

TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE: IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS

Joint CANACOM/CANAAC Council Meeting & Assembly

In his book *Clash of Civilizations* Samuel Huntington uses lines from a novel (*Dead Lagoon*) to paint a picture of the world that he believes is real. Huntington draws on the views of a fictional nationalist. The nationalist is quoted as saying: *“There will be no true friends, unless we hate what we are not we cannot love what we are. These are old truths, we are painfully rediscovering after a century and more of sentimental cant. Those who deny them, deny their family, their heritage, their, culture, their birthright, their very selves. They will not lightly be forgiven.”* Huntington comments that the reality of such a worldview cannot be ignored. He contends that as people reengage and reaffirm identity be it religious or ethnic, identifying the other as the enemy becomes necessary.

The critical point here is the recognition that the idealizing of self underlies this outlook. I am contending that self, the celebration of one’s distinctiveness over against the other, is the underlying force that has driven what the Accra Confession describes as the current world disorder. Self-interest, self-preservation, and warped perspectives of self-fulfilment continue to fuel the engines that drive racism, slavery, economic disenfranchisement, ecological disaster and the perpetuation of war for the purpose of preserving ideological mantras.

It is against the background of this disorder that we are being invited to consider the principles of transformative justice. Isaiah 58:6 reads, *“to loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke”* (NRSV). The text reminds us of God’s call to practice justice and invites the church to answer this call. The Accra Confession invites us to covenant for justice. Covenanting for justice is intended to

bring renewal, wholeness and healing within and amongst the community of humanity. We are being invited to embrace the ideals of transformative justice as a philosophical underpinning for action intended to rebalance warped relationships. In so doing we accept the call of the Accra confession to build communities of life.

Living the ideals of transformative justice means accepting the call to live in ways that takes steps to work for peace in the midst of war. Equally, these ideals should form the basis of a conviction, which challenges us to stand with those who are constantly dehumanized by the harshness of socio economic systems that hold influence over their lives. I do not propose to identify what transformative justice should be like in practise. I will however identify issues that must first be contended with, if transformative justice as an ideal is to resonate within the church and into the wider society touching where it matters.

Conversion

The WCC in a document entitled: *Being church and overcoming racism: It's time for transformative justice* proposes that conversion is essential to any conversation about transformative justice. If transformative justice is about engaging in actions that are intended to give hope and restore life and if restoring life is necessary amidst the almost mindless submission to the pain and oppression that many face as they struggle to survive then I am inclined to agree with this proposed role of conversion.

Metanoia, conversion; transformation begins with the renewing of the mind. “*Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, that you may discern what is good, pleasing and perfect will of God*”. (Rom 12: 1-2).

I am not suggesting that our thought about conversion are in relation to the systems of the world, but rather conversion within the church. I am

suggesting conversion among those and by those who would covenant for actions of transformative justice. In the dynamics of church and church organizations, conversion will mean a willingness to accept as equal partners, all who sit at the table irrespective of what they bring, or do not bring to the table. Conversion to the idea, that one's capacity to influence, or one's ability to engage, is not related to money, or numbers.

I put the following questions as we consider this process of transformation. Why has self taken centre stage in the dynamic of the human community? How must we now understand power its use and place in relationships? Any process of transformed thinking and relationships will imply the need to let go of the desire to maintain control. There should be an acceptance of the intent to move away from the desire and determination to be manipulative.

Conversion will also be essential for those who have historically been perpetual victims of the "systems". One should arrive at the understanding that life, does not only exist through a conscious or subconscious pattern of reaching out for something from others, who are always willing to control by giving.

Here is an example of victims acting in ways that begin to bring change. In 1969 the First Nations people of Canada resisted the promulgation of a government policy that was intended to make them "equal" within the context of a euro-centric society. They viewed this policy as the final attempt at assimilation ultimately leading to the "death of their collective identities".ⁱⁱ The opposition of the First Nations people to this attempt at legalized assimilation caught the rest of the society by surprise and forced a debate about who these people were and what had been done to them. By their actions the First Nations people signalled the intent to take charge of their destiny.

