

GOD IS IN THE STENCH!

2008/2009 ESSET Reflections Report



“We must acknowledge that the church is not a moral bystander, watching out for a sinful word, but is actually involved in the sins of our times through its actions and inactions.”

Values

ESSET values and promotes:

- The integrity, equality, wholeness and fullness of life,
- God's preferential option for the poor, and
- Responsible stewardship for all creation

Vision

To attain a transformed society that promotes a just economic system prioritising the needs of the poor.

Mission

To advocate for social and economic justice by supporting the struggles of the marginalised communities.

Contents

1. FOREWORD	Pg 04
2. INTRODUCTION	Pg 05
2.1 Background	Pg 05
2.2 Methodology.....	Pg 06
2.3 Purpose of the document.....	Pg 06
3. THEMES FROM THE REFLECTIONS	Pg 09
3.1 Democracy, power and the marginalised	Pg 11
3.2 Racism, violence and abuse.....	Pg 12
3.3 Economic disparities	Pg 12
4. CHURCH RESPONSES – A CRITIQUE	Pg 14
4.1 Communities of faith, civil society and the struggle for justice.....	Pg 14
4.2 Christians in the current context	Pg 16
5. TOWARDS BEING CHURCH, AGAIN	Pg 17
5.1 The Big Questions	Pg 17
5.2 A critique of the church	Pg 17
5.3 Towards a ministry of presence.....	Pg 18
5.4 Speaking truth to power	Pg 18
5.5 Working for an alternative society.....	Pg 19

1 . FOREWORD

As ESSET seeks to work for socio-economic justice, we have become aware of the church's struggle to live out, in word and deed, the essence of the faith commitment to the notion of 'God's preferential option of the poor'. As part of the journey towards rediscovering the identity and the role of the church towards socioeconomic justice, spaces were created for various role players in the ecumenical movement to reflect on the drivers of the current socio-economic crisis in our country and globally. This document seeks to capture the outcomes of these reflections.

While the lessons shared here are not posited as the voice of the church, there are sufficient elements of the truth that should, in the least, enable the broader ecumenical body to agree on the challenges before us.

The reflections affirmed a number of issues.

1. There is paralysis within the ecumenical movement. This is a paralysis of action and presence as echoed in the many voices that continue to lament the absence of the voice of the church in the many national debates and developments. It is not an exaggeration to note that the church that locates itself within the historic ecumenical movement that has been part of the liberation struggle for South Africa has distanced itself from the many current struggles of majority of the people.
2. There is a disjuncture within the ecumenical movement with various organs pursuing different agendas resulting in contradictory and often confusing pronouncements and behaviour. Such can be seen in how the movement has responded to strikes by public servants and to the community protests for improved citizen participation in local democratic processes. These varied agendas are evolving into competing institutional arrangements.
3. The movement has, with a few exceptions, found comfort in becoming service delivery partners with the government and business. It has shied away from being agents of transformation that will ensure a more sustainable future for all South Africans.

The stories shared here amplify these observations.

Words of gratitude are extended to Mr Graham Philpot, Samuel Njenga, Mark Butler, Thembela Njenga and Desmond Lesejane, who gave invaluable contribution in the conceptualization of these reflections. Graham Philpot of the Church Land Project, Rev Siyabulela Gidi of the South African Council of Churches in the Western Cape, Mr Sammy Njenga and Rev Desmond Lesejane of ESSET facilitated the different groups. The councils of churches in the Eastern Cape, Gauteng and the Western Cape identified participants and hosted the reflection groups. Rev Siyabulela Gidi and Mr Graham Philpot went an extra mile in the consolidation of the reflections from the different groups. We will forever be grateful to their organizations for the time availed in making this project a success. Special acknowledgement also goes to Dr Stiaan van der Merwe who gave birth to this idea, and everyone that participated in aspects and actual reflections in different levels.

The staff at ESSET helped to making these reflections a reality. For this, our gratitude goes to Thembela Njenga, Sonto Magwaza, Thabo Koole and Busi Thabane.

Desmond Lesejane

“We need to be prepared to listen to God beyond the structures of the church. Structured voices can demoralise!”

