


The Rustenburg Church Conference of 1990: A call to the churches in South Africa after 30 years

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The Rustenburg Church Conference took place in 1990, 30 years after the historic Cottesloe Church Consultation of 1960. Both these conferences had a huge influence on the history of the churches in South Africa. Thirty years after the Rustenburg Conference, this article suggests that the current context of South Africa calls for another church conference. To motivate this, the events and the declarations of the Rustenburg Church Conference of 1990 are revisited. Firstly, the article starts with a short overview on the organising of the conference. Secondly, it revisits the important confession of Prof. W.D. Jonker on apartheid and what he said on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Afrikaner people. It then recalls the lesser known but not less important declaration by the women at the conference before moving on to the main declaration, which was made after the conference. The question that is then asked is what this important historical event means for the current situation in South Africa. It is suggested that the churches in South Africa are called to take the initiative to organise a Lekgotla where churches and other civil organisations can come together to discuss and address the challenges in South Africa. Racism, poverty, education, violence against women and children and corruption are specifically named as issues that should be addressed. The article concludes that given the current situation in South Africa, the churches have arrived at another Kairos moment.

Interdisciplinary implications: The research in this article challenges other disciplines in theology, sociology, education and law to join the quest for workable solutions. This should be done with specific reference to research on the current problematic events in South Africa, namely poverty, corruption, racism, violence against women and the needs of children and land issues.

Keywords: Rustenburg Church Conference 1990; Lekgotla; confession; apartheid; violence against women; corruption.

Introduction

Two important church conferences stand out as beacons in the history of the church in South Africa. The first is the Cottesloe conference of 1960. After the Sharpeville shooting where police opened fire on protesters, killing 69 people and injuring more than 180,¹ the conference was convened from 07 to 14 December 1960 (Van der Merwe 2010:1). De Gruchy (2005:64) was correct when he stated that this conference was of great importance to the churches in South Africa. For the first time a collective prophetic voice addressed the wrongs and injustices in the South African society of the time.² The second conference that took place 30 years later was the Rustenburg church conference of 1990. Professor J.A. Heyns gave the hint of a church conference to President F.W. de Klerk late in 1989 who then requested the churches in South Africa to come together to discuss the role of the churches in a changing South Africa³ (Gaum 2020). Several important events took place during and after the conference. Professor W.D. Jonker made an

1. There are different accounts of what happened, but the numbers of people killed are confirmed (Steenkamp 1987:198).

2. It was especially part two that addresses specific issues: '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 these groups have an equal right to make their contribution towards the enrichment of the life of their country and to share in the ensuing responsibilities, rewards and privileges', (Cottesloe 1960:1). In the following paragraphs it addressed the wrongs that were part of the heart of the apartheid system. In paragraph 6 the declaration read: 'No-one who believes in Jesus Christ may be excluded from any church on the grounds of his colour or race' and paragraph 10: 'There are no Scriptural grounds for the prohibition of mixed marriages'. Paragraph 11: 'we call to attention once again to the disintegrating effects of migrant labour on African life'. Paragraph 15: 'It is our conviction that the right to own land where he is domiciled, and to participate in the government of his country, is part of the dignity of the adult man and for this reason a policy which permanently denies to non-White people the right of collaboration in the government of the country of which they are citizens cannot be justified'.

3. President F.W. de Klerk made an important speech on 02 February 1990 in which he announced that Mr. Nelson Mandela would be released from prison and that the ANC would be unbanned. This was the first step on route to the first democratic election in South Africa.

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important confession on apartheid; a declaration was issued by women attending the conference and an important declaration was issued after the conference. The importance of the conference is best described in the words of Catholic Archbishop George Daniel when he said: ‘...on the 9th of November 1989 the Berlin wall came down and on the 9th of November 1990 the wall came down between the various churches in South Africa’ in (McMahan & Briggs 1990:2).

