



**A PROPHETIC CHURCH IN THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE SOUTH  
AFRICAN SOCIETY- A MYTH OR REALITY**  
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### **Introduction**

In this presentation I have been asked to look at the role that needs to be played by the church in the maturing of democracy in a transforming South Africa. From the start I would like to state the position from which I approach this discussion. I am not a politician or a political analyst, so I will not speak from a political theorists' point of view nor am I can expect on the political issues. I approach this issue from the point of view of a theologian with special interests in political issues as they manifest themselves in the life and mission of the church. In this case I approach it from a political theologian's point of view. I also approach it also as an academic or intellectual-activist who spend most of his time reflecting on these issues. I also approach it from a point of view of a concerned South African and leader in the church. First I am going to start by giving a few Biblical reasons why Christians must be involved politics. Second I will give a brief illustration of the political landscape in South Africa. Third I will look at the South African church. Fourth, I will suggest strategies that the church can employ to play a significant role in the public arena. Then I will draw the discussion to a conclusion.

#### **1. Reasons for the church's involvement in the political life of the country.**

These subsequent comments are shared as a way of stimulating discussion about the role of the church in promoting good governance and democracy in society. Four things are important to note at the beginning.

1. If Christians are to engage with the idea of democracy and good governance, then they must do so in an honest, direct and coherent way. They have to share clearly what they believe with regard to these issues and politics in general, drawing from their resources such as the Bible, hymns, doctrines and traditions.
2. Christians have to realize that they are members of society which is governed and impacted upon by politics. Also the people they have been called to

minister to be impacted upon by politics and issues of governance either positively or negatively depending on who they are and their social status. Therefore they cannot ignore politics.

3. It is important to note that the idea of democracy is not something specifically religious or Christian. It has been found mostly in secular institutions rather than religious ones, because these tend to be autocratic and theocratic. But it is also important to understand that the struggle for democracy in society is a struggle against any form of leadership that is undemocratic and viewed to be authoritarian.
4. It is also important to recognize that Christianity like most religions has a particular view of how the world is to be governed. For instance Christianity builds on the view that the world has to be governed using the basic principles' of governance in God's household such as equality, justice, peace and human dignity. I propose that it is imperative for the church to teach, practice and enact these principles in the public arena as part of its mission.

In spite of the above reasons that justify the involvement of the church in matters of political nature and governance, there has been a sense of disagreement and disappointment from some quarters in our society that since the beginning of the new dispensation the church has not been involved in the political life of the country. Constantly we have heard questions such as, where is the prophetic Church? Where have all the prophets gone to? Most of the time such questions come from people either who work with poor people who feel that the church has neglected them. But it also comes from government officials when they want the church to help them deal with problems such as the breakdown of the moral fiber or to deliver services. For business people when they are frustrated by crime and corruption they also ask the same questions. The above groups ask the question of the whereabouts of the church not because they are looking for a prophetic church, but one that can cooperate with them and most of the time in their own terms, not those of the church. The poor ask this question because they are looking for a different church, one that will walk with them as they are faced by the dehumanization that they still experience even in the new dispensation through lack of basic human necessities such as water, housing, jobs and the erosion of their dignity. As a result for most of them to talk of a prophetic church in South Africa is to talk of a dream not reality. But the question to ask is "Is a prophetic church in South Africa a myth or reality? Are the assumptions that the church is not prophetic anymore true or misplaced? In other words is a prophetic church in SA just a pipe-dream or a dream that is gradually becoming a reality? Those are the questions I hope to address in this presentation. I think in a discussion of this nature it is imperative that we start with defining what we mean by a prophetic church. By a prophetic church we mean "a church that engages itself in socio, economic and political life of a society, guided by its understanding of the Kingdom of God, holding the transformation of the world to emulate values

of the kingdom as its vision and mission to the world. By the church here I refer to both the church as a community of believers, the people of God at worship, fellowship and service in their local communities. Secondly I also mean the institutional church, the church as a hierarchy, the representatives of the people of God such as pastors and bishops together with the structures of the church. So I will use the term "church" interchangeably referring to these two groups.

## **2. Exploring the political landscape of the South African society**

Impacted of democracy to people in society.

### **Social level**

It is a fact that the current dispensation brought a lot of benefits for people in South Africa. As we are always reminded, democracy brought freedom with it. Just the feeling of being an important and respected citizen of a country without being restricted by laws on where to stay, buy, what to ride, swim, work is an achievement. The freedom to associate with any person or organization is an added value.