The document further argues, that transformative justice ideals imply change in thinking, perceptions and ways of living to achieve a just vision of society. We must be honest about who we are and our condition before God. *“Conversion makes us come to terms with the ambiguities of human existence: we are saints and sinners at the same time. We have the capacity for goodness and generosity and love. But we also have the potential for evil, selfishness and hatred in the midst of this struggle; we easily give in to the argument of self-preservation and maintenance of the status-quo. We forget to dare. It is always staggering to realise how easily we as Christians comply with the standards of the world. The passion for justice, the capacity to take risks and rehearse more egalitarian relations among us has long been domesticated.”*ⁱⁱⁱ

A paradigm shift is required; a new mindset is necessary, both are essential to making conversion legitimate and meaningful. Truth telling is to be accepted as part of this paradigm shift. Willie Esterhuyse, in an article *Truth as a trigger for transformation: from apartheid to transformational justice* argues for truth telling as essential to transformation.^{iv}

Truth telling becomes necessary when we talk about economics, excessive wealth and excessive poverty; when we talk about economic degradation and the overt desire to remain comfortable irrespective of the resources used. Truth telling is essential when we talk about racism, which is intricately woven into the fabric of society as well as covert and overt misogyny.

The following questions beg being asked. In what way should there be transformation in thinking and action? What are we required to be honest about? What truths should we face if any covenant for justice is to make sense? I contend here that a failure to take the principle of conversion seriously makes transformative justice the latest catch phrase in ecclesial circles, good for exciting intellectual conversation and nothing else.

Justice

One act in the conversion process has to be a deconstruction of the limited view of justice. There is the understanding that (*Tsedeq*) justice or righteousness is more relational than personal, the common view locates justice in a legal framework. Justice is commonly related to rights and retribution and righteousness takes on personal and private dimensions. Justice has been defined as “The fulfilling of the requirements of a relationship”. I understand this to mean that we intentionally live seeking to bring balance and wholeness in our relationships with human beings and with creation.

The definition stated above challenges self-interest and proposes the need to act for the good of all. Justice understood in these terms and lived out intentionally has implications globally. The interests of the north become directly related to the interests and well being of the global south and vice versa. *“Justice should redress the imbalance of relationships and the imbalances of power...The present globalization dynamics of exclusion, marginalization and destruction of the environment show us clearly that we do not live in a global community.”*

^v Deconstructing the common understanding of justice and enabling an understanding that centres on the relational is essential to the task.

In engaging the task of deconstructing this myopic view of justice, those who have benefited from the “systems” should disengage themselves from prescribing solutions. Authentic space should be given for the voice of those who historically have been victims of institutionalized racism, overt and covert sexism, intentionally marginalized economies and those on the frontline of the effects of climate change.

The WCC document uses some case studies based in Canada, the UCC and the First Nation Peoples, The Lutheran church of Norway in relation to the Roma people and the United Methodist Church in relation to Native Americans and racism that led to the creation of separate African

American denominations, as it examines principles of transformative justice at work. ^{vi}

The document then makes the point that legitimacy in the process of re-establishing justice comes when the victims have a voice in the solution. I here suggest that there will be required a willingness to hear the memories of the pain, experiences of hurt and a willingness to hear the tremor of anger in voices. Honest acknowledgement ought to be made of the benefits attained through the pain of others. Truth telling comes alive which may invite an initial contending with guilt, ultimately one should rise with a commitment to embrace, looking to the future based on an equal footing together.

The community that is to move towards transformative justice should know that accepting responsibility, confession, apologies and asking forgiveness are necessary. This is risky stuff but are we willing to dare. Are we willing to cry to God in lamentation “my God my God what have we done”.

Justice implies the redressing of imbalances to the end of making communal relationships right. It should not be assumed that in the process of restoring broken relationships there would not be pain, angst, fear, and expressions of anger. However let it be understood that the fact that this process has to be undertaken is itself an indicator of other issues. These issues should be acknowledged if transformative justice is to resonate in the life of the church community. To these issues I now turn.

Power

Power has been defined in a range of ways; power has been associated with wealth, might, success and the ability to win, getting your way by any means necessary. Steven Lukes in his book “*Power: A Radical View*” makes a case for power to be defined as “*an ability or capacity of an agent*

or agents which they may or may not exercise”^{vii}. Power is capacity; it is a capacity that is dispositional, present but never actually used.

Power is the capacity to manipulate, to force, to influence, to renew and to coerce. In reflecting on the arguments of others, Lukes lifts up the point, that power should not be confused with the exercising of capacity, or the means by which capacity is displayed. Vietnam and Iraq for the USA and Afghanistan for the former Soviet Union are indicators that military superiority or wealth does not necessarily constitute power. I would add that equally the wiry, bespectacled, humble, homespun cotton wearing Mahatma Ghandi also showed power.