The focus of this article is to revisit the Rustenburg conference and to engage with the events that took place and the declarations that were made during and after the conference in order to show the importance of the conference for South African society. Thirty years after the Rustenburg conference South Africa is faced with multiple challenges such as growing poverty because of the COVID-19 pandemic, violence against women and children, corruption and racism. Sadly, the 30th anniversary of the conference went by almost unnoticed⁴ whilst I sincerely believe the voices of Rustenburg cannot be ignored in the church’s calling in the current context. Thirty years later, the Rustenburg conference is calling for another conference.

The convening of the conference

The conference was convened in the small town of Rustenburg from 05 to 09 November 1990 at the Hunters Rest Hotel (Gous 1993:258). Gous emphasised the importance of the conference when he quoted Alberts and Chikane (eds. 1991) who said:

[N]ot since the Cottesloe Consultation in the 1960s has the church been presented with so significant a challenge to rediscover its calling and to unite Christian witness in a changing South Africa. (p. 15)

This point of view is also underlined by the theme that was chosen for the conference, which was: ‘Towards a united Christian witness in a changing South Africa’. The consultation was according to Hofmeyr and Pillay (1994:295) historic in two respects: Firstly, for the first time 230 delegates from 80 churches and 40 Christian organisations with divergent theological and political views assembled. Secondly, there was a broad consensus under the guidance of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. An example of this statement was the Rustenburg Declaration that was drafted at the end of the conference in which apartheid was denounced as a sin (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:295).

Convening the conference was however not plain sailing. As already stated it was president F.W. de Klerk who called on the churches in South Africa in his Christmas message to formulate a plan ‘conductive to negotiation, reconciliation and change for the situation in South Africa’ (Du Toit et al. 2002:105). According to Gous (1993:259) many churches were willing to heed to the call of the appointed conveyor, Dr Louw Alberts, but the South African Council of Churches (SACC) objected to governmental involvement in organising the conference. The organisation declared that: ‘if the

4.Only one article appeared in the Afrikaans newspaper *Rapport*, written by one of the delegates, Gaum 2020.

State becomes involved in the resolution of theological differences, the church runs the risk of losing her independence and role as witness in society’ (Chikane in Van der Linde 1990:1). After negotiations between Dr Louw Alberts and Rev Frank Chikane of the SACC it was decided that Alberts and Chikane would act as co-organisers of a nationwide church consultation on condition that the State President withdraws from the consultation – a step Mr. de Klerk was willing to take (Gous 1993:259). With the political hurdles out of the way, the road was now clear for the most important church conference since Cottesloe take place. The fact that the conference was indeed a miracle is reiterated in the *NIR Special Report* (1991), which stated:

[G]athering representatives as diverse as Roman Catholics, Charismatics, African Indigenous Churches, Dutch Reformed Churches (black, “coloured” and white), Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and others was remarkable in itself. But the reconciliation which occurred among delegates, enabling them to produce and affirm the Rustenburg Declaration was nothing short of miraculous. (p. 1)

It was however not only the concerning of the conference that was miraculous. What happened during the conference was also nothing short of a miracle when Prof. W.D. Jonker made an unforeseen confession.

Events that defined the conference

Confession and forgiveness

One of the first important events that defined the conference was the confession of Prof. W.D. Jonker. Although Jonker was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), he was not part of the delegation⁵ of the church but was invited to the conference as one of the keynote speakers. Under the impression of the enormity of what was happening at the conference, Jonker (1998) as part of his address – decided to make the following confession:

[I] confess before you and before the Lord, not only my own sin and guilt and my personal responsibility for the political, social, economic and structural wrongs that have been done to many of you, and the results of which you and our whole country are still suffering from, but vicariously I dare also do that in the name of DRC of which I am a member, and for the Afrikaner people as a whole. I have the liberty to do just that, because the DRC at its latest synod has declared Apartheid a sin and confessed its own guilt of negligence in not warning against it and distancing itself from it long ago. (p. 205)

After Jonker’s address, Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Alberts & Chikane 1991) reacted by saying:

[P]rof. Jonker made a statement that certainly touched me, and I think touched others of us when he made a public confession and asked to be forgiven. I believe that I certainly stand under pressure of God’s Holy Spirit to say that, as I said in my sermon that when confession is made, then those of us who have been wronged must say ‘We forgive you’, so that together we may move to the reconstruction of our land. That confession is not cheaply made, and the response is not cheaply given. (p. 96)

5.The DRC was represented by Drs. P. Rossouw, D.J. Hattingh and Prof. P.C. Potgieter.

