

WAGING PEACE IN A 'WARZONE'

7 keys to healing a traumatised nation

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It has been a traumatic few weeks in South Africa. Various writers, commentators and politicians have gone so far as to describe the situation in almost war-like terms. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, in an address to the nation, spoke about the country “being in mourning”. For many, it feels like the country is under siege on multiple fronts: an oppressed economy; horrific attacks on women, children and foreigners; and strikes, protests and widespread lawlessness.

However, it would be wrong to think that South Africa is alone or unique in experiencing tremendous upheaval on a national scale. There are other nations – outside of warzones

– that are currently going through similar traumatic and challenging struggles: French ‘yellow vest’ protesters have marched in Paris for 44 straight weeks; Hong Kong has experienced 15 weeks of relentless protest and unrest; Venezuelans face an economic siege and political uncertainty; and Sudan finds itself tentatively embarking on a whole new, more peaceful trajectory after decades of authoritarian rule and oppression (to name but a few examples).



Though this article focuses mostly on South African examples of challenges and possible methods of response, all the principles are transferrable to other nations and situations with slight adaptations to allow for cultural-specific circumstances.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

If, in the midst of the agony of a nation at odds with itself, the Church in that nation does not provide an answer or response, then that nation is indeed in a very dark place. Christ reassures His followers that He never leaves us, nor forsakes us, and He frequently reminds us not to fear or to be dismayed. There are many Scriptures that encourage His children to keep their eyes on Him in the midst of the storms of life. But how does that all translate into practical, day-to-day actions?

We often speak about the ‘social fabric’ of a nation, referring to the interwoven nature and connectedness of society. It may be geographically specific, or an ethnic group or spiritual community, but in every case, there are ‘threads’ that bind the members together. Where there is animosity, hatred and disunity, those ‘threads’ are damaged and the group is weakened; just like a torn garment slowly unravels, so too a ‘wounded’ community ‘unravels’ and falls apart.

Here is where the role of the Church, Christ’s Body, is vital. As the Church fulfils its calling, existing ‘threads’ are repaired or new ‘threads’ created. And, as more and more ‘threads’ are woven across these gaping ‘holes’ in our

broken societies, so communities are strengthened, healed and made whole. The keys that follow are not an exhaustive list of possibilities, but guiding principles to help the Lord's children be effective in the healing process.

KEY 1: REALITY CHECK

In the news: "In his address to the congregation [at Grace Bible Church in Soweto], President Ramaphosa expressed his gratitude for the initiatives taken by the church in the aftermath of the attacks on foreign owned businesses and on gender-based violence. The President said he was encouraged that [the church] showed leadership by visiting affected communities and giving the material support as well as prayer. He cautioned against this new phenomenon [xenophobia] and warned that if it is not tackled early, it will grow tentacles." (News24 – September 2019)

If the Church is to play a vital role in the process of the healing of a nation, then it is important to begin with an assessment of the Church in that nation. In South Africa, depending on which source you consult, 75-80 percent of the population professes to be followers of Jesus Christ. With an estimated population of 57,73 million (2018), then we are speaking of tens of millions, and even if one goes with a conservative number, then we are still talking of possible millions.

Given that South Africa has the incredible potential (if one only looks at sheer numbers) of having Christians in almost all facets of society and various walks of life, what amazing opportunities exist to influence this society in a godly way. It's heartening that the South African president acknowledges the vital role of the Church in this nation, but despite the example mentioned in the news item above, there remains a serious lack of influence from the South African Church as a whole in society. One expects that if the Church seriously pursues Christ's mandate of first loving God and then our neighbour, the traumatic incidences of extreme violence in society would decrease.



The South African Church can look to the north of Africa to gain inspiration from brothers and sisters in Sudan. Despite being small in numbers, they have impacted their nation in a big way, and it's been primarily through the way they endured intense persecution. Their lives have been such a testimony that non-believers called them to the forefront and commended their spirit and attitude. These believers played a crucial role in the recent protests that saw a nation pursue an entirely new path of peace.

