

# Bonhoeffer and costly reconciliation in South Africa – through the lens of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>3</sup>

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## ■ Introduction: ‘And the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Prize goes to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission!’

It was a day to remember, the 25th of April 1999. In the French Cathedral, in Berlin, former Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chairman of the South African Truth and

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3. See Meiring (2015).

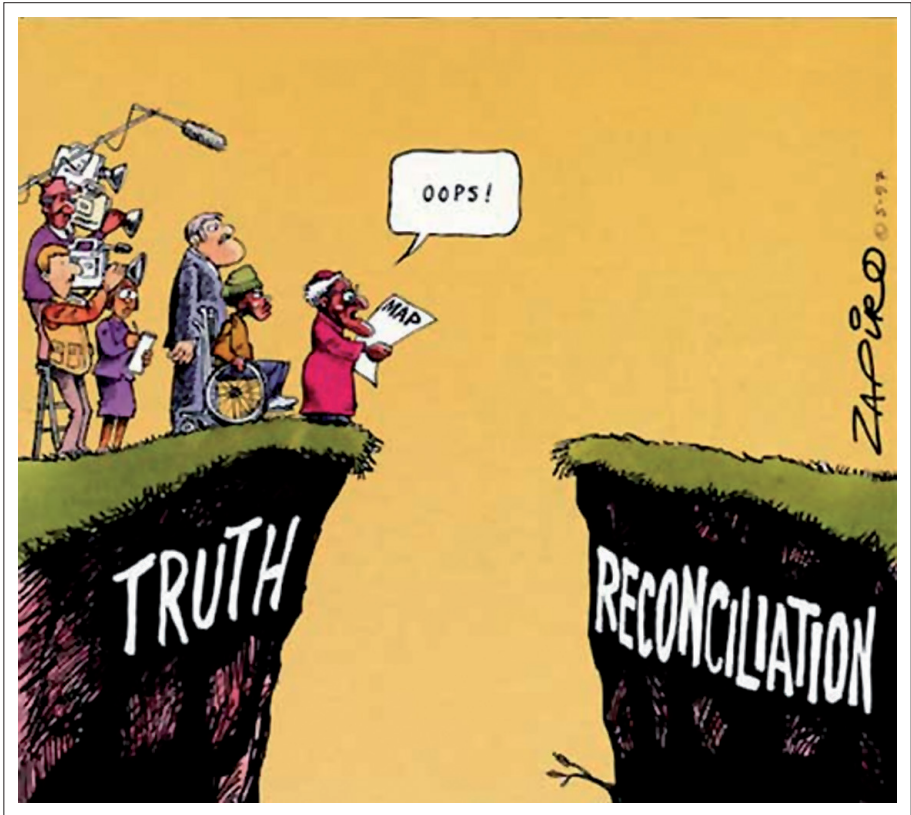
Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Dr Alex Boraine, deputy chair, were given a resounding applause when the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Prize was handed to them. In the award document, it was stated that 'the Commission has courageously and energetically supported the process of finding out the truth and made forgiveness possible' (Evangelical Church in Germany [EKD] 1999:1).

The former General-Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), Philip Potter, praised the achievements of Desmond Tutu and his colleagues during the difficult period of changeover from the apartheid system to democracy in South Africa. Desmond Tutu, in turn, thanked the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) for their support in the fight against apartheid, calling upon the 'rainbow nation' of South Africa to find peace with itself and with other peoples (EKD 1999:1). It was evident to all that 'the Arch' and his fellow commissioners in the TRC were, in the spirit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, on the way to reconciliation and forgiveness. A new day was dawning in South Africa (EKD 1999:1).

Dr Alex Boraine, in his address, sounded a serious note. He regretted the fact that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had failed to make reparations in many cases due to legal restrictions. He also pointed out that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission could merely lay the ground stone for reconciliation. He said that it could possibly take generations before the wounds were healed (EKD 1999:1). In South Africa, at the time, Boraine's concerns were shared by many. How far were we really on the road towards forgiveness and reconciliation? The TRC traversed the country, since its inception in 1995. Human rights violation hearings were held in cities and towns, in busy townships and far flung rural areas. In the process, more than 27 000 victims were recognised, their stories captured. Reparation proposals were prepared for the victims and their families. Representatives from many interest groups and organisations were asked to appear, among them the political leaders of the day. The Amnesty Committee processed the applications of more than 7000 perpetrators. Researchers worked day and night to capture all that happened during the apartheid years, using every source available to them, to compile a report on South Africa during the apartheid years (1960–1994). In the end a comprehensive seven-volume report was handed to the nation. But the vexing question remained: We have a report. We have 'the truth'. What, now, about reconciliation? The cartoonist Zapiro (Shapiro 1997:11) captured the general feeling in his own inimitable way (see Figure 1).

