



**ADDRESS BY PROF ERNST CONRADIE AT THE LAUNCH OF THE CLIMATE CHANGE PUBLICATION – *CLIMATE CHANGE – A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCHES IN SOUTH AFRICA* AT THE DIAKONIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES**

Dear friends

Earlier this year I told my children (aged 9 and 6) that their future will be decided in December this year. I said that the Copenhagen Conference of Parties will determine what kind of world they will be living in when they are around my age. It is *that* important I said to them and to others who were around.

Perhaps one should not say such things too easily, because the news we hear about Copenhagen is not too encouraging for my children. Here are three indicators, all arriving on my desk on Friday 20 November alone.

- Harald Winkler, one of SA's top climate scientists wrote in an excellent essay entitled "Going for broke in Copenhagen" that "The future of the climate change regime is to be decided in Copenhagen. It is not looking pretty." He added that a treaty on climate "seems out of reach barring a political miracle".
- During the WCC's UN Advocacy Week, held in New York City, USA, from 15 to 20 November, Olav Kjørven, assistant secretary-general and director of the Bureau for Development Policy at the UN Development Programme, told some 80 participants that it appears there will be no binding agreement on climate change signed by world governments at the upcoming Copenhagen climate change meetings in December, "unless governments can ramp up the courage to address it,"
- The Cape Times reported that day on the Global Carbon project, a study by 31 leading scientists headed by Prof Corinne Le Quéré, suggesting that we are on course towards the IPCC's worst case scenario a rise of 6 degrees Celsius by the end of this century. They observed that annual carbon emissions have increased by 29% from 2000 to 2008 and by 41% from 1990 to 2008. Except for 2009 (due to the

global recession, this represents an annual increase of 3%. Prof Le Quéré added that Copenhagen was the last chance of coming to a global agreement that would curb carbon dioxide emissions. One needs to recognise that a rise of 6 degrees Celsius is similar to the situation that brought about the Permian extinction 251 million years ago when a series of volcanic eruptions produced large quantities of sulphur dioxide and carbon dioxide that warmed the planet by between 6°C and 8 °C, triggering the extinction of around 96% of all marine species and 70% of terrestrial vertebrate species.

What do you do in such a situation? What should the churches be saying? Many would say that all we can do is to hope and pray for a miracle. Some feel we need to shout as loud as we possibly can in the hope that the delegates to Copenhagen will listen. But will they even hear our cries, let alone listen to it and respond to it? Will they receive our statements, let alone open the attachment and read the contents?

Others like James Lovelock (in *The Vanishing face of Gaia*) say that it is already too late. We just have to work on our personal survival skills. Yet others will conclude on this basis that we might as well eat and drink and be merry because tomorrow we may be dead. Personally I thought of Psalm 146:3. Let me read that to you, reminding you that this was one of the most favourite psalms in Afrikaner churches:

- Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help ... The Psalm says that one cannot trust on princes because they are mortal, their plans perish with them, possibly through assassination. Our politicians also perish when their terms expire, within 4 to 8 years. Politicians may indeed be recycled!
- The Psalm then continues to say "Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob". It emphasises that God is the God of the vulnerable, the poor and the oppressed.

But to say *only* that may also be irresponsible. The document produced by the SACC follows a different strategy. Let me mention three features of the document that are quite remarkable:

It is particularly striking that this document is not addressed at the political and economic processes around Copenhagen, even though these are very much in the background. It is primarily addressed at churches in South Africa, self-critically seeking to discern how climate change may challenge the church towards reformation, transformation and *metanoia*. It recognises that others may be overhearing what Christians in South Africa are saying amongst themselves and that

they may do so with suspicion. These "others" include Christians elsewhere in Africa and further afield, people of other living faiths, secular critics and those involved in other sectors of society. It states that "This is not a form of prophecy that safely allocates the blame elsewhere and that merely reiterates a call to do something - which those in government or in the corporate world may not even hear or read, let alone listen to or respond to." Nevertheless, the tacit assumption (and hope!) is that this strategy of "overhearing the gospel" may nevertheless influence political processes indirectly. This notion is based on handbook on preaching by Fred Craddock who suggested that you could speak to a congregation about the sins of other people so that they would merely be "overhearing" what you are saying, getting them on your side and helping them to see their own sins themselves. This is a strategy also used very effectively in the gospel of John.

