

## RECONCILIATION AS EMBODIED CHANGE: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

### FRAGMENTS FROM RECENT SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY

*I want the people who killed my son to come forward because this is a time for reconciliation. I want to forgive them, and also have a bit of my mind to tell them.*

—J. Msweli, whose son Simon was tortured and mutilated, and who subsequently died.<sup>1</sup>

*I would like to meet the man who killed my friends and injured me. I would like to meet that man that threw that grenade in an attitude of forgiveness and hope that he could forgive me too for whatever reason.*

—Beth Savage, a victim of a hand grenade attack in King William's Town by members of the Azanian People's Liberation Army.<sup>2</sup>

*I don't want to cry. I know this is my day. If I do cry, it is not due to the pain, but to the hatred. For fourteen years we have (lived) with the pain. The Boers are liars . . . I will never forget the Boers.*

—Joyce Mtimkulu, as she lifted up scraps of her son Siphwe's hair to show the effects of Thallium poisoning. Siphwe disappeared from Livingstone Hospital on 14 April 1982 and was never seen again.<sup>3</sup>

"Thembi" grew thin, lost her appetite, and then became too weak to get out of bed. *I asked my mother to come from the Transkei to nurse me because my boyfriend had gone back to Maputo. I cannot tell my mother that I have the 'new sickness.' She thought I had been toored [bewitched] and sent for the sangoma [healer] to rub me with herbs to chase the demons out. Nothing helps. Now I am afraid that Sisi is also sick. What will happen to her? I can't tell my church. They will judge me.*

—"Thembi" died two weeks later in a backroom of one of Johannesburg's suburbs at the age of 29. Her boyfriend arrived in time to bury her. Her daughter Sisi now lives with her grandmother and she is showing signs of being infected with HIV.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Alex Boraine, *A Country Unmasked* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 354.

<sup>2</sup>Boraine, *A Country*, 104.

<sup>3</sup>Denise M. Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2003) 68.

<sup>4</sup>"Thembi's" real name is not given to protect her daughter Sisi. The source of "Thembi's" story is an informal network of AIDS caregivers who exchange stories at meetings organized by a local church community in Cape Town.

*Lunga was so excited that morning. He was going to preschool, face shining, clutching his sandwiches. I had told the school that he was HIV-positive. They accepted him. Things went well and Lunga thrived. Then someone broke confidentiality and told a parent that he was HIV-positive. News spreads quickly. I noticed hostility when I took him to school, and then he came home crying. Parents in his class had forbidden their children to play with him. We had to remove him. It has been very hard. We know what stigma feels like and Lunga is lonely.*

—Louisa Barnes, foster mother of Lunga, aged four.<sup>5</sup>

*When my baby was born I found out that I was positive. When I told her father he shouted at us, he blamed me. One day he came home and threw all our clothes onto the street and told us to voetsek [to get out]. I was desperate. I had nowhere to go. I could not go to my mother because she thinks that AIDS is God's judgment for sin. I told my boss. He was kind and he helped me to find a place to stay. I can work and take care of Thandi and the medicines help us to stay well. Her father died last year from AIDS.*

—“Nosipho” is a community health worker in Cape Town.<sup>6</sup>

### SEEKING CONNECTIONS

Do these random fragments have anything in common? How might they relate to the theme of reconciliation? The first three are from testimonies given before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)<sup>7</sup> in South Africa. The last three are more recent. They relate to experiences of the present HIV and AIDS pandemic. This paper would have been a great deal easier to tackle had I been able to situate the theme of reconciliation in one of these two realities. This has proved impossible to do. I cannot separate the present HIV and AIDS pandemic from our recent history. Thus this paper moves between these two realities because they shape present discourse on reconciliation in South Africa. Racial discrimination and HIV and AIDS-related stigma<sup>8</sup> have both caused the

<sup>5</sup>This story was related to me by Louisa Barnes.

<sup>6</sup>“Nosipho” does not want to be identified as she is fearful of repercussions in her community. Her story was related to me.

<sup>7</sup>This Commission was set up in 1996 with the threefold task of investigating human rights abuses during the apartheid era, determining reparations for the victims of gross human rights violations, and granting amnesty to perpetrators of human rights abuses who have made a full and frank disclosure to the Commission of their misdeeds.

<sup>8</sup>For references on the issue of stigma and HIV and AIDS, see Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton, *HIV and AIDS-related Stigma and Discrimination: A Conceptual Framework and Implications for Action* (Rio de Janeiro: ABIA, 2002); and Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963). For a sociopolitical perspective see Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan, “Conceptualizing Stigma,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 363-85.

breakdown of human relationships. Both point to the need for reconciliation across the chasms caused by judgment, prejudice, stereotyping and stigmatization, and all refer to experiences of alienation. They also raise a host of other issues: justice, memory, forgiveness, suffering, gender relations, ignorance, fear, tragedy, courage, hope and our tragic inability to live well with difference. All these themes merit in-depth scrutiny. I have, however, had to make choices.

Before setting out these choices a closer look at the South African context in relation to reconciliation is necessary. This will immediately mark the differences as well as the similarities between social and political reconciliation on the one hand, and individual reconciliation on the other. But more about this presently.