2 . INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

Between 2007 and 2008 ESSET convened reflection groups of church leaders and ecumenical activists in various parts of the country. The meeting arose out of discussions at ESSET’s stakeholder meeting in 2006. In that meeting participants noted a deep socio-economic crisis unfolding in the country and globally. The meeting noted that we actually “know, from a variety of sources, that; we all, Christians, the world, humanity, nature and society are facing a massive global challenge with real potential of becoming a global catastrophe - a kind of global “crisis” and “catastrophe” never faced before in the history of the world. It has become a world in which another war, in the traditional sense of war, would actually come as a blessing, a let-off, and an opportunity for a rebirth, in comparison to what we already facing”.

It was evident the current socio-economic trajectory militated against the heart of the Christian gospel on a scale never faced before. This crisis does not in the first instance point to some enemy out there, as would be assumed. It points to the faith contradictions that arise when questions about the essence and meaning of the truth-claims of Christianity are pitted against the social and economic reality experienced by many. Many people know that there is much going wrong in society, yet in practice the response is silence, complicity and inaction. Even churches seem to be paralyzed, unable to act and speak effectively to the crisis. How does this happen?

In the quest for answers or even pointers to answers, ESSET created space for faith based reflections on the current situation. The process would hopefully enable ESSET (and the church) to hear and see the cry of God’s people and groaning of God’s creation, open the possibility of responding faithfully to the situation. Cognisance was taken of the fact that there is much hard statistical data available that describes and defines key aspects of this crisis. However, this knowledge has not informed perspectives that promoted appropriate responses. Rather much of the data available has been used to hide real experiences of real people behind impersonal and cold statistics.

The task reflection process was not just about (what needs to be done and what the final outcomes should be). Rather, it sought to check if there was sufficient courage of faith to recognise the situation as a profound spiritual crisis. This was a process which, in the language of the Kairos (understood as a pilgrimage and message of hope in anticipation of a more just reality) was a quest for a different way of seeing and doing things. In our times this means a search for a socially and economically just reality, where God’s will, love and compassion for people reigns supreme. Such a journey “involves moving to somewhere else... Earth is our oikos, our home where we are placed by God with a calling upon our lives. It is a reality. But it is not the final reality. We are on a journey to a different oikos, the Kingdom (sic) of God that lies ahead” and towards which we work and focus our energies.

The process would be a departure from the ‘business-as-usual’ patterns of conformity and acquiescence with the prevailing powers. It would be reflective space wherein the fundamental drivers that sustain the present predicament are exposed. It would focus on getting beyond ‘academic’ analysis to work at the level of values and the ways these operate in people’s painful experiences of the contradictions that confront them. The reflections would be informed by the values and traditions of the South African ecumenical experiences honed in the struggle against apartheid.

2.2 Methodology

The process involved meetings of small groups of about 25 people, held in Gauteng, The Eastern Cape and the Western Cape. In total about 130 people participated in these reflections. At the centre of the process was the creation of space for participants to tell their stories. This entailed a facilitated process for frank, honest sharing about observed socio-economic injustices, and experiences of complicity and silence within the churches. This enabled an analysis of stories, drawing of common threads and pointing out the underlying drivers of the action and non-action. Participants were then allowed to develop strategies for individual and collective action. Care was taken to ensure that the process remained open ended, specifically avoiding the temptation to reach consensus on any observation, or agreement on any strategy or course of action.

A type of 'SEE – JUDGE – ACT' cycle of social analysis was employed as a tool of facilitation. Specific elements included discussions in smaller groups, sketching of time lines linked to major developments in the country, recollection of personal experiences of injustices, reflecting on the role of the church. Efforts were made to ensure that the spaces were safe for each participant to participate openly. Confidentiality and tolerance of personal and different views were guaranteed.

Bible reflections were facilitated to set the scene from a familiar and common space for most participants. Some of the passages used were the stories of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-26); Paul's musings about 'being all things to all people' in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 9:16-24). Guiding questions were prepared beforehand for the studies. Responses from the various groups generated sufficient energy that permeated the whole process and kept questions about God and God's presence alive.

This became the space for a reflection for a circle of church-based activists ('lone or silent prophets') to confront and articulate some real truths about the current crisis, and to discern the appropriate strategies, praxis and stance in relation to the experiences and struggles of God's people. No exaggerated claims or expectations were raised about the impact the reflections themselves would have. The process would not be a panacea for the ills of South Africa, but a simple, limited and humble intervention.

