant and far-reaching within the South African scene”.<sup>3</sup>

Far-reaching indeed! For years to come the name Cottesloe would reverberate across the country, in churches and at synodical meetings, in countless statements and articles in the media, in debates in Parliament, in secret meetings of the Afrikaner Broederbond, around dinner tables. The delegates to the consultation were lauded in some quarters, vilified in others.

### 2. EVENTS LEADING TO THE COTTESLOE CONSULTATION

Why was the consultation held? What were the reasons for calling the churches to the Cottesloe Residence on the campus of the University of the Witwatersrand? The year 1960 will be remembered for a series of dramatic and disturbing events. The notorious Clause 29 (c) of the Native Laws Amendment Bill, promulgated by Parliament three years earlier, had

---

<sup>1</sup> Emeritus Professor, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

<sup>2</sup> Lückhoff, A. H. 1978. *Cottesloe*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 153.

<sup>3</sup> Lückhoff, *Cottesloe*, 153.

created havoc in church circles. The act made it virtually impossible for black Christians to join in services of worship in so-called white areas. A wide outcry from the church community followed. Even the DRC was perturbed by the new act, and did not mind saying so.

And then, on the fateful day of March 21, 1960, police in the Sharpeville township, south of Johannesburg, opened fire on a large number of blacks who were protesting against the carrying of the hated pass books that humiliated them and complicated their lives. After half a minute of shooting, 69 protesters, most of whom were women, were killed; 186 were wounded. Accounts on the events of the day differ. According to the findings of Justice Wessels who chaired the judicial inquiry after the event, 10 000 protesters converged on the police station, endangering the lives of the police. The leadership of the Pan African Congress who sponsored the protest differed. It was a peaceful protest, they said. The only violence that was perpetrated, was by the police. Many of the victims, they added, were shot in the back.<sup>4</sup>

Weeks later, at the annual Rand Easter Show in Johannesburg, an assassin wounded the Prime Minister of the country, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd. A state of emergency was declared and in the weeks following, a large number of blacks were arrested, many of them taken to prison or banned.

A public outcry followed, in South Africa as well as abroad. What was happening in the country? What is the Christian community doing to curtail the violence and the injustice? many asked. In Geneva, at the offices of the WCC, Visser 't Hooft was mandated to approach the eight member churches of the ecumenical body in South Africa with a proposal to facilitate a meeting to discuss these events and to decide on the role of the churches in this regard. Dr Robert Bilheimer was sent on a series of visits to South Africa to test the waters, and if possible, to organize a consultation.

It was a difficult and painstaking process. In his comprehensive book *Cottesloe*, Abraham Lückhoff devoted a whole chapter on the preparations for the Cottesloe consultation. There was a hesitation among some church leaders to involve themselves and their churches in the process. Tension between the Anglican Church and the DRC threatened to scuttle the WCC initiative. The Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Dr Joost de Blank, angered the DRC – and frustrated the WCC officials in Geneva – by his continued insistence that the DRC should first change its stance on apartheid before his church would sit around the table with the DRC leadership. In a letter to Visser 't Hooft he did not mince his words: “The future of Christianity in this country demands our complete dissociation from the Dutch Reformed attitude ... Either they must be expelled or we shall be compelled to withdraw”<sup>5</sup> In the end, Billheimer and Visser 't Hooft, with the help of the Anglican leadership in England, prevailed upon the archbishop to change his stance. All eight member churches in South Africa agreed to a consultation, to be held in Johannesburg, under the supervision of the WCC.

### 3. THE COTTESLOE CONSULTATION, 7-14 DECEMBER 1960

The delegations from the member churches, meeting in the Cottesloe residence on the Wits Campus, came well prepared. In the months leading to the consultation all of them were asked to prepare memoranda revolving around five themes: their evaluation of the

---

4 De Gruchy, John W. 1982: *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Cape Town: David Philip, 63.

5 Lückhoff, *Cottesloe*, 19; De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, 63.

current situation in South Africa, the Christian interpretation of the gospel in terms of race relations; the interpretation of recent history from a Christian perspective; the impact of the state of emergency in South Africa; and the Church's witness in terms of justice, mission and ecumenical co-operation.<sup>6</sup>

On the 7th of December Dr Franklin Fry welcomed the eighty delegates to the meeting, ten from each church: the Bantu Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in SA, the Anglican Church (Church of the Province of S A ), the Congregational Union, the Methodist Church, the Dutch Reformed Churches from the Cape and Transvaal, and the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika. Apart from Fry, Bilheimer and Visser 't Hooft, a number of WCC officials attended the consultation: Bishop Lakdasa de Mel from Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Mr Charles Coolidge Parlin from the USA, Dr Wilhelm Niesel from Germany, and Sir Francis Ibiyam from Nigeria. The Cape DRC's delegation was headed by Dr A. J. van der Merwe, and included five theological professors. The Transvaal delegation, headed by the Rev A. M. Meiring, also included two professors in Theology, as well as the Rev S. S. Tema and Rev J. Selamolela. All in all 18 black delegates participated in the proceedings, among them Bishop Alpheus Zulu and Professor Z. K. Matthews. Among the lay delegates were the author Alan Paton and Professor Monica Wilson, the only woman at the consultation.