Jonker (1998) described that special moment as follows:

At that moment everybody stood up. There was tears. There was a feeling of affection. Something like which I have never experienced in my life. It felt as if I were embraced and accepted by co-believers who took the guilt from our shoulders.⁶ (p. 205)

Reaction to the confession was hefty. One of the first persons who reacted was President de Klerk's predecessor, Mr. P.W. Botha who phoned Prof. Potgieter and protested fiercely against the confession. Another phone call would follow the DRC delegation that officially supported the confession of Jonker. It stated: 'The delegates of the DRC want to state unambiguously that we fully identify ourselves' with the statements made by Prof. Jonker on the position of the church. He has in fact precisely reiterated the decision made by our General Synod in Bloemfontein recently. We want to see this decision of the synod as the bases of reconciliation with all people of all churches (Jonker 1998:207).

In reaction to the statement made by Potgieter on behalf of the DRC, Archbishop Desmond Tutu once again stood up and said that he was in no position to accept the confession on behalf of anyone but himself but then continued to say (McMahan & Briggs 1990):

I cannot, when someone says 'Forgive me', say 'I do not'. For [then] I cannot pray the prayer that we prayed 'Forgive as we forgive ...' There are no guarantees in grace. When Jesus Christ looked at Zaccheus, he had no guarantee that Zaccheus would respond to the grace of His forgiveness and love. We are people of grace who have to have the vulnerability of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ on the Cross. Jesus Christ in accepting Zaccheus, released Zaccheus so that Zaccheus could then say, 'I will make resitution'. (p. 3)

The reactions of Tutu and Botha were representative of the reaction to the confession of Jonker. While it made international headlines on the one side, conservative members of the DRC demanded meetings of the executive of the church. That did not lessen the importance of Jonker's confession on behalf of the so-called 'apartheids church' and the Afrikaner people and Archbishop Tutu's symbolic acceptance and forgiveness.

Declaration by women

A second event that defined the importance of the conference was the *Statement from women at the National conference of churches*. Although it is a lesser known voice that came from the conference, it is not of lesser importance in a country where violence against women and discrimination against women is a part of daily life. The statement reads as follows:

The historic National Conference is a gathering of churches in SA to reflect on a united witness in our land. It happens at a time when her people are looking for a just order to

⁶Afrikaans word by Jonker: 'Op daardie oomblik het almal opgestaan. Daar was tranes; daar was 'n gees van bewoëheid. So iets het ek nog nooit belewe nie. Ek het dit ervaar as 'n omarming, as 'n diepe gebaar van aanvaarding deur medegelowiges wat in diepe bewoëheid ons skuld van ons afneem' (Jonker 1998:205).

replace a legacy of injustice inflicted upon her people in the name of God.

The victims of this legacy are mainly people from the oppressed community, especially black women and yet the representation at this conference reflects the old order of selective justice!! This is a deep concern for those of us who had the special privilege to be invited to participate in this conference. Whilst the conference has been grappling with the issues of Justice, the humanity of women is gravely neglected.

Women also suffer with Jesus Christ on the cross and also hope to experience a resurrected life from the death of injustice to a life in a community of the holiness of our creation as women in the image of God.

We call on all the delegates at this conference to:

1. Confess, repent of and leave the sin of dehumanising and belittling women through discriminatory practices:

2. Right the wrongs, past and present by:

2.1 supporting and promoting a constitution which upholds the rights and dignity of women in all aspects of cultural, political, social, economic and religious life:

2.2 creating educational and vocational opportunities within the church to foster the ordination of women as clergy:

2.3 developing the Women's World Day of Prayer into one which is non-racial in nature:

2.4 convening a conference like this one for women in SA where women would have the opportunity to engage in dialogue about developing a united Christian witness in a changing SA.