2.3 Purpose of the document

This document seeks to capture the essence of these reflections. ESSET, with the consent of the participants, offers these humble reflections as:

- A testimony of their own experiences and observations of what is going on in our society gained in their engagement in the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- A tool to help the broader church community to reflect on its own praxis and location in relation to the struggle of the marginalised in our country;
- An antidote to the selective use of statistics and lies spread about the experiences of the poor by the dominant political and economic world view.

ESSET declares upfront that the document is not an authentic kairos response or a traditional theological document. Such a product would, in our view, demand 'doing theology' with people in their struggles in a sustained manner and through rigorous theological discipline.

Guiding questions for Bible Reflections

Luke 16:19-26 (cev)

"(19) There was once a rich man who wore expensive clothes and every day ate the best food. (20) But a poor beggar named Lazarus was brought to the gate of the rich man's house. (21) He was happy just to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. His body was covered with sores, and the dogs kept coming up to lick them. (22) The poor man died, and angels took him to the place of honour next to Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. (23) He went to hell and was suffering terribly. When he looked up and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side, (24) he said to Abraham, "Have pity on me! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and touch my tongue. I'm suffering terribly in this fire." (25) Abraham answered, "My friend, remember that while you lived, you had everything good, and Lazarus had everything bad. Now he is happy, and you are in pain. (26) And besides, there is a deep ditch between us, and no one from either side can cross over."

1. *What sin did the rich young man commit? What made Lazarus go to heaven?*
2. *Reflect on the contrast between the rich and poor living meters away from each other.*
 - o What kind of society produces this kind of situation?*
 - o What makes it possible for the poor to be seen only after they have died?*
 - o What is it that makes the rich not to see the poor?*
3. *How did Lazarus end up as a beggar?*
 - o When did Lazarus give up on life?*
 - o What makes people end up lying at the gates of rich people, begging for crumbs so to speak?*
 - o How does society respond to the beggars around them?*
 - o How should the Lazarus' of this world respond to their plight?*
4. *What can / should the church do about the Lazarus' of this world?*
 - o What economic arrangements do we need to put in place in response to this situation?*
 - o How can the church minister to the plight of the rich young man?*

1 Corinthians 9:16-24 (cev)

(16) I have no right to boast just because I preach the gospel. After all, I am under orders to do so. And how terrible it would be for me if I did not preach the gospel! (17) If I did my work as a matter of free choice, then I could expect to be paid; but I do it as a matter of duty, because God has entrusted me with this task. (18) What pay do I get, then? It is the privilege of preaching the good news without charging for it, without claiming my rights in my work for the gospel. (19) I am a free man, nobody's slave; but I make myself everybody's slave in order to win as many people as possible. (20) While working with the Jews, I live like a Jew in order to win them; and even though I myself am not subject to the Law of Moses, I live as though I were when working with those who are, in order to win Gentiles. This does not mean that I don't obey God's law; I am really under Christ's law. (22) Among the weak in faith I become weak like one of them, in order to win them. So I become all things to all people, that I may save some of them by whatever means are possible. (23) All this I do for the gospel's sake, in order to share in this blessings.

1. *What theme/s can you draw from this passage?*
2. *What does “Preaching the Good News” in our context mean?*
3. *What does “I become all things to all people” mean in practise?*
4. *What is required for a ‘preacher’ to become all things to all people? And what makes this difficult to achieve?*
5. *Is “Good News” the same to all people who hear the message?*

“In the critiques and resistance is the possibility of a modeling of an authentic model of being a church”

3. THEMES FROM THE REFLECTIONS

Many stories arose from points of contact that participants have had as relative outsiders with the issues and struggles of working class and poor people. Some stories revealed concern about the ‘hollowing-out’ of deeper issues of morality and values in current forms of struggle. Others told of the deep personal challenge/s arising from the facts of persistent poverty and degrading service levels available to the poor.

Here people have found no answers to questions like:

- What’s happened to the struggle?; to this government?; to my people?;
- What is the meaning of solidarity?; what is my role?;

3.1 Democracy, power and the marginalised

Access to the justice system is seen to be limited to the privileged and rich in society, despite the provisions of the constitution.