Lukes goes further to make the point that power becomes domination when there is the ability to “*constrain the choices of others, coercing them or securing their compliance, by impeding them from living as their own nature and judgement dictate*”.^{viii} Further to this, power as domination is either coercive or has the “*compliance of willing subjects*”^{ix}. Cornel West uses the word hegemony, which he defines as “*The set of formal ideas and beliefs and informal modes of behaviour, habits, manners, sensibilities and outlook that supports and sanctions the existing order.*”^x This is the reflection of power that has often been seen in church relations.

Transformative justice as a philosophical underpinning for a model of action, against injustice and systemic evil cannot gain traction outside of a conversation about power. There has to be an understanding of hegemony and how it shows itself as well as a commitment to end such displays in the church. Too often church relationships between the north and the south are driven by an agenda that holds access to money as essential to who has a voice and what is to be accomplished. Money and wealth are used as tools to maintain an agenda.

Power as domination has been a constant in the history of the church; the church councils, the crusades, the inquisition, the witch trials

(Malleus Maleficarum), the theocratic experiments of Calvin in Geneva. We can add to this list the compliance of the church in the domination, destruction, and the disruption of cultures foreign to Europe in the much-celebrated age of discovery.

This is part of church legacy, around which we cannot put a creative spin in an attempt to redefine this history as anything else. Therefore the church and organizations such as CANACOM/CANAAC cannot lead in a process of transformative justice unless the issue of power is discussed. An honest conversation about power should lead to the recognition that all, regardless of what they bring to the table, have the capacity to influence for the good of humanity. The exercise of power at its worst is seductive, manipulative and destructive; at its best it influences common action for the good of creation.

While the effort is being made to have this conversation about power, it may be helpful to examine why old assumptions about who can or cannot exercise control remain constant. It may be helpful to determine why negative, disruptive influences always resurface after attempts at renewal. The conversation about power, about conversion, about justice should take into account the reality that there is a force at work behind the systems and structures of our age. Any commitment to covenant for justice should have as its intent, bringing communities together, for the cause of shaping a new world order based on the economy and justice of God. This cause should be cognizant of the “powers” that are behind power expressing itself as domination.

T. Richard Snyder talks about a spirit of the age that is in the air that we breathe^{xi}. This “spirit” is at times subtle and pervasive at other times overt and destructive. Paul says *“our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the rulers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”* (Eph 6:12). The church

must be aware that there is a force that we contend with, hidden and invisible behind the structures of this world. It has been suggested that corporations have a way of shaping an identity, a personality, without a conscience. This reminds us that we have to acknowledge the reality that structures have a way of appearing to change, but instead morphing into something else that is but a new reflection of the same thing. Why is this so?

Walter Wink in a tremendous trilogy, *Naming The Power, Unmasking The Powers and Engaging the Powers* invites the church to understand anew the powers of this age through revisiting the language about the powers in scripture. This is what Wink says “*The “principalities and powers” are the inner and outer aspects of any manifestation of power. As the inner aspect they are the spirituality of institutions, the “within” of corporate structures and systems, the inner essence of outer organizations of power....Every power tends to have a visible pole, an outer form- be it a church, a nation or an economy- and an invisible pole, an inner spirit or driving force that animates, legitimates and regulates its physical manifestation in the world*”.^{xii}

I contend that it is of absolute necessity that any consideration of actions of transformative justice includes taking time to understand, that which lies behind the systems and structures with which we have to contend. Wink invite us to view again the language about powers from Eastern and ancient concepts. We would do well to explore these issues in seminars and in the pews. In so doing we may find again that the language and posture of resistance is already given to us in the images and language of the book of Revelation; where the Throne of God is held up against the thrones of the world. There we learn what it means to live as God’s people in the very presence of evil knowing that the conquering lion is the slain Lamb who alone has authority.

Self

Conversion, justice, power as capacity, power as domination, understanding the powers. There is more to be considered. I also wish to propose that there is the need to examine the reasons why self became so dominant in the expression of faith. To do this we should look back to the period of the Enlightenment where the foundation was laid for significant advancements. During this period the idealizing of self also came to the fore alongside freedom of thought and expression. The foundation for what we now call the Protestant ethic was laid, briefly summed up; “*hard work leads to success, those who fail have not worked hard enough*”. A sphere of influence was created. I accept the view in part that the protestant ethic has basically become the theological underpinning for modern-day capitalism. Some will contend with this view however I here suggest that capitalism, unbridled and unshackled is an economic model based for the most part on self-interest and plunder.

