



SPEECH DELIVERED AT THE DIAKONIA AMBASSADORS' LAUNCH BREAKFAST BY DR MAY MKHIZE

Programme director, the Executive Director Ms Nomabelu Mvambo-Dandala, Council and all governing structures; Friends of Diakonia and those who want to become Friends (as I am also a prospective Friend of Diakonia), I am glad to be here; the youth present – the choir.

I feel so honoured to be here. The youth just last month were celebrating 40 years since 'that day' June 16, 1976. I guess as they celebrated they also took stock of the fact that they now constitute 36% of the South African population – yes 15-34 year old are just more than a third of the South African population.

They possibly also remembered that whilst the doors to access to higher education have widened, we have not managed to widen the doors for a grand exit. We salute the youth of 1976 and the youth present here. Today we thank God for this organisation and we know that God is the main pillar of the good work done here. May I salute Diakonia for having attained the same milestone of 40 years of making sure that human rights are upheld. In so doing I would like to remember and honour the late Archbishop Denis Hurley OMI and his colleagues within the religious fraternity who had the courage to have a vision - a very unsafe vision at the time - but decided to go ahead with unifying churches so they can fight for the rights of the oppressed South African majority with one voice, a strong voice.

Many programmes were established to support those who became victims e.g. detainees, forced removals, issues of equal education and workers' issues. Whilst I mention Archbishop Hurley as one of the founders of the Diakonia, one needs to remember there were other men and women that he worked with and we honour them too.

One other factor to mention is that when the UDF was launched, Diakonia - I am told - became a full member, how courageous. They were, like all progressive organisations, subjected to frequent raids and harassments by apartheid agents. We also honour them for producing many leaders who are leading in different spheres, and to mention some in government - like Thoko Didiza, Lechesa Tsenoli and other activists from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. One issue that I learnt about this organisation is that when it approaches a problem it does not only treat the obvious but digs deep to understand the why?

As early as 1989 when it was clear that apartheid was fast approaching its demise, Diakonia readily strategised how it would support and work together with those who were willing to protect our about-to-be-found democracy.

Today our democracy is 22 years old. It is still very important for the churches to speak with one voice in the task of making sure that the fruits of democracy are enjoyed by all, especially those at the bottom of the pile where the Diakonia Council of Churches is focused.

Our government has very enabling policies and our progressive constitution and subsequently the NDP, are our guidelines, which if properly implemented, can move our country forward. If organisations like Diakonia Council of Churches could be able to form partnerships with our democratic government and strengthen accountability, we could solve our problems especially those related to service delivery.

In so doing our communities could grow in being citizens who are willing to take responsibility and where we can all notice measurable positive impact. These partnerships can also solve the one big problem for organisations like the Diakonia Council of Churches - that of financial vulnerability. So is it a possibility that we can strengthen those relationships?

There is so much outcry about the abject poverty our people still live in and yet there are empowerment programmes that can be brought to our people through the social action groups. There is need for the social action groups to understand how the government funding agencies work and how our people can access the funding. Criteria, not understood can be a huge barrier.

Yes we are faced with many challenges as we walk and build this nation:

- Violence and abuse of our most vulnerable
- Xenophobia
- Racism is rearing its ugly head
- Unemployment is rocketing
- Corruption

We need to address all these issues. The question maybe is how did we see the dawn of our democracy, what did it mean? Challenging the apartheid regime was not easy, it needed commitment, bravery and as we all know some who dared, paid the ultimate price - with their lives!

Today we are in a democratic dispensation - we need a similar commitment and we need to build networks and defend this democracy by personal or even indirect involvement in programmes that ensure that our people understand government policies and ultimately making sure that government empowerment programmes benefit mostly the vulnerable and needy.

As we thank and celebrate God's guidance over the last 40 years - we can borrow from the prayer of St Francis of Assisi, we can all realise that we need peace in our country, peace within each one of us and peace amongst people. Let us be the instruments of that peace!

So much hatred is meted out against one another - are we able to show some love? So much despair, doubt, sadness and we can almost feel and see a dark cloud hovering over our hard earned democracy - can we all be part of a committed group that will bring faith, hope, joy and light in our country?

I would like to thank and congratulate all the organisations that have sustained the Diakonia Council of Churches over the years. They need sustainability as our communities need more support and guidance. Long live to our great God who has carried the Diakonia Council of Churches this far. God will not disappoint us!

I thank you.

Dr May Mkhize