

**The 6th International Congress
of the International Religious Liberty Association
held in Cape Town 27th February to 1st of March 2007.**

I want to offer a brief domestic reflection arising from my personal experience in working in this field of interreligious interaction and to look at specific opportunities and challenges that face us here and something of the vision that we hold.

Missionary oppression

As a former white missionary to Africa back in the 70's I'm pleased that Dr Mndende has reminded us of the oppressive nature of religion especially when coupled with political power and missionary zeal. It's good for Christians to hear this, Christians who so often regard themselves as having some eternal mandate (some existential right of being) and we applaud ourselves for our so called 'tolerance' of other faiths, we forget that Christianity itself is a recent and regrettably a very heavy handed arrival to these shores. It reminds us that all religionists must still tread very gently when they step outside their communities.

Religion under Apartheid

I'm also pleased that we've heard the acknowledgement of religious hurts and failures during the long years of racial oppression in this country. Again Christians of all denominations need to be challenged by this history. The TRC's Institutional hearing of the faith communities report began by saying

'Some of the major Christian churches gave their blessing to the system of apartheid, and many of its early proponents prided themselves in being Christians. Indeed the system of apartheid was regarded as stemming from the mission of the church. Other churches gave the apartheid state tacit support, regarding it as a guarantor of Christian civilisation. They were the beneficiaries of apartheid, enjoying special privileges denied to other faith communities.'

I fear my former Archbishop's prophecy that we in SA would move from a global pariah to a global role model has led to some arrogant thinking among Christians – 'we've taught the world about truth and reconciliation and now we lead the way on how to do religious diversity'. I think that by taking cognisance of the two aspects of our history that I've just mentioned, we will be slow to claim any global superiority in the field of religious liberty and tolerance.

Roots of interfaith understanding

However having said that, there is no doubt that in the prisons and detention centres of the 70's, leaders of our faith communities found each other and had, if you like, interfaith respect and relationship 'thrust upon them'. The leaders who marched together, were imprisoned together, and prayed together discovered a connection of spirit that was not only to make lifelong personal friendships but opened the door to good interfaith relations.

So it is stated that the official interfaith movement in SA begun, to a large extent, with this cordial exchange within religious leadership under struggle. I say 'official' because all the while, in rich and diverse communities like District Six for example Muslims Jews and Christians lived cheek by jowl, worked together, had fun together and naturally had a respect for each others traditions. The fun led to marriage! Many of my families of my church have Muslim relatives within there own families often living in the same house. Muslims children went to St Mark's church school learnt choruses and came to Sunday school to get the sweets from the teacher. In District Six, interfaith tolerance and respect was being lived long before any one picked it up as an issue or gave it a name. Sadly of course apartheid's footprint eradicated the community but the vision lives on.

For example at my church a few weeks ago we had a celebration of Ashura on the tenth day of Muharram, we heard of the restoration of Adam and Eve, the liberation of the children of Israel from the hand of the Egyptians and of course the sweet smelling sacrifice offered to God by Noah at the end of the flood. The Turkish Muslim community brought more than 100 Noah's puddings The 'ashure' to share with the Anglicans as a middle eastern sign of reconciliation. We were even able to enjoy the different nuances of our texts – e.g. was Mrs Noah the faithful wife at the side of her husband or was she the unbeliever who sadly missed the boat? A simple and immensely doable expression of unity and enjoyment of differences

PWR and CTII

But then the rainbow appeared above slopes District Six in 1998 and persuaded Chicago visitors that they had found the right place to hold the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions. This was a watershed event and persuaded us who were involed that time to take the interfaith exploration to a new level – the level of

interpersonal exchange and conversation within our communities. It was time, at least in the Western Cape, to uphold formally values of religious tolerance and freedom and promote opportunities for celebration and collaboration amongst Cape Town's rich heritage of religious diversity. Thus the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative was born as an umbrella body to support the interfaith movement and to promote dialogue and cooperation amongst the communities of faith.

The structure arrived just in time because since 2000 there has been a growing interest and demand for all things interfaith. The 'interfaith' component in everyone's projects and plans became both politically correct and humanly intriguing.

At the same time there was a growing willingness from Government to do business with the religious sector, a really positive development, I believe, in our more recent democratic history. Of course in that exchange there was the constitutional demand to uphold each and every faith tradition. That of course can create problems when one is asked to arrange prayers for some government occasion – no one can be left out – the line of contributors to the opening prayer can become very long! But the principle is good. And this acknowledgment of the importance of the inclusion of all faith traditions has led to a positive engagement between faith communities and the state, on policy and legislation. Our ministers and portfolio committees, in my experience, always welcome submissions from the religious sector.

