

Statement Flowing From the National Church Leaders' Consultation
Held at Lanzerac Hotel, Stellenbosch
19-20 January 2009

20 January, 2009, Stellenbosch

We, Church leaders of South Africa, gathered here at Stellenbosch on 19-20 January;

- Mindful of the challenges facing South Africa, in particular dehumanizing poverty, the scourge of crime and corruption, spiritual malaise and moral decay, disrespect for the Constitution, and the credibility of the coming elections;
- Heedful to the need to conduct free and fair elections;
- Alert to the political crisis facing our neighbours in Zimbabwe and attentive to the disaster in that country;
- Disturbed by the political and humanitarian crisis in the Middle East;
- Guided by the imperatives of our faith;

Jointly issue the following statement:

1. A new vision for Church leadership

We covenant to be a clear and fearless prophetic voice, giving moral direction to the nation and beyond;

We undertake to build and promote a caring society which protects, honours and enhances life in all its forms as a gift from God;

We will do this by following Jesus Christ, who through His incarnation, gave His own life to save life (John 10:10).

2. The role of the Church

We regard it our duty to guide the nation in matters that affect the lives of our citizens. In the past we have played our rightful role in the building of a democratic dispensation and we commit ourselves to continue doing so during the coming elections by offering not only impartial analysis but also ethical guidance.

3. Good governance and accountability

Our electoral system should enhance good governance, accountability to the electorate, moral and ethical leadership.

4. What will be required of us during the elections

South Africa has had three national and provincial elections in which the country's citizens and political parties have demonstrated a commendable level of political tolerance. Those elections were moments of grace and goodness, hope and optimism. There is no reason to deviate from this tradition in our relatively young democracy.

From all South Africans will be required a love of country and a commitment to serve its people, a spirit that recognizes that although we may belong to different political parties we share a common humanity and destiny.

For this reason we appeal to all South Africans to reject those who will cheapen the sanctity of life by resorting to violence in order to achieve their political objectives. We appeal to all political parties to abide by the electoral code of conduct and not to engage in campaigns characterized by name calling, lies, threats of violence, bribery or corruption meant to influence election outcomes.

We call on all South Africans to be critical and engage political parties on their manifestos, and critique what they read and hear in the media. It is through public debate in the open market of ideas that we can deepen our democracy.

Free and fair elections require efficient and transparent electoral practices, before, during and immediately after election day. In this regard, we call on the government to ensure sufficient funding for voter education and preparations and to be supportive of the work that must be done by the Independent Election Commission.

From the media will be required balanced and informative reporting and a critical analysis of each political party's programme/manifesto. The media will need to go an extra mile in giving citizens information in a manner that will enable them to participate meaningfully in the elections.

5. The Zimbabwean crisis

As church leaders in Southern Africa, we are deeply concerned and pained by the loss of life and the continued deterioration of the social, political and economic situation in Zimbabwe. The situation is worsening by the day, and many Zimbabweans continue to flee to neighbouring countries. This grim situation is compounded by the recent outbreak of the cholera epidemic. The health facilities have broken down and the system cannot cope with the crisis. The result has been devastating with the loss of over two thousand lives, according to official reports.

Zimbabwe has collapsed. We believe that Robert Mugabe is holding to illegitimate power. The people of Zimbabwe spoke on the 31st March 2008 by electing a new leadership; we therefore call upon Robert Mugabe to resign in order to give democracy a new chance.

SADC and the South African government have failed the people of Zimbabwe and the continent through their so-called quiet diplomacy. We respectfully call for the intervention of the African Union and the appointment of a new facilitator of the talks in Zimbabwe. Former President Thabo Mbeki is compromised and no longer suitable for the mediation process.

We also call on churches, civil society groups and political leaders in Southern Africa to urgently address the humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe. We commit ourselves to:

- seek and facilitate the unity of the church in Zimbabwe and the region on the situation in Zimbabwe;
- welcome and support our sisters and brothers from Zimbabwe who have come to find refuge in our country;
- assist in providing food aid and other material aid to Zimbabweans through church structures; and
- actively work for the downfall of unjust rule in Zimbabwe.

We pray for a time when there will be peace, justice and security in Zimbabwe and hold on to the hope expressed by the prophet Isaiah:

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in (Isaiah 58:12).

6. Destruction of Gaza

We express our absolute horror at the appalling violence, destruction and killing inflicted on over 1.5 million people in the Gaza strip and surrounding areas.

We condemn in the strongest terms the senseless shelling of civilians, but especially the disproportionate retaliation which has reaped a grim harvest of death and inestimable damage to homes, property and infrastructure.

We address a sincere word of sympathy and comfort to all Palestinians and Israelis (Muslims, Christians and Jews) who have suffered injury, loss and trauma at the “hands of the men and women of blood.”

7. Conclusion

As Church leaders we undertake to deliberate and act on these and other important issues. We have committed to meet regularly and to assess the situation on a continuous basis.

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it (Matthew 7:13-14).

Issued by:

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On behalf of

National Church Leaders

Bishop Ivan Abrahams (Presiding Bishop of Methodist Church of Southern Africa)