The stories related parts of a narrative of deep pain and perplexity at confronting a truth that ‘this government that I love and fought for’ is a system of power – of power over and against the people, and not for them.

Farm worker murdered by farmer

There was a farmer who owned a farm in a town neighbouring Mozambique and Swaziland called Komatipoort. His family is notoriously known in the neighbourhood for their bad treatment of black people. Many workers, who were previously employed on the farm, have allegedly disappeared without a trace. They worked long hours for very little pay, and on occasion are beaten until being unconscious.

The elder son, Mr Smith (name altered) inherited the family business from his father and it has flourished over time. All their employees were either illegal immigrants or temporary workers whose rights did not exist.

One day, a man known as Mandla (name altered), who had worked on the farm for almost fifteen years without a break, a day off or leave, decided to go home and pay homage to his father on his birthday. Mandla worked as a pump operator, he watered the farm and was responsible for almost fifteen years. He was not allowed to be sick, go to church or do any form of shopping.

When he returned from his father’s place, he was summoned to appear before his boss, who questioned who gave him permission to go visit his family. All farm workers were summoned to come and witness what form of punishment is meted out to people who don’t listen to their superiors. He was beaten by his boss and when he tried to run away the boss chased after Mandla. When he was about to be hit by the van, he tried to avoid or evade it, but he fell and the van drove over him, crush

his skull motionless. The incident was witnessed by the entire farm workers and Mr Smith ordered them to take the motionless Mandla to workers quarters and not to hospital.

The incident took place on a Thursday afternoon just as workers were preparing for lunch. All workers were made to sworn to secrecy and not to tell or they will face the same wrath of the "BOSS". The motionless Mandla was not taken to consult a medical doctor or any medical facility but locked in a room.

Mr. Smith, who is known as one of the richest farmers in Komatipoort tried to conceal the murder. He did not officially report the killing to the police but instead tried to sneak the corpse through the back door to the government mortuary which is in the premises of the Komatipoort police station. One of Mr Smith's friend, a police officer stationed in the same police station, who was off duty, went and collected the mortuary keys, without informing the police on duty as he was not permitted on premises without informing the police on duty.

When the police on duty enquired what the off duty policeman was doing with the keys of the mortuary, the response was very racist and derogatory. The black policeman went outside and found that Maritz wanted to hide the corpse without following proper procedure through the charge office and opening a case of murder. The black policeman on duty called the station commander and a case of murder was opened against Mr Smith.

The farm workers on Mr Smith's farm told of what kind of treatment they are up against: they would work in the farm for years without leave benefits, and at times laid off just before they were to get paid. They worked until they could not see a thing. Mr Smith would throw a stone in the distance and if they could find the stone, Mr Smith would tell them to continue working, only if they could not find the stone, would he allow them to stop work for the day. There are allegations that some workers were fed to crocodiles and some given paupers burials. All farm workers were not registered and had no access to any form of benefits.

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) provided support to Mandla's family through the court hearings and the burial of their loved one. We partnered with ANC, COSATU and SACP to formally support the court case against Mr Smith. The case went to court and Mr Smith was only fined R30 000. He paid it in cash and the family did not receive any pay for the fifteen years Mandla worked for Mr Smith.

The South African Human Rights Commission publicly committed itself to investigate the alleged human rights abuse in the farm, to send investigators to verify rumours of secret graves, but nothing much has happened.

It was stated that politics of the 'stomach' has become the order of the day. The quest for political power is perceived to be aimed at obtaining economic leverage for wealth accumulation and is supported by business interests that seek to maintain and increase their 'market' share.

The democratic system with its promises was largely appreciated by participants. However, many felt that the system failed ordinary people. Large communities still live in appalling conditions because of the failures of the system. It is—"poor service delivery for poor people" as seen in lack of access to health care and education systems. Many of such communities are 'slag pals', abattoirs, where human beings live with, and like animals and are condemned to certain death, literally and figuratively.