### **Economic level**

The economy of this country is growing at a rate of about 6% annually which is quite an achievement. More people have houses, access to water and electricity, education and health care. It is also true that despite these success stories South Africa is experiencing a flurry of challenges that leave the majority of citizens without enjoying the benefits of freedom and democracy. More people are faced with problems such as abject poverty, unemployment, housing, land and lack of service delivery etc. As a result we have seen a number of riots and resistance activities by dissatisfied communities Khutsong, Harrismith, Vryburg etc. This demonstrates that the growth of the economy does not translate to a better life for all people in the country. It is this group that feels alienated by the church.

### **Political level**

At a political level the looming elections of the leader of the ruling party in Limpopo has led to a focus to the so called "succession debate." The media has played a big role in creating a discussion around this issue and this has raised a number of points of views, some positive and others negative on how this issue is going to impact on the country. The church has been conspicuously silent when it comes to this issue. What needs to be explored are the reasons for the silence and also strategies to address it and that is what I am turning to now.

## **3. Strategies of building good governance through the Religion and Governance Programme.**

I will now identify strategies to address the lack of participation of the church in public processes of governance. The question is, "what practical strategies can

the church apply to participate in the nurturing of good governance in South Africa?" How can the dream of a prophetic church become a reality?

### **3.1 Discovering a theology of democracy**

During the struggle against apartheid there was an abundance of liberation theologians that helped the church with theological frameworks when doing their socio-economic and political-analysis work. During the early years of transition the government had a negative attitude towards theology seeing it as of no value in comparison to science and other disciplines (SABC, 16 June 2000) necessary to the building of a new society. This led to a closure of theological faculties and a mass departure of theologians to other fields such as government and private sector. As result there has been a vacuum in the theological discourse. Archbishop Tutu has argued for a theology that will propagate the church's involvement in politics;

If we say that religion cannot be concerned with politics, then we are really saying that there is a substantial part of human life in which God's writ does not run. Religion is not a form of escapism. Our God does not permit us to dwell in a kind of spiritual ghetto, insulated from the real life out there. Our God is not a God who sanctifies the status quo. He is a God of surprises, uprooting the powerful and unjust to establish His Kingdom (in Sparks, 2006:295).

These are sinews of a theology of democracy that must be developed by the church, to guide its involvement and upon which effective strategies of engagement with the state must be built. The good news is that this theology is already there, some people especially the poor are practicing it though in the fringes of society, thus the church misses it. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2007 I attended a workshop organized by ESSET. What was unique was that by far the majority of participants close to 94% were people representing the poor e.g. homeless, PLWA, LPM and Anti-privatization Campaign. There were not more than five church leaders at that meeting. There was a point where a young women activist from Soweto who is a devout Christian spoke about the theology of water, water as life, a gif from God for all, people as needing to drink from the same well of Jacob, no matter who they are and where they stay. The theological sinews and insights she raised can make some of us professional theologians feel like Sunday school children. The point I am making is that there is a theology of democracy out there; as Graham Philpott put it "the church has to listen from the poor as they articulate the theology that emanates from their experiences."<sup>1</sup> For me the prophetic church is already busy working in communities through such people and FBOs it is only that the institutional church has not realized it, thus it sleeps on. Having formulated a theology of democracy the church will then embark on appropriate strategies of engaging government using existing spaces and invent some where necessary.

### **3.2. Exploring the notion of critical solidarity**

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Philpott was evaluating the conference, 23 October 2007, ESSET Meeting Johannesburg.

There was a shift in the way the church related from the apartheid government to the democratic one. The key term that defines church-state relations in contemporary South Africa is *critical solidarity*, which means that the church supports initiatives which promotes justice, peace, democracy, protecting the interest of those vulnerable and minority groups while continuing to protest against unjust policies that the democratic government put in place. This means that a new approach to church-state relations needs to be developed which moves away from the dominant models in which the church is either absorbed by the state or it regards the state as an enemy. But one where the church maintains an independent and critical stance from which it can engage government either with affirmations or criticism depending on the circumstances. This proposes a new approach from the old ones where the church was either a puppet of the state or an enemy. Tinyiko Maluleke puts it this way:

We must move away from the two extreme models of church-state interaction: lapdog or cat and mouse (Ecumenical Consultation Report, 23-26 March 2003).

Echoing the sentiments for a new way for church and state relations in South Africa, the Rev. Roxanne Jordan a proponent of liberation theology who later became the speaker of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Council argued:

The role of the church in the new South Africa is constructive engagement and critical solidarity (Interview, 18 July 2001).