2.5 engaging in affirmative action to enable women to participate equitably in church structures through the development of a more critical theology which conscientises both women-women and women-men:

2.6 accepting that the Ecumenical Women's Decade is a decade of churches in solidarity with women.

We acknowledge that women are divided because of apartheid. If we are to develop a united witness, it is imperative that together women and men work towards the eradication of the sin of injustice.

Careful reading of the declaration clearly shows how the women at the conference experienced the position of women in South Africa. The fact that they refer in the introduction to:

The humanity of women being neglected, and the fact that women also suffer with Jesus Christ on the cross with the hope of a life in a community of holiness of their creation as women in the image of God, set the tone for the rest of the declaration. Words such as dehumanising, sin, belittling and discriminatory practices were further indications of the position of women. The call for the rights and dignity of women in all aspects of life with special reference to educational and vocational opportunities within the church and religious life made it clear that the position of women had to change. Although the declaration did not get the attention it deserved, it was an important start of rethinking and evaluation of the position of women in the church and in the country. Thirty years later, women in South Africa are still in a precarious position. This has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This asks for serious attention.

The conference declaration

The Rustenburg declaration (1990) starts with a preamble which states:

[W]e have been convinced anew of God's amazing grace by the way in which, despite our wide variety of backgrounds, we have begun to find one another and to discover a broad consensus through confrontation, confession and costly forgiveness. (p. 1)

It then continues (Rustenburg 1990):

[C]oming from diverse Christian traditions, histories, political persuasions and cultural backgrounds, we engaged midst joy and pain, love and suspicion, in a process of soul searching and wrestling with the theological and socio-political complexities of our country. In the process, we had a strong sense that God was at work among us. We became aware that He was surprising us by his grace, which cut through our fears and apprehension. We give praise to this liberating God who is forever faithful in visiting His people in their hour of need. (p. 1)

It then proceeds to describe the context before it addresses the first important part, namely *Confession*: It states that although the declaration focuses on apartheid it makes clear that (Rustenburg 1990):

[W]e recognise that there are many other sins in our society, which call for repentance. Once all vestiges of apartheid have been abolished, the Church will still be challenged by many other social evils, which will threaten our society. (p. 7)

It then proceeds (Rustenburg 1990):

[A]s representatives of the Christian Church in South Africa, we confess our sin and acknowledge our part in the heretical policy of apartheid, which has led to such extreme suffering for so many in our land. We denounce apartheid, in its intention, its implementation and its consequences, as an evil policy, an act of disobedience to God, a denial of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a sin against our unity in the Holy Spirit. (p. 1)

This was clearly the focus of the declaration. It proceeds to refer to victims of apartheid and their suffering; that without genuine repentance and practical restitution God's forgiveness cannot be appropriated and that they have 'practised, supported, permitted or refused to resist apartheid' in different ways (Rustenburg 1990:1). It then proceeds:

[T]hose of us who have perpetuated and benefited from apartheid are guilty of a colonial arrogance towards black culture. We have allowed State institutions to do our sinning for us. In our desire to preserve the Church we have sometimes ceased to be the Church. We have often been more influenced by our ideologies than by Christ's Gospel. (p. 1)

The declaration then also refers to those who were victims of apartheid and acknowledged their own contribution to the failure of the church because they had failed to be instruments of peace in a situation of growing intolerance of ideological differences.

An important part of the confession on actions against women then follows (Rustenburg 1990):

Those of us who are male confess that we have often disregarded the human dignity of women and ignored the sexism of many of our church structures. By limiting the role and ministry of women – as was reflected in this conference – we have impoverished the church. We have been insensitive to the double oppression suffered by black women under sexism and apartheid. (p. 1)

This part of the confession gave recognition to the separate declaration made by the women at the conference and once again emphasised that the role and place of women was important in moving forward. The paragraph on confession ends appropriately with the following words (Rustenburg 1990):

With a broken and contrite spirit we ask the forgiveness of God and of our fellow South Africans. We call upon the Government of South Africa to join us in a public confession of guilt and a statement of repentance for wrongs perpetrated over the years. (p. 1).