## ■ Dietrich Bonhoeffer in South Africa

Back to Berlin, to the celebration in the French Cathedral. It was not the first time that Bonhoeffer's name and his legacy was connected to South Africa, not by far.



Source: Shapiro (1997:11).

**FIGURE 1:** The Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Indeed, the figure of the pastor in the Tegel prison cell, has loomed large over the country for the past 70 years.

‘When did Bonhoeffer visit South Africa? He knows our situation from the inside!’ (De Gruchy 1984:4). Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer’s friend and biographer, was amused at the question put to him quite innocently by a number of lay Christians who had no previous knowledge of the German theologian, at a Bonhoeffer seminar in Johannesburg in 1973. Back home he remembered the question, and in an essay based on his experience in South Africa he wrote about the many similarities – as well as differences – between Bonhoeffer’s Germany and South Africa in the 1970s (De Gruchy 1984:4).

Bonhoeffer indeed never visited South Africa, and he probably did not know a great deal about the country. But the relevance of Bonhoeffer for South Africa was never

in doubt. John de Gruchy chose Bonhoeffer as partner in dialogue for doing theology in South Africa. He wrote his doctoral thesis on Bonhoeffer, as did *inter alia* Johan Botha, Russel Botman and Carel Anthonissen in the years that followed.

Heroes from the struggle against apartheid, Beyers Naudé and Steve Biko, among others, were hailed as latter-day Bonhoeffers. Mandela's famous 'Speech from the dock' before his conviction and imprisonment at the Rivonia Trial was compared to Bonhoeffer's (1995) essay on *The structure of responsible life*. At ecumenical gatherings, his name and his teachings were often invoked, whenever protest was lodged against the injustices of apartheid, especially against the theological defence of apartheid.

When the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, meeting in Ottawa in 1982, took the historic step of declaring that the apartheid situation in South Africa, and the position of two white South African member churches on the issue – the Nederduitse Gereformerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) and the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk (Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa) – constituted a *status confessionis*, the voice of Bonhoeffer could be heard in the background. It was Bonhoeffer who retrieved the concept of a *status confessionis*, last used in 1550 in the Lutheran Formula of Concord, in his discussion of the question whether the 'Aryan paragraph', introduced by the Nazi government, might also be applied in the church.<sup>4</sup>

Three years later (1985) the *Kairos Document* was published (Nürnberg & Tooke 1988:11–21). Reminiscent of Bonhoeffer's blunt distinction between the true and the false church, the *Kairos Document* declared that the time had come for Christians to choose sides, to join the resistance. It was not enough to reject apartheid in principle and yet stop short of political solidarity with the liberation struggle. The moment had arrived for the Church to stand with the oppressed in their struggle for justice and freedom. There could be no cheap reconciliation. What was needed was, in Bonhoeffer's words, costly grace. Three years later, at the 'National Initiative for Reconciliation conference' (Pietermaritzburg 1988) David Bosch uttered a similar plea, again referring back to Bonhoeffer ('Processes of reconciliation and demands of obedience: Twelve theses' [Nürnberg & Tooke 1988:98ff.]).

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 4. To exclude (baptised Christian) Jews from membership of the church, Bonhoeffer contended, would be a violation of the church in its substance, a denial of God's act of reconciliation in the cross of Jesus Christ, through which he:

[H]as broken down the dividing wall between Jews and gentiles and 'made the two into one' (Eph 2:14f). A church that accepted the Aryan paragraph in its own life, would cease to be the church of Christ. One could serve such a (pseudo) church only by leaving it. (Blei 1994:5)

So serious the situation was adjudged, that the membership of the Afrikaans churches was suspended by the World Alliance, until the day they truly repented of their sin and heresy.