The very word "reconciliation" is contested, if not abused in South Africa. Many, if not most whites, long for reconciliation and a peaceful future yet, given our recent history, we barely dare to utter the word "reconciliation." Have we listened before we speak?<sup>9</sup> On whose behalf are we talking about reconciliation? South Africans cannot speak with any surety about the healing of our nation. This is a hope that may only be realised over generations. Our wounds are too deep and have existed for too long.

Today it is also quite fashionable to write off the achievements of the TRC.<sup>10</sup> "Little truth and no visible reconciliation," some would say. This reaction demonstrates a lack of understanding of the true function of the TRC. TRC commissioner Dumisa Ntsebeza explicitly states that it was never the duty of the TRC to implement reconciliation, but rather to promote it. In his view it is too early to judge the TRC process, but he does caution that "there will be no reconciliation as long as the division between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' exists."<sup>11</sup> Afrikaner intellectual Frederick van Zyl Slabbert writes that the assumption that truth leads to reconciliation is "demonstrably nonsense." Truth can lead to revenge, hatred and retribution. Truth in all its fragility and partiality is, however, a necessary condition for reconciliation. He defines reconciliation as "a relationship that is restored to the extent that the parties can move on in peace while accepting each other's integrity."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>See John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) 16.

<sup>10</sup>See Hugo van der Merwe, "National and Community Reconciliation: Competing Agendas in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission," in *Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict*, expanded and updated version, ed. Nigel Biggar (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2003) 101-24. Van der Merwe, while not writing off the TRC's achievements, is nonetheless critical of its processes.

<sup>11</sup>Dumisa Ntsebeza, "A lot more to live for," in *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*, ed. Wilmot James and Linda van de Vijver (Cape Town: David Philip, 2000) 104-105.

<sup>12</sup>Frederick van Zyl Slabbert, "Truth without Reconciliation and Reconciliation without

The TRC was, from its inception, caught in a dilemma between what was politically expedient and morally compelling. It was born out of a political compromise. This makes the extraordinary generosity of spirit contained in the first two stories emerging from the TRC quite remarkable, while the third story's tough honesty is a sober reminder of just how complex the very idea of reconciliation is in the South African context.

Today, southern Africa is engaged in a new struggle for survival. In Musa Dube's words,

Only yesterday did we leave the delivery room, smiling, with a new born baby: a free and independent Africa. It is still a newborn child we have been breast-feeding. . . . And just as we began to smile, watching this child lift its foot to take its first step as an independent being . . . bang! Another oppressor struck Africa: HIV/AIDS!<sup>13</sup>

In South Africa we are at the epicentre of the HIV and AIDS pandemic that is presently killing about 600 of our citizens daily. "In 2000 an estimated forty percent of deaths in adults aged 15-49 were attributable to AIDS, making it the single highest cause of death in South Africa."<sup>14</sup> In five of our nine provinces—including the country's most populous ones—at least twenty-five percent of pregnant women are now HIV-positive and it is estimated that approximately 5.3 million South Africans are living with HIV.<sup>15</sup> Increased feminisation of the epidemic is causing the collapse of family community care systems and household production.<sup>16</sup> The secondary impact of AIDS is vast. At the present rate of infection, fifteen percent of all children in the worst affected countries will be orphans by 2010, and the capacity of the state and the private sector to deliver services will drastically diminish. Statistics are generally numbing. They cannot communicate the horror of a landscape strewn with suffering and dying bodies; of orphaned children, fragmented families, overburdened healthcare workers and

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Truth," in James and van de Vijver, *After the TRC*, 69-70. Van Zyl Slabbert feels that the TRC was doomed from the start to fight an uphill battle as an instrument of national reconciliation. He comments acerbically on "the senile arrogance of P. W. Botha" and describes F. W. de Klerk as "legalistic, small-minded, and trying to be clever," 65.

<sup>13</sup>Musa W. Dube, "Culture, Gender, and HIV/AIDS: Understanding and Acting on the Issues," in *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes*, ed. Musa W. Dube (Geneva: WCC, 2003) 85.

<sup>14</sup>Julia C. Kim, Lorna J. Martin and Lynette Denny, "Rape and HIV Post-Exposure Prophylaxis: Addressing the dual epidemics in South Africa," *Reproductive Health* 11 (2003): 101-12.

<sup>15</sup>*AIDS Epidemic Update*, 9.

<sup>16</sup>See *Nelson Mandela/HSRC Study of HIV/AIDS: South African National HIV Prevalence, Behavioural Risks, and Mass Media* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2002) 45-46. "The national HIV prevalence differs substantially between males and females with 9.5% among males and 12.8% females being HIV-positive."

institutions, and the dreadful psychological, social, political and spiritual toll of the pandemic.

For those experiencing HIV and AIDS-induced stigma, reconciliation is particularly elusive because the truth cannot be named. Their stories are hidden in blankets of political, social and individual silences that surround the pandemic. Take my second three stories. They illustrate the different consequences of stigma. "Thembi" dies in silence; Jason is deprived of schooling because his condition cannot be dealt with openly and compassionately; and "Nosipho" is blamed for breaking the silence of her condition by her child's father, and consequently rejected. Would these tragedies have taken place if the political silence that surrounds the pandemic were broken? President Mbeki confirmed his denialist position when towards the end of last year he stated that he knew no one who had HIV and AIDS. His position is supported by our minister of health who never misses an opportunity to question if not deride AIDS medicines and who champions olive oil, the African potato, lemon peel, beetroot and garlic for those who are sick. In a culture which is patriarchal and hierarchical such as ours, where cultural taboos are common when talking about any matters related to human sexuality, change should be driven by those who hold power and authority. The tragic stances adopted by those in positions of leadership have huge social implications and confirm and exacerbate cultural and religious attitudes towards this disease.