The proper declaration then follows under the heading: *Declaration*. In this part of the document the Worldwide Church is thanked and called upon to continue to stand with Christians in South Africa. Political leaders are called upon to meet urgently to negotiate a new and just order for the country whilst the nation is urged to renounce and turn from personal, economy, social and political sins. This paragraph is concluded by a call on the Church of Jesus Christ in South Africa to adopt the confession and pledge itself to restitution. Church leaders were specifically called upon to carry the confessions and commitments of the declaration into the life of every congregation in South Africa (Rustenburg 1990:1).

The declaration then continues to state under the heading *Affirmation* that *justice* is of the utmost importance. It refers specially to the fact that the Bible reveals God as a God of compassion who has a special care for the sinner, the downtrodden, the poor and all who suffer injustice. It continues with the following important remark (Rustenburg 1990):

After decades of oppression, the removal of discriminatory laws will have to be accompanied by affirmative acts of restitution in the fields of healthcare, psychological healing, education, housing, employment, economy infrastructure and especially land ownership. For many years, greed has led to the taking of land from the poor and weak. But the church and state must address the issue of restoring land to dispossessed people. (p. 1)

This part of the declaration names several issues that are still problematic 30 years after the conference. Although the discriminatory laws have been discarded and much has been done to improve housing, the issues of land, health and education remain huge challenges to the church and state after three decades. These issues have been highlighted by the current COVID-19 pandemic.

A call is further made on those who negotiate a new South African constitution, to respect important principles

in the constitution. Exclusion of all race or class interests, the acceptance of the Rule of Law under an independent judiciary, the entrenchment of a Bill of Rights and the (Rustenburg 1990):

[E]mbodiment of the right of individuals or religious groups to preserve and protect moral values that affect marriage, family life and particularly the moral norms pertaining to youth. This should be available to all religious groups in terms of their life and world view. (p. 1)

Specific reference is also made to peace where reference is made to God's Shalom, which is to be understood as a comprehensive wholeness and rightness in all relationships, including those between God and his people, between human and human and between humans and creation (Rustenburg 1990:1). Under *Spirituality, Mission and Evangelism* it is stated that:

[T]he Church's work of mission is a consequence of its worship, prayer, fellowship and spirituality. We commit ourselves to deepen these aspects of the practise of our faith. We resolve to fulfil the Great Commission, to bring men and women to repentance and personal faith, new birth and salvation and to help them to work this out in a witness, which engages the world. (p. 1)

The second last paragraph of the declaration addresses *Restitution and a commitment to action*. It states clearly that confession and forgiveness require restitution. 'Without it, a confession of guilt is incomplete' (Rustenburg 1990:1). Government is called upon to return all land expropriated from relocated communities to the original owners, 'white schools' are to be opened to children of all races and programmes of affirmative action were to be embarked upon at all levels of black education. It was suggested that a National Day of Prayer was called for, for the purpose of acts of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation (Rustenburg 1990:1).

The declaration (1990) concluded with the following moving prayer:

[W]e give thanks for Gods past grace and faithfulness, by which He has seen fit to use so many of His people here, in spite of our many weaknesses and sins, to bear witness to His Name, to proclaim His Saving Gospel and bring blessing to many, to labour for justice and to care for the poor, oppressed and needy. We give praise in our belief that in wrath He has remembered mercy. This being so we are enabled by His Spirit to move forward together in His Name and call others to do likewise so that the Kingdom of our God and His Christ may be extended far and wide both in our land and beyond. And so to that Name which is above every name, even the Name of Jesus, we ascribe all might, majesty, dominion and praise. Amen. (p. 1)

Thirty years have passed since the conference, which was a Kairos moment for the churches in South Africa. The question that must be asked is: What value does it have if any 30 years later?

Thirty years later: Back to the future

If we look back at the Rustenburg church conference, it is the point of view of the author that the Rustenburg conference and specifically the declaration that was made at the conference is of specific importance to challenges in the current South African society. The role of women and the way in which women are treated, reconciliation and restitution – which includes the land issue, education and poverty are some of the issues that come to mind. Thirty years ago, the conference was convened as an initiative of a politician. The current situation in South Africa calls for the church to take the initiative to do something to tackle the current problems in South Africa.