GFSA

One example was the faith leaders, in this case they were mainly church leaders, who met in 1994 with Peter Story and Sheena Duncan with a vision of a fire arm amnesty during the period of the first democratic elections. This vision led subsequently to the forming of a NGO called Gun Free South Africa, which together with its NGO partners in the Gun Control Alliance became powerfully instrumental in the revision of our gun control legislation in South Africa.

In order to reflect on many other critical issues of provincial governance we have established the Western Cape Religious Leaders Forum where the insights and guidance of faith leaders will be brought to bear, in a spirit of critical solidarity with government, on the challenging issues of life in South Africa. A National Religious Leaders Forum was established in 1998.

Values

Along with this opportunity goes the national conversation around values. SA's leaders are calling for moral regeneration, for a return to the fundamental values of our lives. Again there is an urgent call to all religious communities for leadership and inspired input. A recent national television series called the Heartlines project brought 8 values into focus and were debated at all levels nationwide. As you all well know, if it is doctrine and dogma that divides, as the Heartlines slogan put it – it's 'values' that connect.

Theological challenge

One challenge we always face in interreligious work is a theological one. By which I mean theology that by its very nature is about, division separation, election, supremacy and exclusivism – an old adage we use in CTII says 'we are chosen you are frozen'. We know the problem but in this context today I want to say one thing.

I don't believe it is good enough to say you are religiously tolerant, that you support religious liberty – 'everyone has the freedom to believe what they like', - while your own faith position is one that excludes the other to the point of subtle oppression. In other words exclusivism, faith supremacy when it comes to religion, is in contradiction to the values of religious liberty. I don't believe you can truly feel at home in an organisation such as the IRLA if deep down inside you know that you will be saved but ah it's a shame for those other guys. Religious liberty I believe, demands serious theological rethinking. Maybe you can sense that I believe the era of Augustine's fall/redemption theology is over. For me, particularly in this time of Lent, Christ leads us into a wild and wonderful wilderness of temptations and possibilities of living beyond the fears and prejudices of what so often is nothing but blatant religious apartheid.

We have to revisit our sacred texts and look again at those words however well loved, however wonderful; we must attend to texts and stories that support patriarchy, chosenness and exclusive claims to salvation. We cannot tell religious stories at the expense of the other anymore. Stories which demonise and estrange vast communities of God's people must be contextualised or even rewritten. Religious leaders have a huge responsibility here, a responsibility to preach a big God, a God bigger than all the boxes we build for her. Religious leaders have a wonderful opportunity to speak of a God whose very essence empowers, sustains and connects us on our complimentary spiritual paths.

I must just say this also as a Christian with hopes for my children
The kind of theology that is being funded by the middle American

right both here and to an alarming degree in Central Africa is creating a new generation of rice Christians and planting a time bomb on African soil.

Challenge of Universalists

We have also been challenged by the voice which tries to gloss over the differences – focussing solely on what we have in common, manifestos of shared ideals and calls to a universal oneness. We are one in the spirit – never mind the rest. I understand that in Holland the Bahai community have all but been expelled from the Interfaith structures because of their unwillingness to accept differences. Here, I'm pleased to say we embrace the Bahai community, holding to an understanding of spiritual unity on the one hand but at the same time avoiding any unhealthy syncretism, as we seek to live peacefully and confidently with others of different and sometimes conflictual understanding.

Challenge of global events.

Needless to say even here in sunny Cape Town – we all retreat into the trenches when there is a global religious crisis. Acts of terrorism, Papal quotations Danish cartoons all affect the ease with which our faith communities can live at peace. We are very much part of global sensitivity.

Vision

So our vision is to move beyond dialogue to conversation – remember you can have dialogue with your enemy!
To move beyond tolerance to forgiveness – remember you can tolerate your mother in law!
To move beyond religious pluralism to a concept of a community of religious communities
To move beyond academic understanding to an enjoyment of complimentary and even contradictory truths
To move beyond the constitutional right of religious liberty and freedom of expression to a deepening of our faith traditions, a softening of theological expression and an empowered dialogue that is met with a forgiving response.
To move beyond interfaith dialogue to mutually enriching coexistence and open hearted hospitality.

This is what this Mother City requires of us.

'The scourge of the earth is the totalitarian attempt to exterminate or oppress those who differ in belief from oneself. The faith of today can no longer rest on an alleged completed certainty of the past; it must be a Socratic commitment to a didactical process aiming at a future truth.'

Keith Ward speaking of the need for Socratic faith