To return to my initial questions: Is there a common thread in the fragments of the stories told? How do they relate to the theme of reconciliation? With regard to a common thread the answer is both yes and no. The first three stories relate more directly to the need for societal and political reconciliation after apartheid. The last three illustrate how stigma fractures relationships of those suffering from HIV and AIDS and how individual reconciliation is called for. All the stories speak of experiences of suffering and alienation; some express hope. In order to understand how the need for reconciliation spans the stories emerging from the last ten years of our history, questions on the nature of reconciliation arise.

#### UNDERSTANDING RECONCILIATION

The term "reconciliation" is redolent with contextual and historical particularities as well as being a concept that has a certain universal understanding among Christians. Catholic theologian Robert Schreiter distinguishes between individual and social reconciliation. Individual reconciliation "occurs when the victim's damaged humanity is restored"; the victim is brought to a "new place" frequently accompanied by the calling to take a new direction. Social reconciliation is "a process that engages the entire population" in reconstructing a society, and is accompanied by the further reconstruction of the moral order of that society. Schreiter holds that "individual reconciliation helps nurture and

strengthens social reconciliation, but social reconciliation cannot be reduced to individual reconciliation."<sup>17</sup>

South African Reformed theologian John de Gruchy has a broader understanding of reconciliation. He finds four interrelated ways of describing it. The first is theological and refers to reconciliation between God and humanity; the second is interpersonal reconciliation which refers to relations between individuals; the third, namely, social reconciliation, is required between alienated communities and groups; and, last, political reconciliation refers to projects such as the process of national reconciliation in South Africa.<sup>18</sup> He describes reconciliation as "a journey from the past into the future, a journey from estrangement to communion, or from what was patently unjust in search of a future that is just."<sup>19</sup> It is, in a sense, always beyond our grasp, yet it is also a gift by which we live even now but which is also ahead of us. "Reconciliation," he concludes, "is a human and social process that requires theological explanation, and a theological concept seeking human and social embodiment."<sup>20</sup>

The stories at the beginning of this paper point to the difference as well as the need for both social and individual reconciliation. Individual and social reconciliation are not identical but they do share many characteristics and cannot be separated. How I live as an individual and how I live as a member of my society, are two facets of one life. As a woman I know that the private and the political cannot be separated. The nature of my relationships and how I live them, encompass both the individual and the social aspects of my life. Social and personal reconciliation are not at odds with one another. Clearly no social reconciliation is possible without reconciled individuals. Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela are examples of reconciled people who are able to bring about social reconciliation. The processes by which reconciliation occur are different as the one is internal and the other public. Thus the processes are similar, interrelated but nevertheless distinct.

In Christianity there is no one clear understanding of reconciliation. Christians too are affected by context and circumstance in our understanding of reconciliation.<sup>21</sup> It is, however, central to our understanding of ourselves as Christians endeavouring to live in relationship with one another and with God. According to de Gruchy, reconciliation is used in two fundamental or primary ways in Christian doctrine. First, it expresses the sum total of what Christians

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<sup>17</sup>Robert J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1998) 111.

<sup>18</sup>De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 26.

<sup>19</sup>De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 28.

<sup>20</sup>De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 20.

<sup>21</sup>Schreiter, *The Ministry*, 14, comments that Protestants may, for instance, see reconciliation as the result of Christ's atoning death and the justification by faith. Catholics may differ slightly in focusing on God's love poured out as a result of the reconciliation God has effected in Christ.

believe about God's saving work in Jesus Christ and second, it is a term derived chiefly from the letters of Paul for whom it "is the controlling metaphor for expressing the gospel."<sup>22</sup> Schreiter picks up on Paul's teaching on reconciliation which he summarizes in five points. First, reconciliation is the work of God through Jesus Christ (Col. 1:20); second, reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy (2 Cor. 5:20); third, the experience of reconciliation makes of both victim and wrongdoer a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17); fourth, the process that creates a new humanity is found in the story of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:10-11); and, lastly, the process of reconciliation will only be fulfilled with the complete consummation by God in Christ (Col. 1:20).<sup>23</sup>

Flora Keshgegian in her work *Redeeming Memories* takes a different tack. She argues that through the power of Jesus Christ we not only encounter God but we become participants in the divine through the mediation of the Holy Spirit. Such participation is embodied. "Our redemption is a concrete process that brings us fully into a different kind of relationship. Such relationship has been described as reconciliation and right relation. Reconciliation implies right relation—that which has been out of harmony or off balance or at odds is brought back into right relationship."<sup>24</sup> Reconciliation thus takes place within the framework of the redemptive narrative of our relationship with the God of grace and mercy and is expressed in the embodiment of right relations—with God, ourselves, others and our world. Reconciliation is the work of God who goes about restoring our brokenness so that we may live with justice and love in community. Keshgegian's stress on the relational aspect of reconciliation is particularly valid where stigma has alienated people from one another.