The notion of 'critical solidarity' is built on the foundations of liberation theology and theologies of reconstruction, which continues the tradition of God's preferential option for the poor. It also calls for obeying the laws of the country only if they are not contrary to the laws of God, (Acts 4:19, 5:29). The churches also base their participation on the text that says, "The earth is of the Lord and all that is in it", (Psalm 24:1) thus bringing congruence between ecclesial and societal issues. This includes an embrace of the liberal constitution that declared the country a neutral-religious state. Being a neutral-religious state means that "South Africans are protected from both theocracy and atheism, meanwhile allowing religion to exist without any constitutional impediments" (Villa-Vicencio, 1992:264). A prophetic role in this situation means that the church affirms government when it is addressing the needs of all people especially the poor, but also criticizes and distances itself from it when it is ignoring them. In this case the church never stands with government but with the poor, it is government who joins the church and the poor and it benefit from the affirmation and praises of the church, but as soon as it leaves the poor, it has left the church and risks the ruthless criticism and denunciation of the church in the name of God.

### **3.3. Offering Christian-centered civic Christian Education**

One of the painful facts about politics is that people get the leaders they deserve. If people are enlightened and know what they are looking for in a leader of their country, they choose a leader who fits their expectations with traits such as good governance abilities, high moral conduct, leadership qualities etc. But if people

do not know what type of leader their society needs they elect using all the wrong criterias such as ethnicity, charisma, popularity etc. In SA we are faced with that time of making choices and people are not yet prepared for that. They know voter education but they have no clue of civic education which includes knowing the system of governance, how it functions, and what type of leaders are appropriate to it. People can hardly tell you what type of leader is needed by this country, they would rather tell you about which party must the person come from. I think it is time that the church embarked on an intentional Civic-based Christian Education which will teach people about their rights as citizens and how important these are for democracy. This will include teaching people about the three levels of government, the processes of electing officials starting from the local municipality level right up to Parliament. Those who are running for high office must be challenged to produce their manifestos, so that these may be taught to the people, who ultimately will make the choice of the leader, based on what they stand for and promises to do instead of their political slogans and rhetoric that is only heard through the media and rallies. I do think that the church can play an important role to make people to decide responsibly who to vote for and why through education. I contend that it is the mission of the church to provide knowledge, so that knowing people may live well (Hosea 4:6).

### **3.3. Cleaning our own house: Inculcating democracy in the church**

Being a prophetic church does not necessarily mean being critical of others only but it also means that the church needs to be critical of itself. It has to allow God's spirit and messengers to speak truth not only to secular powers but also to the powers in and within the church itself. If the church is going to call for democracy and good governance in society with credibility, then it faces the challenge of implementing democracy within its own structures. For an example, regarding gender and democracy, our analysis is that many churches and faith communities lag behind society in general in addressing patriarchal traditions and the transformation of their own undemocratic structures, policies, and practices. Women and youth are under-represented in positions of leadership in the church's governance structures. For the churches to act prophetically (and add value in a democracy) they need to take democracy within the churches themselves seriously. It is hypocritical to expect to challenge a president who wants to change a constitution to run for more terms in office, whilst bishops in the church are resisting the change of the term of office from life to a number of years as permitted by periodical elections and evaluation. Being a prophetic church would mean that the church listens to those prophetic voices within the church itself, challenge its own ethos and rules.

### **3.4. Using the invited spaces effectively to influence a parliamentary democracy**

One of the key criticisms leveled against the South African government has been the centralization of power around the presidency. There is a feeling that government is tightly controlled by the president's office so that it is difficult for other groups, whether civil society, opposition parties and faith communities (the

church included), to engage it or participate in it. The first person to raise these concerns was Archbishop Tutu when he delivered the Nelson Mandela lecture in 2005 at University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. The second observations about the lack of a robust democracy as a result of too much centralization of power came from one of the key members of the Tripartite Alliance (which includes the ruling party), the South African Communist Party (SACP) who argued:

It (the presidential centre) has sought to build a strong centre within the state, in which the leading cadre is made up of a new political elite (state managers and technocratic ally-inclined ministers) and (often overlapping with them) a new generation of black private sector BEE managers/capitalists (Bua Komanisi, 1May 2006).<sup>2</sup>

The centralization of power and tight control of democratic processes was against one of the key principles of the Freedom Charter (manifesto of the ANC) that said “The People Shall Govern” (Polley, 1988:25). The question that needs to be asked today is, are the people really governing? Political theorist Xolelwa Mangcu argues that “the people are not governing but instead they just follow the elected leaders.” He argues, “Many of the former activists in South Africa have found that they have to go along” (Calland & Graham, 2005:72). When listening to the majority of South Africans they hoped for a decentralized government built on the basic foundations of direct democracy. However, that is not what they are experiencing. The same observations are made by Richard van der Ross in his book *African Renaissance and Democracy*. Where he asserts that:

Even today, most South Africans, of whatever color, do not consider that they can do much, if anything, about influencing the law, let alone change it. They go to the polls once in five years, cast their vote for a party, and leave the rest to the politicians. If things go wrong, this is blamed on government, but they, the citizens, feel they can do nothing about it until the next election, especially as, under the system of Proportional Representation, they have no immediate contact with or recourse to a Member of Parliament to act as local sounding-board for their complaints or opinion (2004:24).