## ■ Back to Tutu and the Zapiro cartoon: How far are we on the road to reconciliation?

Did the work of the TRC and the publication of the TRC report contribute to reconciliation, to help the rainbow nation to find peace with itself? The Commission's lofty charge inspired many at the time:

- To provide 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 for all, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex.
- The pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all citizens, of peace and reconciliation and the reconstruction of society.
- The recognition of the need for understanding but not for vengeance, the need for reparation but not for retaliation, for ubuntu but not for victimisation (TRC 1998:55–57).

Recently (23 September 2015) at a gala dinner for a delegation from Sri Lanka that travelled to South Africa to discuss the possibility of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in their country after years of civil war as well as a bloody aftermath, the aged Advocate George Bizos was invited to speak. Bizos who was more involved in the local TRC process than many of his peers and who represented numerous victims at the hearings, was positive about the outcome of the TRC process. Everything was not perfect, he said. There were lapses, especially in the process of paying proper reparation to many victims, but South Africa would have been much the poorer without the TRC. Tensions would have run much higher in the community.

But, having said that, we do have to face the fact that South Africa, 20 years after democracy, is still a fractured and a very divided country. One needs only to take the annual 'Reconciliation barometer' (Wale 2013) published by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in hand, to realise how far we still have to go on the road to healing, reconciliation and nation building. Millions are still suffering from poverty and disease. For large numbers of South Africans without proper education, without jobs, without security, the future seems bleak. Racism, alienation, xenophobia are still with us, as is the case with corruption and greed and endemic violence. Public trust is at a very low ebb, the delivery of services often a nightmare.

However, everything is not lost. Looking back at what has been achieved during the TRC years, one cannot but be amazed and heartened by how far the country has travelled on the road of reconciliation. But reconciliation does not come easy. There are a number of prerequisites for the process of forgiveness and healing.

## ■ Reconciliation

The first prerequisite has to do with definition. The commission appointed was aptly called a Truth and *Reconciliation* Commission, but to describe the meaning of reconciliation proved to be difficult. In the years running up to the new political dispensation in South Africa, many different definitions and many different preconditions for reconciliation were coined and discussed. In ecumenical circles many statements were produced, *inter alia* by the Kairos theologians, by the South African Council of Churches, the Evangelical Witness produced by a group of 'Concerned Evangelicals', as well as the 'Church and Society' policy document of the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1988 a meeting of the National Initiative for Reconciliation was called in Pietermaritzburg where prominent church leaders and academics – among them Frank Chikane, David Bosch, Michael Cassidy, Denise Ackerman, Klaus Nürnberger, Bongani Goba and John de Gruchy – reflected on the issue of reconciliation.

In the same vein, immediately after its appointment, the TRC had to grapple with the same questions: What does reconciliation really entail? Tutu describes in his book on the TRC, *No future without forgiveness*, the different views on the matter: the way in which the politicians and lawyers, the religious leaders and the community workers, the commissioners from so many different backgrounds, discussed their understanding of the concept of reconciliation, and on the process that was necessary to lead the country on the way to forgiveness and nation building (Tutu 1999:70ff.).

For Tutu, it was evident that the process would be profoundly spiritual. After all, President Mandela knowingly, decided to appoint an archbishop to chair the TRC! (Tutu 1999:71). The President, Tutu argued must have realised 'that forgiveness, reconciliation and reparation were not the normal currency in political discourse ... Forgiveness, confession and reconciliation were far more at home in a religious sphere' (Tutu 1999:71). Tutu made it clear that he was addressing the issue of reconciliation from a Christian vantage point. Regularly quoting Paul's message in 2 Corinthians 5, Tutu stated his conviction that only because God has reconciled us to him by sacrificing his Son Jesus Christ on the cross, true and lasting reconciliation between humans became possible. Knowing this, all Christians need to recognise and accept their own responsibility to become ambassadors of reconciliation in our everyday lives:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Cor 5:18f. [RSV])

Tutu, however, never failed to emphasise the role the *other religions* in South Africa had to play in this regard. At many hearings, as well as during inter-faith services that regularly

accompanied the TRC's programme, the Archbishop called upon leaders of the other faith communities – Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, African Traditional Religion, et cetera – to join the debate, to reflect on what they, from the deepest sources of *their* religious traditions and beliefs, might contribute, helping the TRC to arrive at the true meaning of reconciliation in the country. At the faith communities' hearing in East London (November 1997) much time was set apart for this process. It was clear from the statements from the imams, rabbi's and priests that the other faiths indeed had much to offer.