These three approaches illuminate important facets of reconciliation, all of which are pertinent to my chosen theme: *reconciliation as embodied praxis for change*. Its individual and social aspects, its religious core and the emphasis on righting relationships each address the places from which J. Msweli, Beth Savage, Joyce Mtinkulu, "Thembi," Lunga and "Nosipho" speak. The emphasis on embodied praxis for change comes from my background as a Christian feminist theologian of praxis. I cannot understand reconciliation in any other way than as primarily an action, a tangible, contextual practice for change, something we choose to become involved in and that we can celebrate, before we explain it. It is not in the first instance a theological doctrine or even a political theory. It is rather, in de Gruchy's words, "a process in which we become engaged at the heart of the struggle for justice and peace in the world."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 45.

<sup>23</sup>Schreiter, *The Ministry*, 14-19.

<sup>24</sup>Flora A. Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) 195.

<sup>25</sup>De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 21.

## RECONCILIATION AS CHANGE

We live in a world of fear, mistrust and collective self-interest all exacerbated by barriers caused by different cultural, political, ethnic and gender ideologies. We long for a new life and live in the tension between our declared faith in the Gospel and our actions that too often deny the message of renewal for the world. God who is the Creator is also God the Reconciler. God saw that creation was "very good." But because of our failure to live up to our innate "goodness" in relationship with God and with one another, God entered creation and became one of us, so as to reconcile us to one another and to Godself. "We, as humans, are at once creators, potential destroyers, and thus called upon to be reconcilers," says Enda McDonagh. He continues: "Thus, in the Creation story and in the Jesus story, in each case, we see the creation, but also the potential for destruction, and the consequent need and potential for reconciliation."<sup>26</sup> This implies the need for *change*.

Not surprisingly, the question then arises: Can human beings really change? Dorothee Sölle's reply to this question is scathing: "I see this question as true atheism. Whoever poses such a question, whoever believes that human beings cannot change, does not believe in God. In the bible what we call 'change' is really 'redemption.'<sup>27</sup> Overcoming discrimination and stigma and reconciling across difference and prejudice is therefore possible if one accepts that human beings can change.

Reconciliation requires change. What resources do we have to propel us towards change? Our most accessible and treasured resource is the Gospel.<sup>28</sup> But

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<sup>26</sup>Enda McDonagh, "Stigma and Christian Theology," paper read at a UNAIDS Workshop of Theologians on HIV/AIDS in Windhoek, Namibia, 8 December 2003.

<sup>27</sup>Quoted from Herman Wiersinga, *Verzoening als Verandering: Een gegeven voor menselijk handelen* (Baarn: Bosch and Keuning, 1972) 18; my translation. Original text reads: "Deze vraag zie ik als het echte atheïsme. Wie zo'n vraag stelt, wie gelooft dat de mens niet veranderen kan, die gelooft écht niet in God. In die bijbel heet wat wij 'verandering' noemen immers 'verlossing'."

<sup>28</sup>As I am not a biblical scholar I do not want to enter into a lengthy discussion of the precise meaning of the word "reconciliation" in scripture. It can be understood as bearing witness to an image of God as a personal God of the covenant who cares and suffers to bring about reconciliation. This is not an apathetic God. The God of Sarah, Rachel, and Rebecca and of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is not the God of the metaphysical theologians. This is a God in partnership with humanity, bringing about change, making things right, and suffering when people are unfaithful. People remain people, but, as partners, are told to "go and do likewise" as in the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:37). The figure of the mediator is also powerfully connected to the idea of reconciliation. In the Old Testament the mediators were those who represented the people before Yahweh, the king, the priest, or the prophet. In the New Testament, Jesus the mediator represents God to the people and the people to God. The reconciling work accomplished in the life, ministry,

how can the Gospel message strengthen us for the difficult task of becoming reconciled? Dutch theologian Herman Wiersinga in his compelling work *Verzoening als Verandering* argues that, firstly, the Gospel brings a dimension to our lives that touches our egotism, guilt and unwillingness, by creating a longing for restored relationship, forgiveness and reconciliation. Second, the Gospel provides motivation by setting before us a story of what has happened and what will happen. Confronted with the past and the future, our attention is drawn to the ethical quality of our present actions and we are invited to meaningful participation in changing the world. Third, the Gospel relativizes our ethics, not in the sense of diminishing them, but by setting our actions in relation to God's actions and making us participants in God's cause, thus steering us away from overactivity (activism) or too little activity (frustration, even despair). Lastly, reconciliation provides an effective model for interpersonal relationships. God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ is our model and sets the pattern for us to emulate by pointing to the centrality of reconciliation. God crosses the bridge to us, not by demanding from us but by reaching out in grace.<sup>29</sup> J. Msweli, Beth and "Nosipho's" stories bear testimony to the grace of change while Lunga and "Thembi" cry out for it.

#### EMBODIED CHANGE

Why *embodied* change? We live embodied lives. The fact that we can see, hear, touch, smell and feel is the source of what we know. All reality and all knowledge are mediated through our bodies. All theological reflection starts with the body. To think that theology is an activity separate from the concreteness of the human body and concerned solely with some abstract realm of the spirit is nonsensical. Reconciliation itself is not abstract. It needs to be absorbed in minds, articulated on tongues, visibly demonstrated in bodily acts, and embraced in hearts.