Dr Fry's opening address, according to Visser 't Hooft, was "a masterpiece". He acknowledged the concern of the Afrikaans churches that they, once again, would find themselves in the dock. He however made it very clear: "Is there going to be pressure? If you mean against your own conviction, the answer is no ... If, however, pressure means the pressure of God's Word, the answer is yes, this pressure is equal upon us all"<sup>7</sup>

The delegations were divided into four groups of twenty each, to discuss the memoranda prepared by the churches. On Day Three a crisis loomed. Although all the delegates had previously agreed that the discussions would be in camera and that no delegate would individually speak to the press, the Afrikaans newspaper *Die Transvaler* that morning reported that some Afrikaans church leaders had voiced their concern about the value of the meeting. They were disappointed by the very critical sentiments of some of the delegates during the discussions. Dr Fry was deeply disturbed and wanted to know who were responsible for the leak. Nobody confessed and the editor of *Die Transvaler* refused to name his source.

Beyers Naude recalled the incident:

"The general suspicion was that Prof S P Engelbrecht from the Hervormde Kerk was responsible for the leak. The other newspapers threatened to break their own promise not to publish inside information on the Cottesloe consultation, but did in the end agree to keep their silence on condition that they would receive a press release at the end of the consultation."<sup>8</sup>

This was a sad turn of events, oom Bey added. If the leak in *Die Transvaler* had not occurred,

6 Crafford D. and Gous G. 1993: *Een Liggaam – Baie Lede*. (One Body – Many Members) Pretoria: Verba Vitae, 91-92; cf Du Toit, Flip (et al) 2002: *Moeisame pad na Vernuwing. Die N G Kerk se pad van isolasie en die soeke na 'n nuwe relevansie* (The Difficult Road to Renewal. The DRC's Road away from isolation and in search of a new relevance). Bloemfontein: Barnabas, 54ff.

7 Lückhoff, *Cottesloe*, 75.

8 Naudé, Beyers 1995. *My Land van Hoop* (My Country of Hope) Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 51. My translation.

a public statement at the end of the meeting would not have been necessary. The member churches would have had the opportunity to take the resolutions to their own constituencies in their own time – and Cottesloe would have been spared the explosion in the public arena in the aftermath of the consultation.<sup>9</sup>

It is understandable that, initially, some tension existed among the delegates. To learn to understand one another and to trust one another, took some time. Visser't Hooft remembered:

“Afrikaner en Engelssprekende, blank en swart, draaien om elkaar heen en beloeren elkaar. Maar weldra komen er persoonlijke contacten tussen mense van verskillende afkomst. De Bijbelstudie, de humor van een Lakdasa de Mel, of een Franklik Fry, het saamen eten (alleen die Hervormde Kerk zaten altijd alleen aan een tafeltje apart) droegen by tot ontdooiing. En ten slotte was er een echte verbroedering. Mense, die niet geneigd waren sentimenteel te worden, waren diep onder de indruk. We hadden het gevoel dat er iets groots gebeurd was.”<sup>10</sup>

Speaking of the humour of Franklik Fry. Rev Meiring in later years loved to quote the words of the chairperson who, on a very hot December day, during the afternoon session, remarked: “Brothers, I always thought that we are members of the Church Militant. I stand corrected. It seems to me that we, rather, belong to the Church Dormant!”

When the time came for drafting and accepting resolutions, it was agreed that those issues and viewpoints that were acceptable to the majority of delegates would be tabled. Proposals that received 80 per cent of the vote, would be included in the final report. The delegations of the DRC (Cape Synod as well as Transvaal Synod) were at the centre of things. Not so the Hervormde Kerk, whose delegates at the end rejected the final statement out of hand. The DRC delegates were virtually unanimous in supporting the Cottesloe statement. One reason for this, De Gruchy noted, was that the final statement was largely based on the preparatory documents that the DRC brought with them to the consultation.