Defining reconciliation, as well as describing the responsibility that Christians have to accept in this regard, was of equal importance to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In a poignant passage in his *The cost of discipleship* (1963), he reminded his fellow Christians in Germany, at the time of the Third Reich:

Not just our own anger, but the fact that someone has been hurt, damaged, or disgraced by us, who 'has a cause against us,' erects a barrier between us and God. Let us therefore as a Church examine ourselves, and see whether we have not often enough wronged our fellow men. Let us see whether we have tried to win popularity by falling in with the world's hatred, its contempt and its contumely. For if we do that, we are murderers. Let the fellowship of Christ so examine itself today, and ask whether, at the hour of prayer and worship, any accusing voices intervene and make its prayer in vain. (p. 144f.)

The debate on the real meaning of reconciliation is still with us. There are some who are even questioning the use of the word. To many it has become a discredited term, an oppressive term. But we dare not let go of the concept, for reconciliation lies at the heart of the gospel of Christ. We need the light from many lamps, also Bonhoeffer's lamp, to lead us along the way.

## ■ The truth shall set us free

Equally important on our journey towards reconciliation and forgiveness is the quest for truth. When the then Minister of Justice Dullah Omar introduced the TRC legislation to Parliament, he called upon all South Africans 'to join in the search for truth without which there can be no genuine reconciliation' (Villa-Vicencio & De Gruchy 1985:128). It was a tremendous task, to capture the stories of thousands of South Africans, of victims as well as perpetrators, to try to establish what really had happened in South Africa during the apartheid years, and to try and capture the many nuances and unspoken truths encapsulated in the evidence presented to the TRC.

In his introduction to the TRC report Desmond Tutu reflected on the difficulties involved in finding the truth – and of sharing the truth with fellow South Africans, as well as with the outside world. Tutu quoted a Dutch visitor who observed that the TRC

was bound to fail. Its task was simply too demanding. Yet, she argued, 'even as it fails, it has already succeeded beyond any rational expectations.' Referring to the words of Emily Dickson she added: '[T]he truth must dazzle gradually ... or all the world would be blind' (TRC 1998:4).

But, wrote Tutu, the TRC was not prepared to allow the present generation of South Africans 'to grow gently into the harsh realities of the past.' The commissioners, confronted with the ugly truths, had often wept. But fellow South Africans needed to share their tears:

However, how painful the experience has been, we remain convinced that there can be no healing without the truth. Not only the pain and injustice of thousands needed to be uncovered. The fatal ideology behind it, the structures erected to support apartheid, needed to be scrutinized. (TRC 1998:4)

As was the case in Bonhoeffer's Germany when Bonhoeffer had to take a firm stand against the many distortions of truth by the ideology of National Socialism, against the deceptions, cover-ups and half-truths that were rife in society, South Africans were called by the TRC to take a stand for truth, to look for the truth that will eventually set them free.

Finding truth, the commissioners realised, goes far beyond collecting facts and weighing findings. Finding truth is to imagine yourself in the other's shoes, to accept accountability, to look for justice, to restore and to maintain the fragile relationship between human beings. The process needed to be handled with sensitivity and the utmost care. If not, to quote Tutu's visitor, South Africans would be blinded. The hope, however, was that the process would succeed, that by inviting the many victims to the podium, by confronting thousands of perpetrators with their dastardly deeds, and by calling upon political parties, academia and civil society to reflect on their role in the past, it would eventually lead to national catharsis, to forgiveness, to the point where the truth really sets one free.

This indeed is what happened. The annals of the TRC contain the testimonies of a large number of perpetrators who used the opportunity to appear before the Amnesty Committee. All of them were required to disclose all the facts and motives behind their deeds. They were subjected to questioning and cross questioning. For a many this was a painful and embarrassing experience, but for the 1167 perpetrators who did receive amnesty it meant a new lease on life. When the former Minister of Police, Adrian Vlok, was granted amnesty for his role in the bombing of the SA Council of Churches' headquarters in Johannesburg, he responded: 'My heart sang. I got a lump in my throat and I thanked God for his grace and mercy to me' (Meiring 1999:357). The same was the reaction of Mongesi Manqina and his three colleagues who received amnesty for the killing of an American fieldworker fieldworker, Amy Biehl, and of the parents of Amy



who travelled from the USA to be present at the hearing in Cape Town. Listening to the testimonies of Mongesi and the others, the Biehls declared their satisfaction and admiration for the TRC process. They found healing and peace, they said, and started a non-governmental organisation, the Amy Biehl Foundation, to support black youths in various ways – employing two of Amy’s killers as staff members of the foundation (Meiring 1999:67ff.).