The study on the effects of socio-economic injustice on youth

The feasibility study was conducted by Project Hope as part of a project coordinated by Extra Mural Education Project (EMEP) and funded by the Western Cape's Department of Social Services. It concentrated on four rural communities, namely; Vredendal, Clanwilliam on the West Coast and Bredasdorp and Napier on the South Coast. The results of the study were astonishing; children were leaving school as early as grade three. For example, in one family of three, children all under the age of 15, only one was in school – the other two dropped out before they reach grade five. This was a trend at the three rural communities where the study was done. Amongst others, the study revealed the extent of the problems of teenage pregnancy, the astounding rate of children with foetal alcohol syndrome and the weakened spirit that goes with extreme poverty.

The “Slagpaal” (Afrikaans for abattoir) in Clanwilliam is one of the areas where the study interviews were conducted. The community in this area literally lives on the premises of an abattoir. When one approaches the entrance of the gate to this community, the first thing visible is the sight of unemployed teenagers standing idle. The second thing that characterises this area is the horrendous stench that hangs in the air. The residents stay in abattoir premises previously utilised to keep animals waiting to be slaughtered. In each of the homes visited during the study interviews, there were flies all over the house – as if it's a plague. The community is utterly and completely vulnerable, for if they protest, they will lose their jobs and their ‘homes’. When it comes to service delivery, the local municipality has failed the community miserably by arguing that the municipality does not have resources and capacity to meet the needs of the community.

The residents of “slagpaal” are further stigmatized. The children from “die slagpaal” who attend school in an established nearby township are also being discriminated against. At school, the township kids do not want to sit next to ‘slaagpal’ children because of the stench. It is said that the stench is so strong it could be felt in the clothes, hair and skin of pupils from “slaagpal”. There was also a perception that the stench was in the psyche of the township kids.

There are little or no signs of the work of the church anywhere in this ‘slaagpaal’ community. When confronted by this ugly picture it is inevitable to ask a question: where is God in the midst of these hopelessness, despair and stigmatization? The analysis of the study findings compared the alienation and rejection of the residents of “die slaagpaal” to that of Jesus Christ- “He was despised and rejected by humanity. He came to his own and His own received Him not”. Throughout His Ministry and up to His crucifixion –Jesus knew alienation that was orchestrated by both the authorities and even His disciples”. The analyses of the study findings make a theological conclusion that: “God through the Spirit must be in the stench, for with the stench comes rejection and alienation. if we fail to respond to “die slagpaal” we fail to respond to God, for God is in the stench.

Participation in democratic processes was seen to have been hijacked by the social, economic, cultural and political elites with policy making processes being made the preserve of the technocrats and experts. Efforts by communities of the marginalised are at best ignored. There have been growing incidences of criminalization of the responses of communities when they have sought to demand socio-economic rights enshrined in the constitution. Such acts, often the last resort of a community not listened and heard, are labelled illegal, anarchist, counter revolutionary and reactionary. Leaders thereof are marginalized, charged and their organisations squeezed out of public processes.

However, stories of resistance and resilience, even in the face of brutality, were shared. These are stories of hope that remain hidden as they do not always conform to conventional transformation processes.

3.2 Racism, violence and abuse

“Where are we when life is so cheap, when our children are raped and killed? Why are we quiet and not doing anything?” reflect a female participant on incidences of rape and abuse.

A few narratives located deep and brutal systems of oppression at very intimate levels of family and childhood. Oppression and the silencing and ‘discipline’ of children in this global mainstream institution (family) have extreme and pervasive consequences that are carried into the leadership of, and participation in, other structures-like the churches. Opinion is seen as dangerous, rebellion is viewed as intolerable, dissent is considered unacceptable, and truth cannot be different from what leaders and powerful people tell us is so.

Incidences of human rights abuse and exploitation of workers remain prevalent. Often this has racial connotations with, for instance, black farm workers’ lives treated as inferior to those of white farm owners. Such blatant and latent racism was also experienced in the church in relation to how black pastors were received in white congregations.

3.3 Economic disparities

One picture describes the persistent, growing concentration of power and wealth ‘across the road’ from equally persistent powerlessness and poverty of the majority. South Africa’s economy continues to retain the structure and form of the apartheid economy. Opportunities continue to accrue to the ‘newly monied’, recipients of Black Empowerment deals. This class, in collaboration with the traditional big business/capital has an almost exclusive access to and influence over government’s economic policy. And upon this unholy alliance lies the foundation of the endemic corruption gripping society and the growing perception that government policy and practise is anti-poor.