The Cottesloe Statement did contain dynamite. Reading through the three subsections today, one tends to recall Dr Fry’s observation that in many parts of the world – also in South Africa in the 21st century – there is little to raise the eyebrow. But in apartheid South Africa, in the 1960s, this was explosive stuff!

- We recognise that all racial groups who permanently inhabit our country are a part of our total population, and we regard them as indigenous. Members of all of these groups have an equal right to make their contributions towards the enrichment of the life of their country and to share in the ensuing responsibilities, regards and privileges.
- The body of Christ is unity and within the unity the natural diversity among men is not annulled but sanctified. No-one that believes in Jesus Christ may be excluded from any church on the grounds of his colour or race.

---

<sup>9</sup> Naudé, *My Land van Hoop*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Translation: Afrikaner and English, black and white, walked circles around one another, carefully watching each other. But soon personal contacts between people from different backgrounds grew. The Bible studies, the humour on one Lakdasa de Mel or one Franklin Fry, the eating together (only the delegates from the Hervormde Kerk preferred to sit alone at their own little table), helped us to thaw towards one another. At the end we really became brothers. People who usually are not sentimental, were deeply touched. We had the feeling that something very special was taking place. Lückhoff, *Cottesloe*, 95.

- There are no Scriptural grounds for the prohibition of mixed marriages.
- We call attention, once again, to the disintegrating effects of migrant labour on African life.
- It is our conviction that the right to own land wherever he is domiciled, and to participate in the government of his country, is part of the dignity of the adult man.
- It is our conviction that there can be no objection in principle to the direct representation of Coloured people in Parliament.<sup>11</sup>

Before attending to the reaction to the Cottesloe Statement, Dr Frans Geldenhuys reminds us in his memoirs of a remarkable incident at the consultation, that unfortunately did not receive the attention it merited:

“Some of us will remember the harsh and unfriendly way in which Dr Joost de Blank, archbishop of the Church of the Province, used to speak about the DRC. At Cottesloe we had the opportunity to look one another straight in the eye. On the last day, at the plenary session, De Blank rose from his seat, indicating that he has something on his heart. He wanted to apologize to his brothers and colleagues from the Dutch Reformed Church for what he in the past had said about them. Having had the opportunity to spend a week with them as fellow Christians he realized that he was wrong in judging them. It did not mean that he necessarily agreed with all of their viewpoints, but he wanted to say how sorry he was for condemning them.”<sup>12</sup>

De Blank's statement made a huge impact on the delegates. Wilhem Niesel, one of the ecumenical officials, referred to it as “Das Schönste, was am Ende der Konferetz geschah”.<sup>13</sup> Geldenhuys opined: “I am still sorry that the press did not give proper attention to this, but rather concentrated on the ‘dangerous’ resolutions of the consultation.”<sup>14</sup>

Beyers Naudé recalled the same incident but added a rider: Some critics of Cottesloe did indeed take note of De Blank's gesture, but interpreted it differently, with serious suspicion. It just showed how De Blank took the Afrikaans churchmen for a ride!<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. THE BITTER FRUITS OF COTTESLOE

In his autobiography, *My Land van Hoop*, Beyers Naudé devoted a whole chapter to “die bitter nasleep van Cottesloe” (the bitter fruits of Cottesloe). Abraham Lückhoff needed three chapters in his book to cover the reaction to the consultation. Frans Geldenhuys, as well as Willie Jonker (who was in Holland at the time of Cottesloe, but who attended the Transvaal Synod some months later), provide us with vivid descriptions of the aftermath of Cottesloe as well.

Already at the consultation the DRC delegates had a premonition of what was to come. After the final session Dr A J van der Merwe, moderator of the Cape Synod, called the DRC delegates together: “Brothers, it is necessary that we acknowledge the serious implications of these

---

11 *Cottesloe Consultation* 1960. Geneva: WCC, 73-75.

12 Geldenhuys, F E o'Brien 1982: *In die Stroomversnellings*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 51. My translation.

13 Translation: The very best that happened at the end of the conference. Strassberger, Elfriede 1974.

*Ecumenism in South Africa 1936-1960*. Johannesburg: SACC, 229.

14 Geldenhuys, *Stroomversnellings*, 51. My translation.

15 Naudé, *My Land van Hoop*, 50.

resolutions for us.” Rev Bertie Brink from the Transvaal Synod warned: “We need to prepare ourselves for tempestuous times”.<sup>16</sup>

The reaction against Cottesloe was swift and vehement. Two days after the conclusion the Hervormde delegation announced over the radio that they had distanced themselves from the Cottesloe Statement. They had not trusted the process from the beginning, and would have no part in the resolutions – even though some of their delegates had voted in favour of some of the resolutions during the discussions.