A new Lekgotla for South Africa

Although most of the churches in South Africa are in one way or another involved with the challenges of the country,⁷ there is a dire need for an organised concerted effort. The current context of South Africa challenges the churches of the country to get together as in 1990 to provide a non-political platform for discussion and negotiation in order to bring change to the wrongs in society in the African context: a Lekgotla.⁸

The importance of the churches taking the initiative stem forward from the fact that the church is an essential agent of change. If we want to change society in South Africa the church can play a major role. This is confirmed by Pillay in his article *The church as transformation and change agent*. Pillay stated that the church has through the ages been involved: 'in the life of humankind, in making of nationhood, building of culture, structuring of society with its functions and institutions and in shaping the form and quality of political systems (Pillay 2017:1). He then continues to show how the Christian church was involved in transformation of societies throughout the history of mankind (Pillay 2017:2–8). Pillay (2017) makes the important conclusion:

Today, more than ever, given the increasing poverty, violence and injustices in the world, the Christian church is called upon to embrace, engage and continue with its task of being an agent for transformation and change. It has to fulfil the gospel imperative of making the world a better place for all to live with justice, peace and harmony. (p. 8)

It is not only the gospel that challenges the church into action. A confession of faith that came from the heart of the South African society, the Confession of Belhar, which has its origins in the Dutch Reformed Missions Church, states it clearly in Article 4:

We believe:

- that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people
- that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged

7.The struggle against poverty serves as an example. See article of Van der Merwe 2020.

8.Lekgotla is Tswana for public meeting.

- that God calls the church to follow him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry
- that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind
- that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly
- that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering
- that God wishes to teach the people of God to do what is good and to seek the right
- that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, amongst 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
- that the church belonging to God, should 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 others (Confession of Belhar 1982). It is clear that both the gospel and the confession challenge the church into action.

Support for a Lekgotla also came from Prof. Thuli Madonsela when she said (Van der Walt in *Netwerk* 24, 02 February 2021):

[S]outh Africa needs a new form of CODESA⁹ where South Africans can decide on common ground on the way forward to rectify the injustices of the past, which causes South Africa to be the country in the world with the biggest inequality in its population. (n.p.)

Professor Madonsela, the previous public protector continued in her speech at the annual conference of the F.W. de Klerk foundation by saying: 'Unfortunately there is still a lot of tension between the different groups in the country and a lot of uncertainty about the future of the country'. She continued: 'There is a lot of promises which was made in the past which were not realised' and then the most important statement: 'Our Constitution guarantees social justice which, after 27 years did not happen' (Van der Walt 2021).

She also said that we can do nothing about the past, but we can do something about the future. The big inequalities are one of the reasons why there is so much division in the country. 'When people are hungry, they either work together or they devour each other' (Van der Walt 2021). This point of view is in concurrence with the request that the church conference put to churches and church leaders to work towards a new economic order in which the needs of the poor can be adequately addressed. In the declaration it

9. Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) was the meeting held in 1991 at the World Trade Centre in Kempton Park, South Africa where negotiations took place between the different political parties en route to a new political dispensation in South Africa. Although CODESA was a meeting of political parties, it can serve as an example for a new conference.

was clearly stated: The conference requested churches and organisations to place the following on their agendas:

- The need to work towards a new economic order in which the needs of the poor can be adequately addressed
- Provision of work for the unemployed
- Provision of adequate homes and essential services for the service
- The need to work towards parity in standards of living between black and white people
- The need to eradicate poverty and hunger
- Affirmative action to enable transfer of some of the economic power presently in white hands.

One of the outstanding contributions of the Rustenburg Conference was the fact that it set an example to South Africa of how leaders from different backgrounds and cultures can get together to find a common ground to discuss the future.