Many victims reported a similar experience. The truth set them free as well. At a hearing in Soweto an elderly gentleman spoke for many fellow victims:

When I was tortured at John Vorster Square my tormentor sneered at me: ‘You can shout your lungs out. Nobody will ever hear you!’ Now, after all these years, people are hearing me! (Van Vught & Cloete 2000:190)

At the East London hearing Beth Savage who was almost killed by an attack at a Christmas party at a golf club in King Williams Town (1992) and who had spent many months in hospital, was asked about her feelings towards the perpetrators of the attack. She said that she indeed understood their motives. ‘My honest feeling is: there but for the grace of God, go I ... It is marvellous that we have a Truth Commission’, she said.

According to Meiring (1999):

To be able to get everything of your chest brings healing ... What I really want is to meet the man who threw the hand-grenade. I want to do it in a spirit of forgiveness, in the hope that he, for whatever reason, will also forgive me. (p. 27)

The Truth and Reconciliation process however required that not only the perpetrators and victims be exposed to the truth. The *nation* needed to be invited into the process. They, too, needed to sit down and listen. It was not easy.

Throughout its life, the TRC was concerned about the fact that many white South Africans, English as well as Afrikaners, were conspicuous in their absence at the hearings, seemingly unwilling to involve themselves in the process. But the media played their part. Day after day the testimonies at the hearings were carried in the newspapers and reported on over radio and television. The public needed to be confronted with the truth, albeit in their own family rooms. They needed to be shamed by the truth. They, too, had to struggle with what had happened in our country. They were challenged, daily, to reflect upon their own complicity. And in the end, many of them were able to experience that the truth, hard as it may be, sets one free.

This process has to continue. We have not reached the end of the road to reconciliation. To the contrary, there are many stories yet to be told, the stories of our time: of mothers unable to feed their children; of the victims of violent crime; of young people depressed

and angry because they cannot find work; of students who cannot pay their fees; of fellow Africans who crossed our borders to find a new life, only to experience alienation and rejection and xenophobic attacks on their homes and their township spaza shops; of farmers, black as well as white, who suffered the horror and often mindless cruelty of farm attacks. They, too, need the opportunity to tell, to be listened to, to be taken seriously, and to experience healing in the process.

## ■ The call for justice

Bonhoeffer was a young pastor, 27 years old, when he challenged his colleagues in the church, with the publication of his essay *The church and the Jewish Question* ([1933] 1965). Against the view of many German Christians that the churches ought to emulate the Aryan Clauses enacted by the German government, he called for the virtue of justice on behalf of the victims of injustice. It was a heroic step to take, Bonhoeffer embarking on a road that put him in direct conflict with the powers of the state, that would eventually have him arrested, and in the end, would cost him his life.

But he had no choice. Justice and reconciliation go hand in hand, Bonhoeffer taught us. Lasting reconciliation can only flourish in a society where justice is seen to be done. In his ‘Thoughts on the baptism’ (a baptismal sermon for his godson included in his *Letters and papers from prison* [1959]) he emphasised the relationship between justice and reconciliation in society, lamenting the fact the church in the past:

[H]as fought for self-preservation as though it were an end in itself and has thereby lost its chance to speak a word of reconciliation to mankind and the world at large. (Bonhoeffer 1959:160)

In South Africa, with the granting of amnesty to perpetrators of apartheid, a choice was made between *retributive* justice and *restorative* justice. The latter, Tutu (1999) contended, was characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence:

Here the central concern is not retribution or punishment, but in the spirit of *ubuntu*, the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships. This kind of justice seeks to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he or she has injured by his or her offence. (p. 51f.; TRC 1998:435)

The quest for justice is still on the table. People are still suffering in South Africa. We live in a society torn apart by inequality, poverty, unemployment, racism and violence. We have barely begun to address the vexing issues of equal education, of land reform, of proper governance and of corruption.

In 1972, Beyers Naudé, the South African on whom Bonhoeffer's mantle had fallen, was standing trial in Johannesburg. His statement reverberated inside as well as outside the courtroom:

No reconciliation is possible without justice, and whoever works for reconciliation must first determine the causes of injustice in the hearts and lives of those, of either the persons or groups, who feel themselves aggrieved. (De Gruchy 1979:171)

That was his mission, Naudé declared. To identify with the aggrieved in our country, to stand with them in their quest for justice.