Rampant corruption continues to erode the gains of the democratic dispensation. At all levels of society such corruption is sustained through political patronage by elected representatives. There is evidently no sufficient will to tackle the problem, either through prescribed systems or collective community consciousness. The problem seems too big for ‘small’ people to tackle.

There is spiritual poverty in society “there is poverty here greater than material poverty. This poverty of the spirit is more failing than the poverty of material things”. The current ethic promotes selfish indi-

vidualism. It is a cut throat, 'dog eats dog' behaviour which supersedes even interpersonal relations. This new ethics also spawns apathy, a sense of purposelessness, of emptiness and of gradual destruction.

We have a 'cappuccino economy'

- *Foundations of the 'apartheid economy' remain intact. The majority of black people remain at the bottom of the economic cup; a mixed middle class consisting occupies the middle part; whites are the cream at the top; and a sprinkling of BEE moguls are like flakes on top of the cream.*
- *There is persisting poverty and inequalities in the economic life of the country despite moderate economic growth since 1994. This situation subsists because of the country's economic trajectory that unjustly and falsely divides the economy into first and second spheres with the latter treated as a dispensable fodder for the former.*
- *Economic policy making and praxis is elitist and excludes those in the margins from articulating their experiences and aspirations. At all levels of society policy is determined by and biased towards the social, political and economic elite. Attempts to increase this voice are thwarted by the fragmentation in the communities of the poor; inadequate mobilisation and lack of relevant human and other resources*
- *This, in practise means a minority of the country's population who happened to be whites, enjoy the highest stake of the economic takings. Just as a person can choose to drink the best delicious part of a hot cup of cappuccino, which is on the top and leave the bottom part which is tasteless to another person who is inferior. In contrast, the blacks who are in majority are the ones often left to only smell the flavour of the served 'cappuccino economy' which was enjoyed to the fullest by whites. Many are simply unable to enjoy the fruit of the South African economy.*

State of the South African economy

4 . CHURCH RESPONSES – A CRITIQUE

4.1 Communities of faith, civil society and the struggle for justice

“What is the core, the centre of the gospel that we feel impels us to action? How do we discern it? How do we interpret it?”

For a number of participants, their faith and their community of faith have had greater impact in empowering them with information and alternative ways of working out the issues of concern in their respective localities. For some, issues within their faith community are part of the problem. These issues include denominationalism growing at the expense of an ecumenism that had previously helped hold together a prophetic agenda. Others spoke of the ways in which moments of church solidarity with grassroots struggles were not sustained, and were quite problematic anyway on reflection. Often, the role of the church leadership in the few moments of actual presence with popular struggle was effectively to pacify people’s militancy and save the broader political electoral system, at the expense of the people’s actual struggles. And when the moment was over, there was no sustained solidarity, the church leaders didn’t return as they had promised, but shifted away when the stakes got high. This sense of pain, which effectively gave false promises to the poor, re-emerged in other stories too. People pointed out that the church imagines itself sometimes as the ‘voice of the voiceless’ but in fact ‘the voiceless’ have little reason to trust it in this role.

Some saw how in the experience, analysis and action of grassroots poor people, the institutional churches are deeply complicit in the agendas of the elites- from national government agendas to the capture of local opportunities and resources by local elites. From this perspective, the project of ‘development’ might better be understood as war on the poor - and the institutional churches are effectively on the wrong side in this war. For a few participants, these kinds of realities make it legitimate to ask whether ‘the churches’ are actually capable of being appropriate agencies for the quest for justice.

Prior to the local government elections in 2006 the Khutsong Community in the municipality of Merafong, formerly the mining town of Carletonville, waged a sustained community struggle against being made part of the North West instead of Gauteng. This decision of the government was taken against the stated wishes of the community expressed in numerous government led processes.

Public protests became the order of the day. Schools were closed, services collapsed and life become a daily struggle for many. The authorities remained intransigent. The churches inside Khutsong were paralysed and those outside remained aloof.

As part of their struggle, the community resolved to boycott the 2006 local government elections. Violence escalated. No campaigning or voting would be allowed. Suddenly, delegation after delegation went into Khutsong. Churches, led by the SACC in Gauteng, led bishops and other leaders into the area. Ministers of ‘mainline’ churches began to meet and interact with the leaders of the community.