Commentary in the English press was mostly favourable, but the two Afrikaans newspapers in the Transvaal, *Die Transvaler* and *Die Vaderland*, blasted both the Cottesloe Statement and the delegates, especially the DRC delegation. In Cape Town, the editor of *Die Burger* was far more sympathetic in his commentary. The time had come for Afrikaners to take a long hard look at race relations, he wrote. Cottesloe challenges us all to re-examine our thinking. Dr A P Treurnicht, editor of *Die Kerkbode*, the official newspaper of the DRC, joined the fray, condemning Cottesloe as an “unacceptable coup d’état”.<sup>17</sup>

And then the Prime Minister of South Africa spoke.

In his New Year Message (January 1, 1961) Dr Verwoerd did not mince his words, effectively destroying any positive contribution that Cottesloe might have had offered to the solution of South Africa’s problems. Cottesloe, he said, was a reprehensible effort by foreigners to meddle in South African affairs. The WCC will never have a lasting impact on the way we think and act in South Africa. He added: “In fact, the Churches have not spoken yet. The voice of the Church still needs to be heard. That will happen when the synods speak, where both predikante and lay people will have their say”.<sup>18</sup>

In the English speaking churches the reaction was mild. There was nothing in the resolutions, John de Gruchy noted, that was new or unacceptable. If anything they did not go far enough.<sup>19</sup> But what would the DRC do? That was the question.

In the Transvaal DRC a storm was raging. Church councils and presbyteries voiced their strong protest against Cottesloe. The Afrikaner Broederbond and other cultural organisations sent angry letters and admonitions to their members to be on the watch against the enemy within. In Heidelberg, Transvaal, the local dominee, the Rev Meiring, had a hard time explaining himself. The fact that Dr Verwoerd served as the Member of Parliament for the town did not make it easier! Visser ‘t Hooft must have taken note of this. He wrote in a personal letter to Meiring: “Ik behoef u niet te zeggen hoe zeer my gedachten en gebeden in deze weken naar Zuid-Afrika gaan en in bijzonder naar degenen, die in het centrum van de geestelijke strijd staan”.<sup>20</sup>

In March 1961 an extraordinary meeting of the synodical commission of the DRC was called to discuss the Cottesloe issue. In April the Transvaal synod was due to meet, and a strategy for dealing with Cottesloe had to be devised. An ad hoc-commission was appointed to

---

16 Naudé, *My Land van Hoop*, 53.

17 Naudé, *My Land van Hoop*, 55.

18 Lückhoff, *Cottesloe*, 116; Naudé, *My Land van Hoop*, 56; De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, 67.

19 De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, 67.

20 *Meiring Archive*. The author’s private collection of the papers of Rev A M Meiring. Translation: I need not tell you how much my thoughts and prayers are reaching out to South Africa, especially to those who find themselves in the centre of the spiritual battle.

decide upon the merits of the Cottesloe Consultation as well as to inform synod on the DRC's continued membership of the WCC.

When synod convened on April 5, 1961, tension was in the air. The election of office bearers right at the beginning would indicate the way the wind was blowing – everyone in the hall knew that. Will the old moderation, all of them Cottesloe delegates, be re-elected or replaced? A M Meiring was, against the expectations of many, re-elected *moderator*, but with a meagre majority of 9 votes, against A J V Burger, an outspoken Cottesloe critic. Beyers Naude lost the election as *assessor* with a 450 against 280 votes against Burger. Frans Geldenhuys who for many years admirably served synod as *actuaris*, lost against Willie Jonker, with exactly the same vote count. Jonker who had just returned from study leave in Holland, wrote about his total shock at his election. The people don't know me, he thought. I agree with Cottesloe! During the course of the debates he left synod no doubt about that, to the extent that someone was overheard saying in the foyer: We have replaced Satan with Beelzebub!<sup>21</sup>

For a full two and a half days Cottesloe was on the agenda. The delegates to the consultation were asked to sit on the podium facing the seven hundred pastors and elders in the hall, and to explain their actions and their resolutions. At the end a proposal to reject the Cottesloe resolutions was adopted by a vast majority. A second proposal to sever the DRC's ties with the WCC was adopted with even a larger majority.

Seven months later, when the Cape Synod of the DRC convened (4 November 1961), some measure of calm had returned. The Cottesloe delegates, A J van der Merwe en W A Landman, were re-elected as moderator and scribe. But in deciding on the Cottesloe statement the dominees and elders at the Cape synod were as strong in their convictions as the Transvaal synod. Cottesloe had to be rejected, and the Church's membership of the WCC terminated.