God offers us reconciliation in the Incarnation. "The Word became flesh and lived among us" is a statement of faith that God became "embodied" as one of us. Incarnation is about meeting God in the body. Yet Christians still struggle with the very bodiliness of our salvation. We have centuries of theological thinking that has belittled the body and relegated it to a lower status than the spirit. This I fail to understand. The Christian idea of reconciliation (and salvation) has no meaning outside the body and its well-being. When we speak of the Word who became flesh, we are not only hungering for healing and wholeness, but we

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death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is so effective, that change is possible. Talk of putting our feet in the way of freedom (Lk 1:79), peace on earth (Lk 2:124) and the weak becoming strong (1 Cor 1:25) are no longer pipedreams. After the resurrection, reconciliation as change and renewal is anticipated and initiated (1 Cor 15:20). Such is the nature of change.

<sup>29</sup>Wiersinga, *Verzoening als Verandering*, 19-20.

are claiming the totality of reconciliation promised to us in and through the Word. Our bodily experience is the fundamental realm of the experience of God.

The Church as the Body of Christ was, from its very genesis, prompted by the Spirit to attest to God's acceptance of people from every ethnic background and to witness to God's intention to incorporate all into a new community. This was clear to Paul. The good news of reconciliation meant nothing less than that Jew and Gentile had to be reconciled "in Christ" and this was to be embodied in the Church as the community of reconciliation.<sup>30</sup> The embodiment of this new humanity in the Church was to be a sign to the world that God accepts every one on equal terms and that it is incumbent on us to do the same. Sadly, the fact that the Church has, since its early days, not managed to avoid ethnic, class or gender captivity, has undermined its witness to reconciliation. As stated earlier, reconciliation is a relational concept and as such it requires embodiment in a community of restored relations. Such a community understands that we exist only in relation to others, that we become who we are intended to be by encountering and embracing those who are different, that is different from ourselves, often across profound chasms. The willingness to embrace "the other" is the foundation of a sustainable community of reconciled human beings.

#### RECONCILIATION AS EMBODIED PRAXIS FOR CHANGE

What actions and attitudes, what embodied *praxis* could hold the promise of change? The following suggestions for such praxis constitute no more than a "politics of first steps" and are addressed to the churches who are, after all, called to be agents for change and bearers of the Christian message of reconciliation. I do so while acknowledging the sad truth that the mainline churches<sup>31</sup> in my country have rarely exercised a proper ministry of reconciliation. Praxis for change has usually been initiated by groups of Christians who are minorities in their own churches. Why is this so? I can only guess at the reasons. The very words, "reconciliation" and "forgiveness" are loaded, overused and induce cynicism, fear or exhaustion at what they might entail. Institutions themselves find it difficult to view our recent history from a critical distance. Reconciliation is a pioneering activity and this can be upsetting to traditional-minded church members. Change, *metanoia*, calls hearts and minds to conversion, to review histories and to become vulnerable enough to take a leap of faith that can redefine the future. The mainline churches in South Africa also have a varied membership—members come from all sides of the political spectrum and have no common story. Finally, prophetic leadership is often lacking—the kind of leadership that can mediate God's intention to a reluctant community. Despite

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<sup>30</sup>De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 84.

<sup>31</sup>By "mainline" I have in mind the established churches such as the Anglican (Church of the Province of Southern Africa), Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, United, Lutheran, and the family of Dutch Reformed churches.

these reservations, or perhaps because of them, my remarks are addressed to the mainline churches, as I believe they have a distinctive role to play in shaping our future, one they dare not neglect. They are accountable to those whose stories I have told and indeed to all victims of alienation, discrimination and stigma. Embodied praxis for reconciliation is the churches' urgent task.

### *Where to Start?*

To begin with, an incontrovertible truth: God is the author of reconciliation. The question then arises for this paper: What human responses to God's offer of reconciliation can embody praxis for reconciliation? The first impulses for change begin, I suggest, out of certain interconnected movements: the coming to *awareness* of the alienated situation, followed by the *public acknowledgment* of its reality expressed in the language of *lament*.

*Awareness* of our alienation, guilt or blindness is an awakening prompted by the Spirit. It is an epiphany, a coming to consciousness, about an historical, social, political or personal reality that leads to a desire for change. Connections are made, contradictions seen in a process in which self-knowledge and social knowledge inform one another.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps Beth Savage came to a new awareness of the historical reality of racist oppression which then enabled her to say to her young attacker: "[I] hope that he could forgive me too. . . ." Awareness is a private moment that then requires *public acknowledgment* of its truth. The TRC offered victims and perpetrators alike the opportunity to speak out about their realities, while the stigma surrounding the HIV and AIDS pandemic stifles public acknowledgment of suffering. Reconciliation is not about concealment and does not live in the sphere of covert compromise or least resistance. Given our human limitations and the partiality of our perspectives as well as the multifaceted nature of truth itself, we can never grasp the whole truth. There will always be a discrepancy between what we perceive and understand and what has happened. In terms of its mandate, the TRC could not uncover the whole truth of our past history. Getting at the truth is a complex process and always incomplete. While some were clearly victims, it was not always obvious who were bystanders or beneficiaries of past injustices. The public acknowledgment of multiple memories of suffering, or complicity in causing suffering, must be articulated to open the possibility for actions that will culminate in reconciliation as change. This is no perfunctory truth-telling. In de Gruchy's words,