For this reason the document is launched today, just before the Copenhagen Conference of the Parties. It is endorsed by more than 130 Christian leaders in South Africa. If you read the list of endorsements, it is indeed amazing - from bishops to Bible study group leaders, from ZCC to DRC. Here then, is something that we can agree with one another. But the point of the endorsements is not so much to say something to the delegates to Copenhagen. It is to recognise the challenge in at least 140 different locations where the church of Jesus Christ has taken root in South Africa.

Secondly, the document repeatedly acknowledges the temptation to speak as if Christians can occupy some moral high ground, especially on the issue of climate change. Instead, this document recognises that the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, that it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart and that it pierces through our own practices, habits and institutions (Heb 4:12). This is strikingly different from other ecclesial statements emerging from the African continent. It has to be understood in terms of South Africa's high carbon emissions - as the "economic powerhouse" of Africa sometimes perceived to act as the "empire" in Africa. It also has to be understood with reference to the impact of the culture and ideology of consumerism that is so evident amongst the consumer class, but which also describes the aspirations of the impoverished majority in South Africa. This is where the document is at its sharpest, most-self-critical, most vulnerable. In short, the document acknowledges that, on this matter, Christians in South Africa cannot occupy the moral high ground on the issue of climate change for four reasons: "because Christianity is considered by many to be part of the problem, not the solution to it; because others [scientists and journalists] have been acting as prophets; because South Africa's carbon emissions are so high;

because human-induced climate change results from economic production and consumption involving lifestyle issues and because the ideology of consumerism affects both the affluent and the poor, albeit in diverging ways."

Thirdly, the document adopts a somewhat curious strategy of speaking with multiple voices in order to reflect the perspectives of Christians from quite different sectors of the South African society, across the divisions of race, class, gender, culture and language. Accordingly, the word "we"/"us" is used in different ways - "to refer to South African citizens, to Christians in South Africa, to those who have endorsed the document or to specific groups of Christians." Often these voices are in tension with each other, for example in articulating attitudes and perceptions regarding climate amongst South Africans. The difficulties in speaking together, although with multiple and even conflicting voices are expressed in the following way:

Although multiple voices are present, these voices speak about a common challenge and a common task to live together on a planet that we share with each other, with people from other faith traditions and numerous other forms of life. On this challenge we have to learn to speak *together* and in such a way that the voices of the victims are not dominated by others or even by their spokespersons. For Christians in South Africa, so deeply divided on the basis of race and class (and other variables), this is by no means easy. We also have to remind ourselves continuously that the victims include not only the poor and coming generations but also numerous other species affected by climate change.

I do not want to say much more about the document, except to offer you a bit of background:

This document emerged through a process of reflection, discussion and education amongst Christians in South Africa concerned with the many challenges posed by climate change, especially within our context. It is the product of ongoing consultations over a period of two years following a conference on climate change held at the University of the Western Cape in November 2007. This conference recognised the need for such a document and also drafted a skeleton for that. Since then portions of the document have been discussed in various workshops, church meetings, interest groups, Bible study groups and conference sessions. During the course of this process more than ten versions of the document were produced, distributed for comment and the feedback incorporated.

Since March 2009 a Climate Change Committee of the SACC in the Western Cape accepted responsibility for the drafting and editing of the document. In this way the SACC accepted ownership of the process of producing the document. From the beginning it was recognised that this process may be as important as the eventual outcome. The finalised version of the text was submitted to the National Executive Committee of the South African Council of Churches in September 2009. The document was subsequently endorsed by the SACC NEC, as indicated in the preface by Eddie Makue, the General Secretary of the SACC.

The document is primarily aimed at lay and ordained Christian leaders in South Africa. The purpose of the document is to assist Christian communities to assess what is at stake in the challenges posed by climate change and to respond to such challenges from the perspective of Christian faith and practice. The aim of the document is therefore to offer prophetic witness, to recognise the sign of the times, to discern God's word for our time; but its focus is also educational, pastoral, confessional and practical. It calls upon Christians to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2), for a transformation of our perceptions, thinking, visions, attitudes, orientation, habits, priorities, practices and institutions.