Churches, through the various delegations, acknowledged the right of the people of Khutsong to decide in which province they wanted to belong and pledged their solidarity with the people. Commitments were made to mobilise resources to support a challenge of the government’s decision.

At the same time a dual call was made to the leaders of the community;

- *Leaders of the community had to restrain community members from committing acts of violence and intimidating people to join the struggle.*
- *Leaders of the community had to ensure that the forthcoming elections would be free and fair. Many had fought hard for the right to vote and not voting -not to mention actively discouraging others to boycott the vote as well, was seen as sacrilegious.*

The elections came and went. Less than 5% of the eligible voters participated. An illegitimate council was put in place. The people of Khutsong continued their struggle. It became more violent. Politicians became less tolerant. There were many casualties, for instance, a teacher who was also a leader of the struggle was dismissed at his local school.

The flood of church delegations in Khutsong became a trickle and in no time stopped. The promises of solidarity and support remained just that, promises.

The Khutsong case shows the church being sharp to mediate when the status quo is disrupted, and absent when people wage real struggles for their rights. This tendency to offer an ambulance, relief and mediation service has become a niche of the post-apartheid church in South Africa. It has become a comfort zone wherein any sign of confronting power is shunned.

This scenario begs the question of whether the church is capable of responding to the current challenges. For some it has itself become complicit. Some of its erstwhile leaders have also 'seemingly forgotten their calling and vocation' and become part of the systems of exploitation of the marginalisation.

Church theology, even within the ecumenical movement, has also gravitated towards a type of prosperity theology that condemns the poor as responsible for their own state; and promotes material accumulation as a blessing from God, without even trying to check how such wealth was accumulated or raising the gospel imperatives of justice, sharing and compassion.

The institutional church is not present in the struggles of communities. Instead a very open propensity to the power elite (be it social, business and political), it has become the norm in a classical manifestation of 'conforming to the standards of this world'.

"It seem like we are so ever willing to conform to the god of this world. We seem unable or unwilling to offer the world the alternative reality of what the God we serve stands for and promises. This happens even when the world outside the church, like the captain on Jonah's ship, sees alternatives in the God we profess and in the faith we espouse. Even at this stage we refuse to take responsibility to confess and work for another world filled with the values of the reign of God." Says a participant at the reflection meeting

It is not only the church that finds itself in this scenario. Social structures were seen to be generally servicing the state project which is itself informed by the market and interests of business. At the same time the voice of the grassroots is suppressed. These facts raise the questions: "can civil society structures really amplify the voice of the grassroots?; what drives this tendency to service the state project?; and can the pattern be broken? How can we redeem these structures?"

4.2 Christians in the current context

Some spoke of their own guilt at being able to do and offer so little in light of the terrible burden and scale of injustice on its victims. Some stories of the terrible burden and scale of injustice simply need to be heard as such, for their consequences are deep and wide- deeper and wider perhaps than individual guilt in the face of them. All such stories also highlight the utter failure of the official systems (of government, of welfare of law and order and so on) to respond in anything close to a sufficiently humane, effective and in a dignifying manner.

It was observed that tensions arise out of the fact that in the post-apartheid period, many church-based and ecumenical activists now have relatively comfortable middle-class lives with private cars, homes in the suburbs, kids at middle-class schools and so on, while the socio-economic crisis of the majority of the poor is not at all resolved. For Christians with strong commitments to justice, this is not an easy tension to live with. Solidarity with the struggles of the poor is no longer an automatic response of ourselves who are poor, but rather a choice and commitment that needs to be made by one from outside. Somehow this disconnection and tension are made worse by an increasing feeling of being locked into structures, relations and institutions that in practise stifle agency for justice among the poor for their own survival.

How an individual Christian responds to the current challenge has become a struggle that goes deep into the essence of being a Christian. One participant shared about the practise of church ministers being invited to open official events such as legislatures with a prayer. Reflecting on this he observed that:

“The current state of affairs has made even prayer a contested practise. What do you pray for when requested to open a political or government gathering? Do you give thanks to God for the democracy and its gains? Does it become an opportunity to bring before God the cries and pains of the poor, the abused? Do you condemn the leaders for not listening to the cries of the poor? Can you go beyond the PR exercise that prayer seems to have become?”