The truth liberates and sets free, the truth heals and restores, but only when the truth is lived and done. Truth serves the cause of reconciliation and justice only when it leads to a genuine *metanoia*, that is, a turning around, a breaking with an

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<sup>32</sup>See the process of *conscientização* as described by Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972).

unjust past, and a moving towards a new future.<sup>33</sup>

The public articulation of the memories of suffering or guilt can counter the temptation to apathy, muteness and depression. Dorothee Sölle understands this when she writes:

If people are not to remain unchanged in suffering, if they are not to be blind and deaf to the pain of others, if they are to move from purely passive endurance to suffering that can humanize them in a productive way, then one of the things they need is a *language*.<sup>34</sup>

The ancient tradition of *lament* gives us a language that names both the suffering and the guilt to God in the hope for change. Lamenting is both an individual and a communal act which signals that human relationships have gone awry. While lamenting is about past events, it also has present and future dimensions. It acknowledges the brokenness of the present because of injustice. Lament instinctively makes a link between healing and mourning which make new relationships possible in future. Lament should be generous not grudging, explicit not generalized, unafraid to contain petitions and confident that they will be heard. Lament is an existential wail that comes from the depths of the human soul, crying out to God to change our circumstances. Lament is embodied risk. It calls into question structures of power; it pushes the boundaries of our relationships with one another and with God beyond the limits of acceptability.

Recovering the language of lament in our churches is indispensable for the praxis of reconciliation. First, the loss of lament enfeebles the pastoral care of the church. No models for pastoral care can be built on anything but recognition of the needs of the moment. In South Africa today the need for healing and reconciliation is paramount. We need healing from the terrible wounds of racist and sexist practices, from stigma and discrimination. This is attested to by the stories in this paper. Healing and reconciliation cannot take place if this wounding is denied. Painful memories cannot be healed if they are suppressed. The desire for vengeance is often the only option for the powerless. Feelings of vengeance need to be acknowledged and voiced. They are real and natural. Lament, however, recognises the fact that the principal of retaliation has to be renounced because it is beyond our capacity to deal with justly. Our understanding is too partial. Ultimate justice belongs to God. We cannot carry out God's justice.

Second, the reconciling moments in our liturgies are impoverished by the loss of lament. We give one another a perfunctory handshake of peace without giving much thought to what truly may be happening in the life of the person beside us. Praise in our liturgies is not praise that emerges from grappling with radical doubt about God's presence in the world, our disquiet about suffering and alienation. It is not praise that is compelled by the belief that God can be

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<sup>33</sup>De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 164.

<sup>34</sup>Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 75; my italics.

worshipped despite the reality of human suffering. It is not praise that is wrought from trust and hope despite continuous questioning and experiences of brokenness. It is not praise which knows that many questions are unanswered but still continues to assault divine silence with tears, petitions and then praise. It is not praise which understands that in the midst of all this questioning, pain, anger and wrestling, we have found a God in whom we can truly trust. It is not praise that comes "out of the depths" (Ps. 130:1). Finally, how can we praise God if we are not reconciled?

Last, the language of lament has theological implications for our understanding of God. Faced with the past and present suffering caused by discrimination and stigma, legitimate questions arise about God, about justice and about God's presence and power in this world. Is God's justice reliable and where is it? There is much cause for lament, yet its loss stifles our questions about evil in the world. Instead we settle for a God who is covered with a sugarcoated veneer of religious optimism whose omnipotence will "make everything right in the end." Religious optimism is deeply different to a life of faith which is unafraid to examine suffering but is nonetheless grounded on hope. Religious optimism prefers to sanitize God by removing God from the ugliness of evil and suffering. This is a God whom we dare not approach with our genuine grief, with whom we are in a relationship of eternal infantilism, and who is not the author of embodied reconciliation.

### *Forgiveness*

After coming to awareness and openly lamenting the reality of our situation, the nitty issue of *forgiveness* arises. Forgiveness is too large a theme to do justice to in this paper. I can but raise a few pertinent points in relation to reconciliation.

Forgiveness is the thorniest part of reconciliation. It is hard to forgive, and often harder to accept forgiveness. Hasty forgiveness can seem like a betrayal of the past, an effort to wipe out painful memories in order to achieve cheap reconciliation without honouring such memories—a kind of tawdry "forgive and forget." Then as Keshgegian remarks, forgiveness "gets in the way of remembering fully."<sup>35</sup> There is no "forgive and forget". "Remember and forgive" is more appropriate.<sup>36</sup> This requires forbearance from revenge. Then we may be able to redeem memories to the extent that reconciliation becomes a possibility.

It is useful to distinguish between divine and human forgiveness.<sup>37</sup> God forgives sins, not simply because God has the power to do so, but because God

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<sup>35</sup>Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories*, 195.

<sup>36</sup>See Donald W. Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 6-9.

<sup>37</sup>Schreiter, *The Ministry*, 57.

is infinite love. We are not required to change in order to be forgiven by God. We cannot earn God's forgiveness. Instead we can become whole because we are forgiven. Then confession is not some vain attempt to make us acceptable to God, but it rather enables us to renarrate our lives so that we are capable of appropriating God's forgiveness into our lives as forgiven and forgiving people in community.<sup>38</sup> Then we can live the grace of reconciliation granted us through the work of the Holy Spirit who judges, consoles, and guides us into new ways.