As a result democracy in South Africa has been labeled as a ‘Parliamentary Democracy’ where elected representatives run the government on behalf of the masses (Bua Komanisi, 24 May 2006). Citizens wait for delivery of services as promised and so the government is seen as a delivery-mechanism not a system of participation in the governance of the country. Civil society groups are finding it very difficult to influence government as required by democracy which is the government of the people. In the words of Peter Vale it is no longer a “living democracy” (Calland & Graham 2005:13). K Fayemi points to the problem with this when he notes; “when we the people withdraw our trust in leaders or discountenance politicians, we make our democratic institutions less effective and risk making ourselves ungovernable”. Fayemi goes on to argue that;

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<sup>2</sup> BEE refers to Black Economic Empowerment, a strategy aimed at balancing the economic inequalities by offering black people opportunities to own businesses.

Real leadership ought to involve motivating people to solve problems within their own communities, rather than reinforcing the overlords of the state over its citizens, and to build and strengthen political institutions that can mediate between individual and group interests (2006:56).

The challenge is that even those who were elected by the people to be their leaders are not always held accountable by the people who elected them. This is because the floor crossing law allow MPs to change from one party to another, without the permission of their constituencies. This also lead to political apathy because if people can just change parties without talking to me as the one who voted them in the first place why do I need to take voting seriously. The above reason may be true for most sectors of society not to have a way of influencing government, but I am not sure if that is the case with the church. As we were told by Dr Frank Chikane in this same hall a month ago, the President has standing appointments to meet with religious leaders twice a year and more if they wanted to, is that not an invited space for the church to use? Where is the loophole? Secondly if you go to most of the provinces especially here in KZN there is a willingness from the part of government to collaborate with religious groups (the church included), of course they want to do this in their own term and for their own agendas, but can we not use these as opportunities to use in our own terms too as a church so that we become a prophetic church? I think the church can use the willingness and few opportunities given to it by government to turn this democracy from a parliamentary one to a lived one, where the people can govern.

### **3.5. Revitalizing socio-ecclesial analysis.**

Churches have *relative autonomy* from the state as well as the state towards the church. To move towards working together, or challenging one another, requires a rigorous process of analysis so that the reasons, issues and terms of cooperation, or resistance can be seen clearly. This requires the church to do socio-ecclesial analysis. Analysis enables the church to see the issues that need to be contested or affirmed much more clearly from an informed position. This was confirmed by Itumeleng Mosala when speaking in the RGP convention in 2005 he said” no analysis, no voice” (Report of Convention, 2005: 12). This means that the ability of the church to engage government lies in the amount of work it is going to do in socio-ecclesial analysis and research. When Frank Chikane spoke to us he emphasized the importance of research so that the church can talk from an informed point of view instead of making naïve statement, thus embarrassing itself to its adversaries such as politicians and business people. For instance with regard to the succession debate the church has been silent, it has not given any leadership direction to the masses especially its own members on what to do think and say about this issue. Christians have been left to their peril and only dependent to the views of the contesting forces such as partners of the alliances who are divided and other political parties who may be enjoying the divisions in the ruling party. The church does need to do clear analysis of the situation and then guide the nation, because this is not just a political issue party concerning who they are to elect as

their president. This issue has to deal with vital matters of national interest, here we are talking about a party that is ruling the country and is likely to rule for more years to come, instability in that party threatens the stability of the country. A prophetic church needs to come forward and call the both the party to sanity again. It must remind us that the issue round who will be the next president is not just a party political issue or one that has to do with personalities. It has to do with the foundations and future of the country, something we all have approach with the required seriousness, humility and integrity. How the church will have the courage to do this only if it takes time to study and analyze what is going on. Thus social analysis is key to giving a credible voice to the church.