5 . TOWARDS BEING CHURCH, AGAIN

5.1 The Big Questions

Illustrative of deep seated levels of discontent, the stories told were often prefixed and concluded by soul searching questions.

- ? What happened to the struggle for the liberation of people?
- ? Where are the prophets of old who would boldly proclaim; **THUS SAYS THE LORD?**
- ? What happened to the soul of struggle activists who were prepared to lay down their lives for the sake of others, but come the 'new' South Africa, they are consumed by selfish greed and do not shy from engaging in corrupt activities?
- ? Where is the church in these times? Who is the church? What does it mean to be church? Does it still belong to the God of justice and compassion, the God of all people?
- ? Where is solidarity in our society today? What does it mean to be in solidarity? And with whom?
- ? What would be classified as the Good News (the Gospel) to the people of God today?
- ? What is the core, the centre of the gospel that we feel it impels us to action? How do we discern it? How do we interpret it?"

5.2 A critique of the church

Reflecting on some of the testimonies given and observations made, a question that arose is why, when we speak of 'the church/es', we do not consider people who are in the churches and in these struggles – as the church? So we must interrogate the ways in which we talk about 'church' because our language and analysis excludes people in the struggles for justice from the church and removes the church from the struggles of people. Perhaps this results from our focus and assumptions about institutionalism – but why have these been adopted. Certainly it is possible that those people who engage in contemporary struggles see no connection with the 'Sunday church' and their 'rest-of-the-week struggles'.

We must acknowledge that the church is not really present in processes of activist formation. There is no serious sustained integration of current struggles and the life of the church through any meaningful solidarity, or through theological and liturgical processes. The pre-occupations of church leadership are not those of ordinary people – they are irrelevant. In these and other ways, it is the church that deprives itself of the space to be present in popular struggle.

The failure to find appropriate ways of handling issues of Africanisation and culture by the mainstream churches in their self-definition, has had the effect of excluding, denigrating, and ignoring a large part of our people's reality. Things these churches find exceptional and worthy of condemnation are mundane and life-giving for the masses of our people – and yet they cannot be expressed within these churches.

Outside of the mainstream and historical-missionary churches, more indigenous forms of church are far more accepting of these aspects of people's lives- but, in effect, the missionary churches (who dominate the 'ecumenical movement') have made acceptance of non-African culture a criterion of acceptance. This impacts the extent to which it is possible for mainstream church to be present in popular life and struggles. By contrast, African independent churches are the church that is present in solidarity with the life of the poor in ways that the mainstream churches and ecumenical structures do not often acknowledge.

5.3 Towards a ministry of presence

While the lack of unity and dearth of ecumenical action for justice is worrying, the reflections noted that "the identity of the church' is derived from what it does and not what it says and theologises". Doctrinal differences have always been with the church and should not now be allowed to be reasons for inaction and disobedience to the dictates of the gospel.

The church needs to be present and listen to the people. Following in the steps of Christ the church must once more immerse herself in the lives of the marginalised and communities that struggle for socio-economic justice. It must bear in mind that these are not the struggles of the church, but of the people. Opportunities to act should not just be from the church, but essentially from the people.

To do this, we would require a change of attitude. The church would need to stop imposing its views or trying to be the voice of the voiceless. Such an engagement would seek to give respect to the marginalised and their agency. It will also locate God and God's work of liberation and salvation among the marginalised themselves rather than pointing them to another 'god' who is alien to their lives and struggles.

We should become part of the struggles and the solutions proposed by the marginalised. This is what commitment to 'God's preferential option for the poor' would mean in action.

Such a change in process would require people with skills to listen and become agents of change in solidarity with communities of the marginalised. This is necessary because processes of formation in churches teach people to speak, tell, impose, keep order, and be the voice. This has to be unlearned.

5.4 Speaking truth to power

Central to this demand of the gospel is the question, what is the agenda of the church?

The observation that the church is afraid or unable to speak truth to power and the dearth of visible 'church' activism for social justice is often attributed to the lack of prophets for our times.

It was suggested that there is a need to differentiate between prophesy and activism. Prophets are raised and appointed by God at his opportune time for a particular purpose. In this sense we feel that the romanticising of the notion of prophecy is disempowering. Other than the prophets' that the biblical history talks about, there were disciples who in many ways were agents of transformation, or activ-