God's forgiveness comes first. Human forgiveness starts from a different point, the point described above, namely through acknowledging the truth of our unreconciled lives. Being able to forgive is in Schreiter's words "an act of freedom."<sup>39</sup> It involves choice. But first a word of caution. Some acts are so evil and destructive that forgiveness seems impossible. Premature speech about forgiveness and reconciliation fails to acknowledge the moral force of, for instance, Joyce Mtinkulu's anger. When we decide to forgive we decide to become free from the power of the past. We do not forgive because those who have wronged us have repented. We acknowledge our wounding and decide to move on. We choose a different future. "Nosipho's" liberation from the effects of stigma began when she chose to reveal her status to her employer. Today she tells her story without rancour towards her deceased partner.

Forgiveness does not mean that we wipe out the past or excuse a wrongdoer. Rather it asserts that the balance of power has passed from the wrong that was committed and the trauma experienced, from the violator to the victim. It is the sole prerogative of the victim to decide to forgive. Forgiveness is an active, willed change of heart that succeeds in overcoming naturally felt feelings of anger, resentment, vengeance and hatred. It has a giftlike quality. The decision to forgive is the point at which divine and human forgiveness intersect.<sup>40</sup> If God had not forgiven us first, human forgiveness would not be possible.

The TRC process in South Africa employed the formula "confession-repentance-forgiveness" and then, hopefully reconciliation.<sup>41</sup> The goal here was the transformation of our society in to one that is more just and in which a repetition of the wrongdoing of the past will not occur again. The hope is the creation of a new society, one that is safe and affirming of all its citizens. Personal reconciliation, on the other hand, is a process that begins with the victim who has experienced God's forgiveness and consequent healing. Here the

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<sup>38</sup>L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 184.

<sup>39</sup>Schreiter, *The Ministry*, 58.

<sup>40</sup>Schreiter, *The Ministry*, 61.

<sup>41</sup>See Russell Daye, *Political Forgiveness: Lessons from South Africa* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2004) 9, who writes about "the drama of political forgiveness in five acts": truth-telling, apology and claiming responsibility, building transitional justice, ways of healing, and embracing forgiveness.

formula is reversed: "reconciliation—forgiveness—repentance."<sup>42</sup> It is a mistake to think that Christian forgiveness is simply absolution from guilt; the purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of relationships in community and the reconciliation of brokenness.<sup>43</sup> When Cynthia Ngewu, whose son Rasta Piet was killed by the police in the Western Cape testified before the TRC, she understood this. She said: "What we are hoping for when we embrace the notion of reconciliation is that we restore the humanity to those who were perpetrators. We do not want to return evil with another evil. We simply want to ensure that the perpetrators are returned to humanity."<sup>44</sup> Forgiveness grants us personal freedom in community. As reconciliation is God's work and it is God who restores our damaged humanity, we can now choose to forgive in freedom. Social and individual reconciliation are not two mutually exclusive processes. Although their goals are not entirely the same, social reconciliation requires leaders who themselves are reconciled individuals. This Nelson Mandela has shown us. There is, however, another reality. For "Thembi" the question of forgiveness may well not have arisen. Her internalized stigma speaks from her grave. Did she believe that she was "deserving" of her fate? Did she ever contemplate forgiving her church for its judgmentalism?

### *Justice*

This process of awareness, acknowledgment, lament and forgiveness then comes up against the inescapable need for *justice*. Reconciliation is about restoring justice. There is no consistent understanding of justice in the modern world. We usually understand justice in a way that suits our individual and collective interests. In South Africa today justice bears many labels: punitive, corrective, distributive, retributive, remedial, restorative, practical and redemptive are but some. I choose to understand justice as restoring "right relationship." Restorative rather than punitive justice is that which remakes what God intended for us—that our human worth be affirmed and upheld in right mutual relationship with one another. Restorative justice rebuilds communities of right relationship and its goal is healing and reconciliation.<sup>45</sup> "God's justice is the justice of restored relations, an understanding of justice inseparable even if distinguishable from love, and one which finds expression in liberation from oppression and reconciliation within both personal and social relations."<sup>46</sup> What would it mean for the churches to bear witness to restorative justice? It would certainly mean the reordering of

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<sup>42</sup>Schreier, *The Ministry*, 64.

<sup>43</sup>See Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 5.

<sup>44</sup>Boraine, *A Country*, 353.

<sup>45</sup>See Charles Villa-Vicencio, "Restorative Justice in Social Context: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission," in *Burying the Past*, 235-50.

<sup>46</sup>De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 202.

power relations in church structures. A good place to start would be to get their houses in order in terms of just gender relations!

