



A RESPONSE TO A NEW KAIROS DOCUMENT, “A WORD TO THE ANC, IN THESE TIMES”

BY DINA CORMICK

I commend your initiative for putting together this letter, but I regard this document as a first draft of a work in process, not a final statement. The moral situation in our country is so grave that it is urgently important that people of faith speak out. But, herein lies my concern - the gravity of the situation needs an equally powerful statement that holds the aspirations and concerns of everyone. The statement needs to touch the conscience of the ruling party, the ANC.

Frankly I am disappointed. I have reread the documents numerous times but I have the same sinking feeling of disappointment. I have been trying to be convinced, I have read the many endorsements and praise comments in the Kairos Southern Africa blog. Several weeks ago I wrote into the blog to voice my concerns, I want to read a section of my letter, because it still expresses what I feel today - my feelings of disappointment. My first reaction was to the tone of the statement - but also to where the emphasis led – [in general every statement that wants to go public needs to be edited carefully].

Frankly I am disappointed. The tone of the document is too moderate, it lacks power. The first two SA Kairos documents (Challenge to the Church and The Road to Damascus) were hard-hitting pulpit-bashing denunciations of the evils of the day. One of the most effective outcomes of that first Kairos document was that it delegitimized the apartheid regime in the eyes of Christians throughout the world.

Now herein lies the rub - we are in a state of crisis again! Of course the ANC is not the unjust apartheid regime. Today the crime is corruption, greed, theft and tender fraud, the injustices are lack of accountability, lack of transparency and lack of service to the poor. The evils of Apartheid - separate development - have been transmuted into classism - the haves and the have-nots. The old “threat of communism” has been morphed into the threat of constitutional freedoms like free speech.

But this new Kairos document does not denounce these things. It treads softly around the ANC, gently offering a few “words”. Where is the loud prophetic voice speaking the truth and demanding conversion... Why have we become so scared of the state authority? Unfortunately the role of faith communities as the moral compass to the nation is almost non-existent now. Who dares speak out against the liberator’s corruption?

This is indeed the **Kairos** moment. But please start shouting now! Things should not be like this now - we were promised better, people gave their lives for better. The current administration need to be forcibly reminded of this. Mantashe et al tolerated the delegation as leaders are wont to do when a protesters hand in memos. The content of the document has been forgotten, filed away until maybe next year after the celebrations.

I regret that Edwin's response did not address my concerns, perhaps because there have been too few critics of the letter. On Tuesday there was a comment on the blog which actually praised the soft gentle approach which I have found unacceptably cloying. For years we heard about Mbeki's soft approach "quiet diplomacy" in Zimbabwe and elsewhere which achieved nothing. The prophets did not mince their words when they spoke to the rulers about the plight of the poor.

However, I wish to itemise three areas of concern which I hope Edwin will respond to:

Authorship - who wrote this document? How was it produced? One of biggest selling points for the original Kairos document was the way it was put together, its method of doing theology. It was **the process** that was foremost in the construction of the statement. Essentially it was a people's theological statement - people making a prophetic statement, it came from below. I heard an interview at the time with Albert Nolan who said, "It started one Saturday morning in July 1985 as a meeting to reflect on the recently declared State of Emergency and in the typical style of the Institute of Contextual Theology that meeting began a series of meetings involving more and more people until finally someone suggested that their reflections be collated into a document to be circulated around the country - as a challenge to the church from below... The ICT was just the facilitating body but what happened was a Kairos theological process."

Over the years there have been many Kairos statements, but one must be careful not to overuse the term. The important issue to this letter is that the original Kairos document bequeathed us with a **process of doing theology**, a theology from ordinary people - a theology of the people.

My issue today is that problems arise when a small group of people claim to speak for the multitudes without any consultation. But in our multi-faith society I find it regrettable that the Kairos theologians did not invite other faith theologians into the authorship.

Purpose - in correspondence with Edwin I was told that this was merely a *Birthday letter -from Kairos SA to the ANC*. Birthdays tend to evoke reflections, and this is simply what happened here. So please read it in that spirit. My immediate response was that is too simplistic. Clearly from the very campaign to get a million signatures the intention is more serious. It was also very clear in the PolitySA interview with Rev Moss Ntlha in the YouTube clip [located in the Blog] that there was an urgent need to issue a challenge to the ANC to return to the right path. And indeed the subsequent meeting to present the "Reflections" to the ANC and their response also point to a more serious document of intent.