And the black members of the DRC's delegation? Were they more successful in communicating Cottesloe to their people? One of them, Bilheimer wrote in one of his reports to the WCC, answered the question laconically: When the white church had spoken, there was very little left for the black church to say. Their synod had taken no action on Cottesloe, because the Mother Church has laid down the line.<sup>22</sup>

Looking back, what were the fruits of the Cottesloe experience, the "bitter fruits" according to Beyers Naudé. Reading the reports and the testimonies of the "Cottesloe heroes" (as Bilheimer called them), as well as taking note of the views of more recent researchers and authors, it seems to me that at least four bitter fruits need to be mentioned.

#### 4.1 Thinking about apartheid: dogmatics replaced ethics

In preparation for Cottesloe, Dr J Alex van Wyk from the DRC Theological School, Turfloop, wrote to Visser 't Hooft explaining the different thought patterns concerning race relations in the DRC. It's all about the central principle, he said. For many ministers the principle is quite simple: Apartheid is divinely ordained. God had created different nations and different races and they should be kept apart. Integration is against God's will. A second group in the church,

---

<sup>21</sup> Jonker, Willie 1998. *Selfs die kerk kan verander* (Even the church can change). Cape Town: Tafelberg, 47.

<sup>22</sup> Luckhoff, *Cottesloe*, 152.

a minority group, sees the differences between nations and races as incidental and as relative. Integration is a distinct possibility.<sup>23</sup>

Years later, in his evaluation of apartheid thinking in the DRC, Johan Kinghorn restated Van Wyk's opinion. Referring to the memorandum prepared by the Cape Synod for the Cottesloe Consultation, the Cape Synod, according to Kinghorn, did argue for apartheid, or separate development. But it was quite clear that apartheid was not regarded as an eternal principle, applicable to all times and in all places. It was an ideal, not a principle. Other possibilities for regulating race relations may, and should, be studied and even taken seriously, the report maintained. Alternative political solutions may be contemplated. Integration may be regarded a viable alternative to separate development. Apartheid, the memorandum stated, was a policy, a medium, nothing more.

Johan Kinghorn explains the issue as follows: In the Cape memorandum, as well as in our evaluation of the Cottesloe Statement, we are confronted by a basic choice: should apartheid be seen as an ethical or a dogmatic (doctrinal) issue? Is the "theology of apartheid" an example of ethical or dogmatic thinking? If the choice is ethics, the implication is that apartheid is to be regarded as a very practical human issue. You may decide to take it or to leave it. If the choice is for dogmatics, the choice is for a divinely ordained socio-political solution. Apartheid, then, is to be regarded as the only key in our hand. God wills us to separate nations and races, to live apart. The rejection of Cottesloe, Kinghorn concluded, indicates the DRC's choice: dogmatics in stead of ethics. The theology of apartheid that was developed over many years since the time of J D du Toit (Totius) in the 1940s, and by A B du Preez, F J M Potgieter and A P Treurnicht in the 1950s, had won the day.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4.2 Critical thinking became increasingly difficult

Both Naudé and Geldenhuys lamented the fact that in the wake of Cottesloe, critical thinking in the ranks of the DRC became more and more difficult. The barrage of criticism that confronted the Cottesloe delegates, the way in which men and women who dared to think differently, were side-lined, sometimes ostracized, and declared to be unpatriotic, even un-Christian, deterred many to think, and speak, and stand for themselves. Bilheimer picked this up when he visited South Africa in the aftermath of Cottesloe. Some do dare to stand behind the Cottesloe delegates, but they do so in private. They do write letters to newspapers, but usually under pseudonyms. Bilheimer had great admiration for the Cottesloe delegates who weathered the storm, who remained true to their convictions. "These are men who show forth the joy of a new obedience. Their faces are alight, their spirits are buoyant. I have no hesitation in saying that this little group of DRC men is engaged in one of the most decisive struggles of the spirit and the Church that we are privileged to witness. Their verdict is: We shall lose a battle or two, but we shall not lose the war."<sup>25</sup>

For Beyers Naudé the road after Cottesloe led to leaving the ministry of the DRC. He founded the Christian Institute and edited the CI's magazine *Pro Veritate*. For many he became a human beacon of hope, daring to stand for truth and justice and for reconciliation, but at a considerable cost to himself and his family. In the end it led to his banning by the state. But he

---

23 Lückhoff, *Cottesloe*, 69).

24 Kinghorn, Johan (et al) 1986. *Die N G Kerk en Apartheid* (The DRC and Apartheid). Johannesburg: Macmillan, 118.

25 Lückhoff, *Cottesloe*, 152.

never lost hope, and tried to maintain ties with his colleagues in the church, endeavouring to explain himself to them, encouraging them and challenging them to stand up for what is right and just<sup>26</sup>. In a very poignant personal letter to Rev A M Meiring (June 24, 1962) Naudé wrote:<sup>27</sup>

"Liewe Arnold,

Hartlik en innig dank vir jou antwoord van 28 Mei insake my telegram oor die Sabotasie-wetsontwerp. Ek is dankbaar vir wat jy probeer doen én reggekry het en dit spyt my dat daar van die ander broers is wat blykbaar die opregte bedoelinge van my versoek bevestig.