Two decades later the Confession of Belhar, also standing in the tradition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the *Bekennende Kirche*, called Christians in South Africa to be true to their calling:

The church must ... stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm other. (Confession of Belhar Article 4) (Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa 2012:770)

## ■ No future without forgiveness

Bonhoeffer spoke and preached eloquently about forgiveness. His sermon on Matthew 18:21–35, is a point in case – and as relevant today as in Germany many decades ago (Bonhoeffer in press). Nobody can put down Bonhoeffer's *The cost of discipleship* and not be moved by what Bonhoeffer wrote about the possibility of forgiveness. Equally, nobody can close his *Letters and papers from prison* (1959) without being profoundly touched by the way he, in the last days before his execution, reached out in love to others, to his fellow prisoners as well as to their gaolers:

Christian love draws no distinction between one enemy and another, except that the more bitter our enemy's hatred, the greater his need of love. Be his enmity political or religious, he has nothing to expect from a follower of Jesus but unqualified love. In such love there is not inner discord between the private person and official capacity. In both we are disciples of Christ, or we are not Christians at all. (Bonhoeffer 1963:164)

Reconciliation requires a deep, honest confession – and a willingness to forgive. One of the more controversial aspects of the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa was that the 'act' did not make it a condition that the applicant had to show remorse for

his actions, or that he had to openly express his regret to those whom he had wronged. When I, at the start of the process, asked him about this, Jude Hassen Moll, chair of the Amnesty Committee put it into perspective. It was correct that no such requirement was stipulated in the ‘act’, he said:

Because, how can one read a man’s heart? How will one ever really know whether the man has sincere regrets, or whether he is just saying the right words? Such a condition would force some people to be dishonest. (Meiring 1999:45)

Tutu, on the other hand, often expressed the necessity of confession for reconciliation. Lasting reconciliation, he contended, deeply depends upon the capacity of perpetrators, individuals as well as perpetrator communities, to honestly, deeply, recognise and confess their guilt towards God and their fellow human beings, and to humbly ask for forgiveness. And it equally rests upon the magnanimity and grace of the victims to reach out to them, to extend forgiveness.

In his *No future without forgiveness* (1999) Desmond Tutu discussed different aspects of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a *risky business*, he explained. Asking for forgiveness, as well as extending forgiveness, is often extremely difficult. You find yourself in a very vulnerable position. What if your reaching out to the other is spurned? What if the victim does not want to forgive – or the perpetrator, arrogantly, does not want to ask for forgiveness?

But we need to remember, the Archbishop counselled, that forgiveness and reconciliation are *meant* to be a risky and very costly exercise. Quoting the ultimate example of Jesus Christ, he writes: ‘True reconciliation is not cheap. It cost God the death of his only begotten Son’ (Tutu 1999:218).

Introducing the TRC report, Tutu mentioned the misunderstanding that reconciliation asks for the glossing over of past mistakes and injustices, that reconciliation requires national *amnesia*. This is totally wrong. Reconciliation is not about being cosy. It is not about pretending that things that happened in South Africa’s past were other than they were. Reconciliation based on falsehood, he emphasised, is not true reconciliation and will not last (TRC 1998:17):

Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking, but in the end it is worth-while, because in the end there will be real healing from having dealt with a real situation. Spurious reconciliation can bring only spurious healing. (Tutu 1999:218)

Forgiveness, however, means *abandoning your right to retribution*, your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin. But it is a loss, Tutu maintains, which liberates the victim. Many instances of this were recorded in the annals of the TRC:

One of the most moving testimonies came from Mahlomola Isaac Thale, the first witness called to the podium at the Alexandra hearing (October 1996). He was an embittered man, and shared it with the audience. He was arrested in 1993, interrogated and tortured, and eventually sent to Robben Island for twelve years. Upon his release, he was banned to Qua-Qua, hundreds of kilometres from his home. He was a broken man, in and out of hospital for many years. A few weeks after his appearance, Thale passed away. At his funeral his priest shared with the congregation a conversation he had with Thale, some months earlier. He was really embittered! 'If I had to die today', he said, 'and if I had to arrive in heaven and come across the perpetrators who had done me so much wrong, I will say to God: I am in the wrong place. Please send me to hell!' But when Thale returned from the hearing in Alexandra he was totally a different person. His bitterness was gone, he said to the priest: 'If I am to die now and arrive in heaven, I will be able to forgive the perpetrators who did me wrong. I found peace. I am reconciled.' (Meiring 1999:98f.)