KEY 2: HONEST REFLECTION

In the news: "The Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk), whose congregants are predominantly white Afrikaans speakers, says it was part of the problem of apartheid, and wants to be part of rebuilding South Africa. Church leaders have held several meetings and embarked on projects with victims of the apartheid-era regime as the first steps to make concrete contributions to the country, says the church's national moderator, Nelis van Rensburg. 'We were very much complicit [in propping up apartheid]. We provided the theological base for apartheid'." (Mail and Guardian – April 2019)

Despite what people may say about leaving the past behind and moving forward, if deep hurts from the past are not sufficiently dealt with, then much of what is attempted thereafter will be undermined by festering wounds that have never properly healed. It is an incredibly bold and decisive step for the NG Kerk to take the lead in attempting to address these deep-seated hurts within South African society.

It is vital for the Church to lead the way in reconciliation. We cannot expect the government or the private sector to succeed in



their efforts if the Church does not set the example, not simply in word, but also in deed. In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul says: “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: be reconciled to God.” How do we, as the Church, help people to be reconciled with God, if we cannot reconcile with one another? We need to honestly reflect on these issues and allow the Holy Spirit to highlight aspects in our own hearts that hinder reconciliation with our fellow citizens.

KEY 3: REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

In the news: “South Africa has apologised to Nigeria over a spate of xenophobic attacks which led to a spike in tensions between the two countries. Twelve people were killed earlier this month when mobs attacked foreign-owned businesses, mainly in Johannesburg. A special envoy from South Africa presented an apology to Nigeria’s President Muhammadu Buhari on Monday [16 September].” (*BBC News*)

A (super)natural outflow of honest reflection is repentance and forgiveness. Many books have been written through the centuries on this vital topic. Repentance and forgiveness lie at the very core of the Gospel – the repentance of sinners and the forgiveness of the Saviour. So crucial is it to our spiritual wellbeing that Jesus’ first instruction was to “Repent!” (Matthew 4:17a). The modern definition of “to repent”, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “To review one’s actions and feel contrition or regret for something one has done or omitted to do; (esp. in religious contexts) to acknowledge the sinfulness of one’s past action or conduct by showing sincere remorse and undertaking to reform in the future.” What becomes very clear in this definition is that repentance involves action, a turning away from what one did before. It’s not enough for one to say the words if hearts and minds remain unchanged.

It will not be enough for South Africa to apologise for the atrocities committed against foreigners – there will need to be a turning away from (and active prevention of) such actions in the future. It requires a shift in one’s thinking that influences one’s actions. Herein the Church can again lead the way by reaching out to the foreigner and treating them in a Biblical way. The Bible affirms – strongly and unequivocally – the obligation to treat ‘strangers’ with dignity and hospitality.



Deuteronomy outlines a number of specific provisions for treating the ‘stranger’ not just with courtesy but also with active support and provision. There are various churches in South Africa that do take this very seriously and actively engage foreigners, but there remains much room for improvement, on so many levels – from welcoming them into our midst and assisting them with becoming legal (for those who have not been able to complete the process or have become bogged down in the system), to providing language training, accommodation, skills training (where relevant), and so much more.

KEY 4: PRACTICAL HELP

In the news: “After Johannesburg was hit by a wave of xenophobic violence and looting, a group of Good Samaritans took it upon themselves to help clean up the mess left behind at informal settlements in Marabastad. Dare To Love, a Christian organisation that aims to “take up the challenge to speak grace and truth into a world that desperately needs to hear”, also lent a hand in cleaning up the mess after a strike by workers in Pretoria in August saw trash being dumped in the city’s streets.” (*Times Live*)

In James 2:14-26, believers are deeply challenged to act upon the faith they profess. This speaks of a ‘hand up’, not a ‘hand out’. The difference is the acknowledgment of a person’s dignity. One of the critical challenges South Africa faces currently is the scourge of unemployment, and its influence in the recent attacks on foreigners could be clearly seen as people targeted foreign-owned businesses. Despite the lawless activities associated with their actions, one can clearly hear a desperate cry for help.