Any exploration of the role of self should also examine how salvation became personalized; how grace became individualized and how religion became privatized. Fundamentalist theology and the new ‘prosperity’ gospel challenge the very notion of prophetic engagement and social action in society. After all we must not become political. This erroneous teaching and thinking must be rigorously challenged. In, and through all this, within church and society, self stands at the forefront of how many in this post-modern world function. Community and responsibility to and for community as a model of action is now found only in pockets of resistance. Self cannot be at the forefront of what faith in God is to be about. The focus on self denies community and frustrates opportunities for engagement in actions of transformative justice.

What then, where do we go from here?

Transformative justice is about the affirmation of people and the working for change in situations that dehumanize. We are then compelled to ask the following. Where do we go from here? How seriously must we take action that will bring change, and renewal? How do we become agents of change in the midst of the distressing issues that continue to hold people in chains? How then must we act to ensure that balance is restored in relationships and hope becomes real in the experiences of people?

I first proposed that we must honestly re-examine some assumptions we have always had; assumptions about conversion, justice, power, structures and systems and self. I will go further to suggest that we examine and embrace key principles in the African philosophical concept of *Ubuntu* as a first step. Bishop Desmond Tutu is a chief proponent of this concept. “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu – a person is a person by and because of other people*”. Michael Battle in his book *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* quotes Bishop Tutu as saying “*In the African Weltanschauung (worldview), a person is not basically an independent solitary entity. A person is a human precisely in being enveloped in the community of other human beings, in being caught up in the bundle of life. To be is to participate. The summum bonum here is not independence but, sharing interdependence.*”^{xiii}

Ubuntu focuses on building an interdependent community, which affirms the distinctiveness of the individual as one created *imago Dei*. It draws on insights from African and European cultures and was a sustaining force in the dark days of Apartheid. Tutu argues that a self-sufficient human being is subhuman for they live in denial of the delicate network of interdependence that is key to God’s created order. He says “*Ubuntu refers to a person who is welcoming.....affirming of others...this person knows thatthey are diminished when another is humiliated, is diminished, is tortured, is oppressed, is treated as if they were less than who they are. What a wonderful world it can be, it will be, when*

we know that our destinies are locked inextricably into one another's....We are being forced if not by prosperity then by impending disaster to realize that we are one another's brothers and sisters. To share the prosperity of affluent countries with indigent ones is not altruism. It is ultimately the best kind of self-interest, for if poor countries become prosperous in their turn, then they provide vigorous markets for consumer goods elsewhere."^{xvii}

Central to Ubuntu is the interconnectedness that all humanity and creation shares. Self, self-interest, self-preservation and warped perspectives of self-fulfilment are challenged. I contend that self-interest and self-preservation stand against the prospect of justice being achieved and renewal being accomplished. The ideology of self-interest affirms the chains of imprisonment that has led to and under girds the current disorders in this world. What is required at this time is the embracing of an understanding of humanity's connection with each other and with creation. There is the need to look beyond skin colour, and distinctive ethnic features and see a person made in God's image. A person with whom I am inextricably linked, whose existence I deny to the loss of something valuable about myself.

The task of working for transformative justice seriously requires an understanding of what *Metanoia* will mean in the church. The common view of justice should be revisited; an honest conversation about power must be had; the effort should be made to discern the powers at work and the ideology of self must be exorcised. The place to begin this may well be understanding and embracing Ubuntu. We may yet then begin to intentionally work towards diverse, inclusive, multicultural, multi ethnic, multi racial congregations not as an experiment confined to one set of persons but as the determined task of a church coming to terms with itself.

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- ⁱ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York & London: Touchstone Books, 1996) p. 20.
- ⁱⁱ WCC, Being church and overcoming racism: It's time for transformative justice, June 2002, p. 9
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 5
- ^{iv} ibid, (reference to Willie Esterhuyse, Truth as a trigger for transformation: from apartheid to transformational justice, 2000) p. 5
- ^v ibid, p.6-7
- ^{vi} ibid p. 6
- ^{vii} Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (Hampshire & New York: Plgrave Macmillan, 2005 2nd ed) p. 63
- ^{viii} ibid, P. 85
- ^{ix} ibid, p. 88
- ^x Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 119
- ^{xi} T. Richard Snyder, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishment* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge Eerdmans, 2001)
- ^{xii} Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1982), p. 5
- ^{xiii} Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1997) p.39
- ^{xiv} ibid p. 35-36

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