However, not only individuals are called to embark on the road to forgiveness – either by asking for forgiveness or by extending forgiveness. Communities – especially the leaders of these communities – are called to follow suit. Tutu was able to point to some examples: Willy Brandt, chancellor of West Germany kneeling in front of the Warsaw War Memorial, President Gerald Ford apologising to the Americans of Japanese origin who were treated shoddily up by the United States government during the Second World War, Pope John Paul II confessing the cruelty of the Roman Catholic Inquisition, and nearer to home, Willie Jonker's sincere plea to fellow South Africans for the many atrocities of apartheid perpetrated by his fellow-Afrikaners (Boraine 2001:372). Desmond Tutu called upon all political leaders in South Africa to do the same, to make some symbolic act of atonement, setting an example to all in the country. Sadly, none of the leaders accepted Tutu's challenge.

## ■ Counting the cost: Costly reconciliation

Reconciliation, history teaches us, is a costly enterprise. But this is to be expected. During the 1930s Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1963) repeatedly warned his fellow Christians against the temptation of 'cheap grace', which is a mortal enemy to the gospel. 'Costly grace' should be the aim of all believers who, knowing and accepting their salvation as a free gift from God, offer themselves to him, and to one another, as a living sacrifice:

Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace ... Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves ... Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. (p. 45)

In 1988, at the height of the struggle against apartheid, when tensions were at a breaking point in apartheid South Africa, a number of concerned church leaders called a National Initiative for Reconciliation together in Pietermaritzburg. At the meeting David Bosch reflected upon Bonhoeffer's words (Bosch in Nürnberger & Tooke 1988):

Almost fifty years ago Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught us that cheap grace was the deadly enemy of the church. I want to suggest that the same is true of cheap reconciliation. What, then, is 'cheap reconciliation'? It is – as the phrase suggests – reconciliation that costs us very little, that can be obtained at a minimum of expense. It is the papering over of deep-seated differences ... (It) sees our being reconciled to one another only in spiritual categories ... Cheap reconciliation means tearing faith and justice asunder, driving a wedge between the vertical and the horizontal. It suggests that we can have peace with God without having justice in our mutual relationships ... (It) means applying a little bit of goodwill to the South African society, but that is like trying to heal a festering sore with sticking plaster or treating cancer with aspirin. (p. 98)

Bosch's words echoed the sentiments of the authors of the *Kairos Document* who, three years earlier (1985), had called on South Africans during the height of the struggle against apartheid to guard against the temptation of 'cheap reconciliation', reconciliation without cost, which, too, is a mortal enemy to the gospel of our Lord. We need to rediscover on a daily basis what 'costly reconciliation' entails, and dare to live according to our discovery (*Kairos Document* par. 3.1) (Nürnberger & Tooke 1988). Thirty years later (2015) the protagonists of *Kairos* came together to, once again, call for a process of costly reconciliation, without which healing and nation building will never succeed.

Reconciliation is no easy task. To be a peacemaker, to try to build bridges between opposing individuals as well as communities, to 'stand in the breach' for truth and for justice, requires a strong commitment, resilience, and nerves of steel. It may ask your all. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, was willing to lay down his life, to face the cross, and he called his disciples to follow his example. Before the outbreak of the Second World War Bonhoeffer's friends in the United States of America (USA) and Britain pleaded with him not to return to Germany. Going back would surely lead to arrest, even death. But Bonhoeffer refused. He would not take the easy way out. He went back to live and, at the end, to die in solidarity with those who were oppressed and those who resisted the oppressor. He chose to live according to his own conviction: 'When Christ calls a person, he bids him (or her) come and die' (Clements 2006:118f.).

In conclusion, allow me to point to another lesser-known link between South Africa and Bonhoeffer, to the life-sized statue of a demure African girl – Manche Masemola, who lived and died in a small village Marishane near Polokwane in the Limpopo Province – that was erected at the entrance to Westminster Abbey in London (see Figure 2).