How can the Church play its part in practically tackling this very real challenge? An example of a church-founded initiative is Fisantekraal Centre for Development in Durbanville, Cape Town. It was founded by various churches to address the needs of the unemployed in the area. An in-depth study was conducted to determine the needs of specific communities, employers' needs and employment opportunities. This research was documented and informed the choice of training provided. Their courses are "a means to developing skills, values and attitudes that enable people to become and remain economically active". The programme intentionally seeks to restore dignity and develop the self-belief of people attending.

KEY 5: COURAGEOUS STEPS

In the news: "This spring morning, 2 September 2019, tens of thousands of people working or volunteering in thousands of organisations are on their way to work. They have one thing in mind – to campaign and fight tirelessly for other people's equality and dignity, to try to build hope and opportunity. Put another way, they work to advance the vision of our Constitution with its aim to 'improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of everyone'." (*Daily Maverick*)

The Lord never said our walk with Him would be easy; in fact, He called us to 'die' to self. In Isaiah 58:6-10, the Lord mentions crucial aspects that He considers to be true fasting: loosing the chains of injustice, setting captives free, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, providing shelter, etc. In order to see true and deep healing in this nation, the Lord may require bold and courageous steps. He may call you way beyond your comfort zone, but He also promises blessings for such acts of obedience. In verses 11-12 of Isaiah 58, it speaks of the Lord satisfying needs, that His people will be "like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose water never fails", and that they will be called "Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings". Sometimes the Lord requires these extraordinary acts to break the ceiling on what was thought to be possible, and reveal the 'impossible' that is possible in Christ.

There are many incredible examples of God's children in South Africa who have demonstrated extraordinary faith. Examples include Agape Family Ministries in Grabouw (Western Cape); Kairos Missions in Bloemfontein; Hands at Work across Africa; and many more who have all dared to believe the Lord's words and promises and boldly step out in faith, tearing down age-old barriers between communities, and building something new and beautiful.



KEY 6: ACTIVE PRAYER

In the news: "At noon on Friday, 13 September, about 200 women, dressed entirely in black, were gathered at an intersection on Maude Street and Rivonia Road in Sandton. They sat in a circle on the tar road while men formed a human chain around them. The group was sombre as they were led in a prayer for victims of gender-based violence." (*Daily Maverick*)

Although prayer is essential in every principle already mentioned, active prayer involves people physically praying for someone else, in their presence. People will seldom turn away an offer of prayer, even in public and government spheres.

There is power in prayer, and when communities pray together there is a deepening of the bond of commitment to one another.



People in government and positions of authority need our prayer. The Lord commands us to pray for them, but what a difference it makes when we pray for them in person. There are various church groups who are committed to regularly praying for their local police station officers, or government clinic staff, or other government workers. It builds relationships as we pray for one another.

KEY 7: LOVE ANYWAY

“Violence robs families of everything. It seeks to drive us apart through fear. Show up on the front lines of conflict and love anyway.” (Preemptive Love Coalition)

When one looks at the circumstances around us, when one watches the endless news reports of ongoing violence, and problems seem to crowd in from every side, when nothing you try seems to work... love anyway. Christ loved fallen mankind extravagantly, to the point of laying down His life.

“If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don’t love, I’ve gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love. Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have. Love doesn’t strut, doesn’t have a swelled head, doesn’t force itself on others, isn’t always ‘me first’, doesn’t fly off the handle, doesn’t keep score of the sins of others, doesn’t revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end. Love never dies.” (1 Corinthians 13:3-8a, *The Message*)

CONCLUSION

The Lord isn’t looking for superheroes, and there are no easy solutions or ‘quick fixes’. The Lord calls each of His children to simply obey what He’s called them to do. He is the God of the impossible, He is the God who leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one who has wandered off, He is the One who enables us, and He is the One who equips. And it was always His desire that we do it in community – His Church, His Body – that the world would know that we’re His disciples, by the way that we love one another. Hebrews 10: 34 says: “You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.”

“I never look at the masses as my responsibility; I look at the individual. I can only love one person at a time - just one, one, one. So you begin. I began – I picked up one person. Maybe if I didn't pick up that one person, I wouldn't have picked up forty-two thousand... The same thing goes for you, the same thing in your family, the same thing in your church, your community. Just begin – one, one, one.” Mother Teresa

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