### **3.6. Strategic networks and partnership**

The effectiveness of the church in fighting apartheid was through its partnership with other movements such as the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the, Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). This indicates that the idea of partnering and collaborating with other organizations committed to a common course can enable the church to make contribute effectively in the public arena. Currently in KZN, the KwaZulu Natal Christian Council has partnered with five Faith-based organization to form the KwaZulu Natal Christian Consortium. This strategic partnership among members constituting the consortium seek to ensure that the quality and quantity of civil society engagement with public duty bearers is increased and, thereby, contributed to a strengthened social contract between the state and citizens in Kwa-Zulu Natal. It also provides a framework for multifaceted institutional cooperation as well as channels for making linkages from the poorest citizens at community level to decision makers in local communities, provincial and national institutions. Among the critical questions include questions of how do churches and church-based organizations (CBOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) relate to one another so that they can engage government structures at local, provincial and national levels? At the ESSET meeting there was a passionate call by delegates for their churches to join them in their struggles. I must admit that by nature I am an eternal optimist, I believe in the redemptiveness of unpredictability. I am already seeing an active prophetic church in this country by just looking at the recent events. For instance there was a time when religious leaders of Khutsong stood up with their people, marched and led them in prayers of support. Just recently here in KZN some of our leaders marched with the Abahlali basemijondolo and were sprayed with water with them here in Durban. This for me is a sign of the coming back of the prophetic church.

### **3.7. Ecumenical and multi-faith mobilizations**

One of the strengths of the church under apartheid is that it was backed by strong ecumenical constituencies and agencies thus it could maximize its impact in society. The challenge faced by the contemporary church is the loss of the spirit of ecumenism. There are two reasons for this. One is that churches are training their leaders denominationally, thus church leaders no longer value the ecumenical collegialship which those who went before experienced during their

training at places such as Rhodes and FEDSEM. The second reason linked to the first one is the lack of funding for ecumenical work from overseas agencies that valued the contribution of a united church front in South Africa. For instance one of the biggest and consistent funders of ecumenical work in SA has been the Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), which is now rounding up its work and wants to focus in other countries in the region. There is a need to find a way of reviving our ecumenical work and our churches need to commit to funding our ecumenical agencies. I am in the executive committee of one of our ecumenical bodies which is doing important work in the province. When you look at the contribution of member churches collectively it cannot even run that organization for one month. The organization depends on fundraising for survival as funding agencies reduce their commitments to such organizations this threatens their future and ultimately the future of a prophetic church in South Africa, because then the church will need to depend on government's mercy and contracts which do not come without some strings attached. The point I am making is that there is an urgent need to strengthening the ecumenical movement both by mobilizing the masses to value ecumenism and resources to fund its work. This will enable the church to build for itself a position of power from which it can engage government and be an effective prophetic voice that is worth listening to because if not listened to it can act against the state with great impact. Power is seductive and leads to corruption, but powerlessness is also bad. Therefore the church must mobilize its resources to move from a state of powerlessness to that of power. Government's power depends on money, but the church has the people, the numbers from which it derives effective power, but these need to be harnessed. A prophetic church needs the masses, to be powerful and be a force to be reckoned with.

### **3.8. Religious Forums**

Being in a neutral-religious state the church needs to learn to value the relationship and collaboration with other religions. By constitution the government needs to work more with religious groups than denominations or sects. In his state of the province address early this year (2007) the Premier of KZN committed his government to working to develop Religious Forums and work with them. It is a fact that is not for government to such forums that is dangerous but government does need such sectors to work with and make democracy a reality and if they are not there it does run the temptation of wanting to form these for reasons of political expediency. I think that the launching of the KZN Religious Leaders Forum some weeks ago is a cause for celebration for all freedom loving religious South Africans. This structure must be regarded as a provincial branch of the National Religious Forum. It is through this structure that the church will collaborate to engage government. In my mind I still have a picture of the KZNCC convention of 2005 which was hosted in PMBurg where members of all the majors faiths in SA participated for three days deliberated on issues of common concern. Although there were Christian leaders who were grumbling, because they are not yet used to this collaboration, the sun did not fall from the sky. This again was an attempt of a prophetic church at work at a local provincial level to

build bridges which are vital to sustain our democracy. This for me is a sign of a prophetic church at work.

### **3.9. Conclusion**

In this presentation I have looked at the following points:

- Explored the reasons for the church to be involved in politics
- Discussed the fears that a prophetic church is not real in South Africa
- Gave a glimpse to the political situation that calls for serious involvement of the church.
- Suggested strategies for the church to use to become a prophetic church.

I conclude this presentation by arguing that a prophetic church in this country is not a myth but a reality. Yes it is still at its infant stages just like our democracy. Ultimately we can all start believing that a prophetic church is possible in South Africa.

I thank you.

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