Moss spoke beautifully in the YouTube clip clearly presenting the urgent need for the Church to re-engage with government, especially because the Church played an important role in the struggle and needs to be part of growing our democracy. Indeed I find the best part of the “letter” is the looking back at the journey travelled together. And herein lies the rub - in 1985 and 1991 we can safely presume that the majority of the current ANC would have supported and endorsed the documents. Now that they [the ANC] are at the receiving end, attitudes are different. Interestingly, a paper from Joel Netshitenzhe presented for the Rev Abraham Maya ecumenical lecture at the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection on 20 November 2010 and then repeated in TheThinker in September 2011 gives us an impressive insight into the mind of the ANC NEC. Considering that Joel is often lauded as the brains behind the policies and principles of the ANC.

Well, in the paper, Netshitenzhe writes as a Marxist, decrying the Christian Church’s tendency to seek to control the masses, for example the dubious intentions of the first missionaries. Remember, the Kairos document of 1985 recognised faith communities as part of the problem. But what I found particularly illuminating was Netshitenzhe’s views on Kairos theology. He argues that the notion of Liberation Theology is outdated in the context of our democratic system, our legitimate state and programme of reconstruction and development. What is needed more, in terms of active Christian participation in changing society for the better, is a Developmental Theology. According to Netshitenzhe the Kairos moment for the church should be solving the unemployment and grinding poverty of the people - this is where the church can be useful to the state, not in “oppositionism but rather in positive developmentalism.”

To me Netshitenzhe’s paper raises the very pertinent question of how the ANC really view the Christian church or religious community. The outburst from Mathole Motshekga in the City Press against Mmanaledi Mataboge’s review of the letter gave no real assurances. All it spelled out was that the ANC does not tolerate any criticism. Motshekga was very happy with all the positive words in the letter, but refused to allow any hint of criticism of Zuma.

So how relevant is the Church’s voice? A carefully cautious letter to the ANC is accepted almost without comment. Yet one short paragraph by Reuel Khoza in his board meeting raised a huge ugly reaction from ANC. Khoza’s words were not outrageous or offensive, in effect he was voicing just one of the concerns listed in the Letter – leadership, yet they touched the raw nerves.

Achievement / Result - so what achievement or result can we expect from the writing and delivery of this Letter? Perhaps only the gathering of a substantial amount of signatures, more discussion and debate, continuing the conversation? I like the concept of conversation, but the letter has already been delivered.

My concern is the document was hastily assembled - before the centenary year began. It begins by asking the ANC not to overindulge, overspend on their celebrations? That was never going to be taken seriously!

In one of the articles on the Kairos blog, Clint le Bruyns comments that the 17 ‘words’ of the letter could be reduced to 4 ‘words’: celebration, confession,

collaboration, critique. I think far too much emphasis was placed on the celebration section (okay, Edwin, so it was a birthday letter) but one 'word' would have sufficed, there was so much repetition - 'words' of celebration, appreciation, praise, congratulation and gratitude. Then a brief 'word' of confession before, admittedly one of the best sections, the six 'Words' of collaboration which were also words of praise. But then only ONE 'word' - 'a word of caution and concern' in which nine critiques were cautiously listed in random order. The overall emphasis of the letter is definitely congratulatory with only a weak attempt at pointing to the vast areas of failures, failures in moral responsibilities like corruption, lack of accountability et cetera that we are all witness to day after day.

My suggestion: in the spirit of Kairos Theology can we not ask for another draft, a more inclusive collaborative effort, gatherings such as this, where we are not handed a document to sign, but rather invited to contribute our concerns and issues? If a draft had been circulated amongst all people of faith, not just the Christians, how might this document have looked then? It is only April now - but had the statement waited until March you might even have had Khoza and all his business colleagues endorsing, now the Kairos letter is a has-been, overshadowed by the stern words of Reuel Khoza.

Yes I signed this first draft, because I signed the other two Kairos documents. To be honest I sign in support of many initiatives without studying them as carefully as I did this! It is easy to sign and sit back content that something is being done. Most of us do not have time to do more than sign. But now, having signed I am more concerned at the outcome. Absolutely I believe this is a Kairos moment. It is increasingly manifest how the ANC does not tolerate criticism yet things are not right. So it is our duty to speak out. It seems everything is hinged on what will happen at Mangaung. Let us not wait quietly. Which is why I am asking for loud voices to speak out!