Die hele aangeleentheid van ons getuienis as Christene teenoor Kerk en owerheid het my die afgelope tyd baie besig gehou. Ek weet dat sommige mede-broers in die bediening asook baie lidmate my siening en optrede skerp kritiseer, ook deur my deelname aan Pro Veritate. In die lig van vroeëre gesprekke wat ons gehad het wil ek hier persoonlik teenoor jou getuig dat ek oortuig is daarvan dat ons as Christene ons diepste oortuiginge in 'n tyd soos hierdie nie moet verswyg nie, maar juis moet uitspreek. In 'n preek gelewer 27 Mei (waarvan ek 'n afskrif aan jou stuur) het ek gesoek om aan die gemeente dit te doen. Hoe dit ookal misverstaan mag word deur sommige, is ek oortuig dat dit nodig is as ons N G Kerk sy profetiese getuienis nie heeltemal kragteloos wil laat word nie.

Miskien stem jy nie saam met my en my siening oor ons optrede en boodskap in hierdie tyd nie. Dit verwag ek ook nie, solank ek weet dat jy en 'n paar ander broers met wie ek baie dinge uit my eie lewe gedeel het, weet dat my uitsprake en optrede nie gemotiveer word deur sondige oorgevoeligheid of selfbejammering of gekrenkte trots nie, maar dat hulle gebore is uit 'n eerlike en opregte soeke na die waarheid in Christus.

---

26 Pauw, J C 2005: "The Life and Legacy of Beyers Naudé" in Hansen, L D 2005: *The Legacy of Beyers Naudé*. Beyers Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 13ff.

27 *Meiring Archive*. Translation: Dear Arnold, I want to thank you, cordially and sincerely, for your answer of the 28<sup>th</sup> of May concerning my telegram *re* the Sabbotage bill. I am grateful for what you are trying to do, and succeed in doing, and it saddens me that some of the other brothers seemingly question the motives behind my request.

The whole issue of our Christian witness towards the State has been occupying my mind to a great extent. I know that some of our fellow brothers in the ministry as well as congregants harshly criticize my views, as well as my work with *Pro Veritate*. In the light of our discussions in the past, I want to testify to you personally that I am convinced that we as Christians should not refrain from voicing our deepest convictions, but that we indeed are under the obligation to speak out. In a sermon to my congregation on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May (see the attached copy) I attempted to do that. Even if some do misunderstand my actions, I remain convinced that we need to take care that the DRC does not emasculate its prophetic witness.

It may be that you are not in agreement with me or my views concerning our actions and our message in times like these. I do not expect that, as long as I know that you, and some of the other brothers with whom I have shared so many of my life experiences, know that my statements and actions are not motivated by a sinful hypersensitivity or a hurt pride, but that they are born from an honest and sincere search for the truth in Christ.

My aim is not to elicit an answer from you, I merely wanted you to know that I am acting and testifying as a Christian, without causing you, as moderator, or my fellow brothers, embarrassment.

With cordial wishes and greetings,

Your brother in Him,

Bey.

My bedoeling is nie om 'n antwoord uit te lok nie – ek wou maar net hê dat jy weet dat ek as Christen probeer handel en getuig, sonder om daardeur jou as moderator of as medebroer in verleentheid te probeer bring.

Hartlike seënwense en groete,

Jou broer in Hom,

Bey.