Source: P.G.J. (Piet) Meiring

**Figure 2:** Twentieth century martyrs at the Westminster Abbey. Statues of 20th-century *martyrs* on the façade above the Great West Door of *Westminster Abbey* (from left to right): Maximilian Kolbe, Manche Masemola, Janani Luwum, Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Esther John, Lucian Tapiedi and Wang Zhiming.

When in 1998, the statues of ten 20th century martyrs were erected above the west entrance to the Abbey, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was an obvious choice. But alongside Bonhoeffer, Janani Luwum, Martin Luther King and Oscar Romero, a niche was found for Manche, the young South African girl who met the Lord Jesus Christ and devoted her life to him. She was ostracised from the community, and suffered severely when she refused to denounce her faith in Jesus (Manche Masemolo's statue is the second from left; Bonhoeffer's statue is fifth from left). In their desire to suppress her witness, her parents beat her, forbidding her to attend the church services. To keep her at home, they stripped her naked. Manche eventually ran away and hid, but her father and mother found her and beat her to death. She was buried in a lonely grave in the veld.

Manche Masemola was 15 years old, still preparing for baptism and her first communion. She, in the end, knew that she might die before that came to pass. Her prophetic words to her cousin were fulfilled: 'I shall be baptised with my own blood' (Makele 2011:1). In years to come many pilgrims, inspired by her example, visited – and still visit – her grave. Manche died a martyr's death in 1928, 17 years before Bonhoeffer, but it is fitting that they appear together at the western entrance of the great church in London: A young African girl and a brilliant German theologian who – albeit that the context and the content of their witness differed widely – both understood the cost of discipleship. Both were called by Christ to die (see Figure 3).



Source: P.G.J. (Piet) Meiring

**Figure 3:** Manche Masemola's statue is placed between Maximillian Kolbe and Janani Luvum.

South Africa was fortunate not only having leaders like Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Steve Biko and Beyers Naudé, leaders who – in the spirit of Manche Masemola and Dietrich Bonhoeffer – were willing to devote their lives, even to die, for their convictions, but also having tens of thousands of women and men, some young, some old, who were equally willing to rise to the occasion. In many instances, they had to pay a costly price for being harbingers of peace. The annals of the TRC contain the stories of many of them, ordinary citizens who reached beyond themselves, to facilitate reconciliation in their communities. 'It never ceases to astonish me', Tutu wrote in between Truth Commission hearings, 'the magnanimity of many victims who suffered the most heinous violations, who reach out to embrace their tormentors with joy, willing to forgive and wanting to reconcile' (Meiring 2002:68).



When the TRC eventually closed its doors, the chairperson had a final word of encouragement for all who had embarked on the arduous and adventurous journey of reconciliation, a word reminiscent of his acceptance speech at the Bonhoeffer Prize ceremony in Berlin. It is a word for us, today, as well:

We have been wounded but we are being healed. It is possible even with our past suffering, anguish, alienation and violence to become one people, reconciled, healed, caring, compassionate and ready to share as we put our past behind us to stride into the glorious future God holds before us as the Rainbow People of God. (Meiring 1999:379)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I dare say, would have agreed.

## ■ Summary: Chapter 2

Dietrich Bonhoeffer never visited South Africa, and he probably did not know a great deal about the country. But the relevance of the German theologian for South Africa was never in doubt. In the struggle against apartheid his message and his theology served to guide theologians, church leaders as well as lay Christians alike. His life and his death served to inspire many during their darkest hours. Theologians, with John de Gruchy in the lead, studied his works extensively. Heroes from the struggle against apartheid, Beyers Naudé, Desmond Tutu and Steve Biko, among others, were hailed as latter-day Bonhoeffers. Nelson Mandela's famous 'Speech from the dock' before his conviction and imprisonment at the Rivonia Trial was compared to Bonhoeffer's essay on *The structure of responsible life* (1995). At ecumenical gatherings, his name and his teachings were often invoked, whenever protest was lodged against the injustices of apartheid. But it was especially in the aftermath of apartheid, when the very serious challenges of reconciliation and nation building, of healing and forgiveness, as well as of amnesty for perpetrators weighed against the demands of justice to the victims were at stake, that many turned to Bonhoeffer for guidance. The author who served with Archbishop Desmond Tutu on the TRC, discusses the prerequisites for reconciliation in South Africa against the backdrop of the TRC experience, emphasising the real need for South Africans, following in the footsteps of Bonhoeffer, to look for 'costly reconciliation'.

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## Chapter 10

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