It also gave an important safe space for confession about the wrongs of the past. Thirty years later, the current situation in South Africa challenges churches and other organisations to get together in a Lekgotla where current problems can be discussed. In 1990, the churches took the initiative and set the example with the church conference, which was followed up by CODESA where the political parties got together to negotiate the way forward. Time has come for a new form of *conference* where churches and *other civil organisations* can get together to discuss the problems in the country and to look for possible solutions and the way forward. South Africa is nearing the abyss of a fallen state and it is the responsibility of every church and leader to stand up and fight against it.

Important issues that can no longer be ignored, which are part and parcel of the calling of the church and which should be on the agenda of a Lekgotla are:

- **Racism:** Racism is alive and well in South Africa. This is confirmed by a declaration of the Desmond Tutu foundation. The statement read: 'Dividing racist rhetoric which was part of the events at Senekal and Brackenfell undermines the national project of reconciliation (Tutu n.d.).
- **Poverty:** Van der Merwe (2020:5) indicated how the South African Council of Churches (SACC) already acted on the huge problem of poverty in South Africa by implementing the Local Ecumenical Action Network (LEAN) program. This programme could be promoted and expanded at a Lekgotla to ensure that more churches and organisations take ownership of it.
- **Education:** In a publication of the South African Institute of Race Relations it is clearly stated (Roodt 2018):

[S]outh African education is in crisis. Children attending South African schools fare poorly on almost every metric and are ill-prepared for the world after school. More tragical those who suffer the most from poor schooling are disproportionately black children. If we fail to fix our schooling system, the problems we face today – many of which seem insurmountable – will seem even more difficult to beat. Looking at the scale of the problem, many may simply give up in despair, but there is hope. (p. 1)

- **Violence against women and children:** ‘There is a dark and heavy shadow across our land. Women and children are under siege’, Mr Ramaphosa said, describing South Africa as one of ‘the most unsafe places in world to be a woman’ (Ramaphosa 18 September 2019). Although the South African Council of Churches is conducting a ‘multi-pronged Patriarchy & Society Campaign against sexual and gender based violence and its social conditioning in society’ (South African Council of Churches 2021), a Lekgotla for churches in South Africa will give additional exposure to launch the programme on a much larger scale.
- **Corruption:** Corruption in South Africa is one of the biggest challenges faced by the country. This is highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to *Corruption Watch* (2021) emergency measures put into place by the South African government have proven irresistible to those with thieving tendencies. Somehow the moral compass of society has to be adjusted. This is one of the important challenges that can be discussed at a Lekgotla.

It will also mean much for the country if the churches in the country can once again create a safe space for confession. One of the important events that took place during the 1990 conference was the confession of Prof. W.D. Jonker on behalf of himself, the Dutch Reformed Church and the Afrikaner people. Although this was not planned as part of the conference, it happened spontaneously under guidance of the Holy Spirit and changed the course of the conference and to my mind history of South Africa.¹⁰ The concluding prayer of the Rustenburg Conference (1990) confirms it in the following words:

[T]his being so we are enabled by His Spirit to move forward together in His Name and call others to do likewise so that the Kingdom of our God and His Christ may be extended far and wide both in our land and beyond. And so to that Name which is above every name, even the Name of Jesus, we ascribe all might, majesty, dominion and praise. Amen. (p. 1)

South Africa once again needs a safe space where confession can take place and forgiveness can be granted. Thirty years after the Rustenburg Conference, a Lekgotla can provide such a space.

Conclusion

Thirty years after the important Cottesloe consultation in December 1960 lapsed before a second important conference took place in Rustenburg in 1990. Whilst another 30 years have gone by and the problems in South African society have not been solved – they have become bigger than ever before, magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. That is why the churches in South Africa face another Kairos moment. Similar to the situation in 1960 and in 1990 they can no longer afford to ignore what is happening. Thirty years after Rustenburg a new Lekgotla is urgently

¹⁰The confession of Jonker opened the doors for church leaders of the DRC to play an important role in the reconciliation process on the road to the 1994 election. For more information see: Van der Merwe 2016.

needed. It is time for the church to answer to her biblical calling and take the initiative for such an event.

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J.v.d.M. is the sole author of this article.

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