#### 4.3 The Dutch Reformed Church became increasingly isolated

A third bitter fruit of the Cottesloe saga is the fact that the DRC, after severing its ties with the WCC, became increasingly isolated. Earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the church was an enthusiastic member of the ecumenical community, playing its part in international ecumenical discussions and actions. A number of DRC theologians and church leaders found themselves in leadership positions, in the ranks of the World Council of Churches as well as other ecumenical organisations. After the events of 1960 and 1961 all of this changed. In what may be the last interview that Beyers Naudé, when he was already very frail in bed, allowed (Mike Heaney, 10 March 2001), he again referred to the fact that, in the DRC, there was “'n huiwering en 'n terughouding op die ekumeniese toneel” (a hesitation and reticence on the ecumenical scene). He explained how the South African government was partially responsible for this:

“Na Cottesloe was die deure in Suid-Afrika in sekere sin vir die WRK gesluit. Die regering self het alles in hul vermoë gedoen dat daar geen wesenlike kontak sou wees tussen die WRK en die Suid-Afrikaanse kerke nie. Persone soos John Vorster in sy uitsprake, sowel as die rol van Koos Geriecke, het hierdie geslotenheid help bevorder om alle moontlike krane tussen die WRK en die Suid-Afrikaanse kerke toe te draai. Daardie krane het hulle baie goed toegedraai. Baie min water het uit daardie krane gedrup. Aan die ander kant was daar talle predikante wat ten spyte van al hierdie dinge hulle belangstelling in die ekumeniese visie verdiep het.”<sup>28</sup>

It took a full fourteen years for the DRC to re-evaluate its ecumenical ties to the outside world, by establishing an Ecumenical Office in Pretoria. Frans Geldenhuys who was appointed the first director of the office in 1974 lamented the years of isolation. After leaving the WCC, he said, the DRC found itself in a theological vacuum. Ecumenical contacts on a smaller scale did continue. The DRC was still accepted in the ranks of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (Council) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, but through the years these relations, too, would be strained to the limit.

Within South Africa, the same would happen. The DRC who used to play a major role in establishing ecumenical relations among the South African churches, was left – or left itself

---

28 Heaney, M. J. 2004: *Beyers Naudé as ekumeniese baanbreker in Suid-Afrika, 1960-1994*. (Beyers Naudé as ecumenical trailblazer in South Africa), Ph. D. Thesis, University of Pretoria, 349. Translation: After Cottesloe, in a matter of speaking, the doors in South Africa were closed on the WCC. The South African government tried its best to forestall any meaningful contact between the WCC and the South African churches. Individuals like John Vorster (premier) and Koos Geriecke (prominent DRC leader) promoted this isolation by closing all the taps of contact. They closed the taps well. Very little water passed through the taps. But, on the other hand, there were a number of ministers who, in spite of all this, maintained a deep interest in the ecumenical vision.

– out in the cold. When the Christian Council of South Africa developed into the South African Council of Churches, the DRC was absent. Relationships on a smaller scale with more conservative evangelical groups were continued, bilateral discussions with some churches did take place from time to time, but by and large the DRC chose to journey alone. Beyers Naudé tried to remedy this by establishing the Christian Institute, but interest in DRC for joining the Institute was very low indeed. Worse than that, Naudé and his institute became the targets of heavy opposition. Within the DRC Family the DRC's actions in the aftermath of Cottesloe, especially the views that were expressed and the theology of apartheid that increasingly became imbedded in DRC thinking, left an indelible mark, often bedevilling relations even further.

#### 4.4 In the ecumenical world attitudes towards the DRC and South Africa hardened.

The disappointment in ecumenical circles with the reaction of the Afrikaans Churches to the Cottesloe initiative, had another effect. In the international world-wide ecumenical community attitudes towards the South African situation as well as the stance of the Afrikaans Churches, hardened. The time for talking, for conducting conferences, for a soft approach, had come to an end. In WCC circles the argument was made for action, for a harder approach. The story of the development of the increasingly active participation of the WCC in the struggle against apartheid, of the many initiatives in this regard – inter alia the Program to Combat Racism – as told in the WCC publication *A Long Struggle. The Involvement of the WCC in South Africa*<sup>29</sup> provides fascinating reading.

### 5. CONCLUSION: HAS THE GHOST OF COTTESLOE BEEN PUT TO REST?

How are we to assess the significance of Cottesloe? John de Gruchy provided an answer by quoting W A de Klerk, the prominent Afrikaner novelist and thinker, as well as W A Visser 't Hooft.<sup>30</sup>

De Klerk wrote quite dramatically:

“The ghost of Cottesloe would return to haunt the Afrikaner's wayward theologizing. There was evidence that, in spite of the silencing, recantation, bowing of heads and deep cogitation, something remained”. For years to come the Afrikaans churches would have to grapple with the issues that Cottesloe put on the table.”

Visser 't Hooft's response summed up the feelings of many outside the DRC who were disappointed by the official DRC rejection of Cottesloe:

“The fact remains that this witness and the attitudes that the World Council has taken with regard to race relations has encouraged many, particularly among the non-White Christians, who had begun to feel hopeless about the role of the Christian church. And it should be remembered in the churches of the World Council that not only in the present member churches in South Africa, but also in the churches which have left us, there are many men and women who are deeply conscious of belonging to the world community, gathered by the same Lord, whose task is to make the transcendent power of Christ

29 Webb, Pauline (ed) 1994. *A Long Struggle. Involvement of the WCC in South Africa*. Geneva: WCC.

30 De Gruchy, Struggle, 1982: 68, cf Vosloo, Robert 2011. The Dutch Reformed Church, Beyers Naudé and the ghost of Cottesloe. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, May 2011(73/11), 1-17.

tangible and visible in deeds of justice and fellowship through which the estrangement of races can and must be overcome.”<sup>31</sup>

Has that happened? Is the ghost of Cottesloe at long last put to rest? Were the Reformed Churches, the DRC in particular, in South Africa in the decades that followed able to redeem themselves? Were the men and women who followed in the footsteps of the heroes of Cottesloe able to make a real difference, to stand up for truth and justice and fellowship?

Looking back, six decades down the line, things indeed have changed. The old apartheid South Africa had become the New South Africa (1994). In the DRC there was a change of heart as well – but it took many years and as many agonizing struggles to arrive at the point where the church in all sincerity was able to take leave of apartheid. The DRC General Synod, in the same year (1994), declared the theology of apartheid to be a sin and a heresy, confessing its guilt towards God and towards fellow South Africans for the pain and the suffering the Church has caused to so many over the years. At the same session of synod a similar apology was extended to the prophets within the fold who were treated shoddily by the DRC, but who courageously persevered in their efforts to call the church to reconsider its stance and to change its views on both the theology as well as the practise of apartheid, and to move towards restoring the unity in the DRC family. It was moving moment when Beyers Naudé, the only survivor among the “heroes of Cottesloe” was given a standing ovation on the last day of synod. “Oom Bey”, the moderator Rev Freek Swanepoel said. “You had it right, all these years. We thank the Lord God for your witness”.<sup>32</sup>

And yet, the DRC still has a long way to go. Within the ecumenical community, the DRC has been accepted again. The different statements made by the church on racism and apartheid have been acknowledged with understanding and words of encouragement. But, this we need to realize, erasing apartheid from the church’s statements is one thing. Erasing racism and prejudice from the hearts and minds of men and women who grew up and for many years lived in an apartheid society, quite another. In spite of progress made on many levels, and in spite of the church’s commitment to contribute in the struggle against injustice and inequality in South Africa, the DRC family itself continue to be a divided community. Unity talks are proceeding at a painfully slow pace.

At the same Synod of 1994 the newly inaugurated president Nelson Mandela paid a surprise visit. He addressed the delegates in Afrikaans, not mincing his words about the atrocities of the past, and the involvement of the DRC in this regard: “I am not saying this in order to rub salt into your wounds, because I am aware of the long struggle within the Dutch Reformed Church to eventually reject apartheid. I am conscious of the agonizing of many of the church members along the way”. Then he added that the real test, the acid test, of whether the DRC had really taken leave of apartheid would be passed the day the DRC family - which had become separated more than a century ago because of racial prejudice - became *one* again. May that happen soon!<sup>33</sup>

---

31 De Gruchy, *Struggle*, 68.

32 Du Toit, *Moeisame Pad*, 116f

33 *Acts, DRC General Synod 1994*: 536, my translation; cf Gaum, F. M. 1997: *Die Verhaal van die N G Kerk se Reis met met Apartheid* (The story of the DRC’s journey with Apartheid). Wellington: Hugenote-Uitgewers, 62f; and Meiring, Piet 2004: *The Dutch Reformed Church Family in South Africa. Lessons Learned on the Way to Unification*. In Best, Thomas (ed) 2004: *With a Demonstration of the Spirit and of Power*. Geneva: WCC, 130.

May the Lord grant that the DRC pass the acid test in the near future. Then, at last, the ghost of Cottesloe may be put to rest.

**KEY WORDS**

Apartheid  
Cottesloe Consultation  
Ecumenical relations  
Dutch Reformed Church  
Sharpeville Massacre  
South Africa  
World Council of Churches

**TREFWOORDE**

Apartheid  
Cottesloe Kerkberaad  
Ekumeniese verhoudings  
Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk  
Sharpeville-slagting  
Suid-Afrika  
Wêreldraad van Kerke

**CONTACT DETAILS**

Prof P G J (Piet) Meiring  
Postnet Suite 236  
P/bag X025,  
Lynnwood Ridge 0040  
e-mail address: [pgjmeiring@gmail.com](mailto:pgjmeiring@gmail.com)