"Justice," writes Wole Soyinka "constitutes the first condition of humanity."<sup>47</sup> Justice is an attempt to restore our dignity, and it comes at a price. Some measure of restitution is always essential after dispossession and the suffering caused by discrimination and stigma. Cultural and spiritual violation leaves indelible imprints on the psyches of people. These can be eased but not erased by reparations or restitutionary acts. But such acts are vital because restitutionary measures serve as "a cogent critique of history" and can act as "a potent restraint on its repetition."<sup>48</sup> In South Africa restorative justice demands reparations. In the minds of the majority of South Africans reparations are inseparable from property rights and land distribution. This is a profound challenge for churches that own large tracts of land, some at the cost of people previously dispossessed. Finally, restorative justice is not soft on forgiveness. God's forgiveness incorporates a demand for change. Forgiveness does not rule out just punishment and it does not excuse the wrongdoer. It simply militates against vengeance and a continuous cycle of violence. It is balanced by love. Justice without love can lead to destructive vengeance, while love without justice can be unembodied sentimentality. Whatever kind of justice is chosen, reconciliation without justice is simply immoral.

#### *Eucharist*

Awareness, acknowledgement, lament, forgiveness, and justice are all pieces that are part of the movement for reconciliation as embodied change. A church that seeks to embody reconciliation has a valuable asset in the power of ritual. Ritual can express deeply felt but seldom articulated feelings. In all the moves for reconciliation that I have suggested so far, ritual is important because its drama can speak of that for which we have no words. Mary Collins writes: "Rituals are about relationships; religious rituals are about ultimate relationships—about people's origins and destiny and their true identity and purpose even in ordinary life."<sup>49</sup> Rituals thus hold the promise of healing broken relationships. The *Eucharist* is extraordinarily significant for reconciliation. In the Eucharist the themes touched on thus far come together: the promise of change, the embodied reality of our faith, the restoration of relationship and the need for restorative justice. We not only share in the "one bread" of the communion, but we commit ourselves to share ourselves with those who are needy, alienated or simply "other," because this is what it means to become "bread for the world."

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<sup>47</sup>Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 31.

<sup>48</sup>Soyinka, *The Burden*, 41.

<sup>49</sup>Mary Collins, *Worship: Renewal to Practice* (Washington DC: Pastoral Press, 1987) 259.

This is by implication a call for restorative justice. It is also the impetus for restored community.

We can comfort ourselves as we struggle to share and reconcile by reminding ourselves that the origins of the Eucharist do not lie in success or triumph but in human betrayal. The Eucharist was instituted on the night that Jesus Christ was betrayed and handed over to the "powers of this world." Our successes do not take us to the table. This is a source of hope for the cause of reconciliation.

Today, the Body of Christ has AIDS. This same Body is one that knows the chasms caused by racism, sexism, by differences of class and ideology. It is not a healthy Body. Thankfully we do not have to be either free of prejudice, stigma or disease to come to the table. The Eucharist is the bodily practice of grace. Suffering, despairing bodies can partake of the feast. Bodies are absolutely central to the Eucharist, our bodies and the body of Christ. Participating in this rite unites our bodies in a mysteriously wonderful way. "The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:16, 17). Our differences disappear as we are all drawn into the one body of the risen Christ. Sick bodies, abused bodies, marginalized bodies together with the healthy are received together into the crucified and resurrected body of Jesus Christ whom we remember and celebrate in the Eucharist.

The AIDS virus lurks deep inside the Body of Christ. In Robert Jenson's incomparable phrase, "God deep in the flesh"<sup>50</sup> meets our diseased and alienated bodies in the Eucharist. When we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are taken into Christ's Body, all of us, where "God deep in the flesh" offers us the promise of new life. The Eucharist is *the* sacrament of bodiliness and *the* sacrament of equality in which all participants are accepted unconditionally. Only self-exclusion can keep us away. Participation is our choice. Awareness of and acknowledging the truth of our realities, and experiencing the grace of forgiveness, should prepare us for the table. This is not all. God's justice revealed in Jesus Christ is the heart of the matter. We are offered the opportunity to become participants in God's justice setting all things right, making things new, effecting reconciliation in the broken world. Commitment to anything else is questionable for members of the Body of Christ, indeed for every person who acts in Christ's name.

After participating in the Eucharist, we join in thanks and then commit ourselves as "living sacrifices in Jesus Christ" to live and work in the world to God's praise and glory—a noble, moving undertaking. The significance of both the gift given in Christ in the Eucharist and the fulfilment of that gift in the future, lie in our willingness to embody reconciling praxis that serves the needs

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<sup>50</sup>See Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, *The Futurist Option* (New York: Newman Press, 1970).

of the world. Such praxis entails awareness of injustice and suffering, forgiveness and a commitment to the task of making right relationships in our communities embodied in practical actions. Without committed praxis for justice and love, the Eucharist becomes little more than an empty rite.

#### CONCLUSION

In his book *No Future without Forgiveness*, Desmond Tutu, with characteristic passion, sets out his credo. I can think of no more appropriate way of ending this paper than by quoting a passage that describes the Christian hope for reconciliation.

There is a movement, not easily discernible, at the heart of things to reverse the awful centrifugal force of alienation, brokenness, division, hostility and disharmony. God has set in motion a centripetal process, a moving toward the Centre, towards unity, harmony, goodness, peace and justice; one that removes barriers. Jesus says, "And when I am lifted up from the earth I shall draw everyone to myself," as he hangs from His cross with outflung arms, thrown out to clasp all, everyone and everything, in cosmic embrace, so that all, everyone, everything, belongs. None is an outsider, all are insiders, all belong. There are no aliens; all belong in one family, God's family, and the human family.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Desmond M. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, 1999) 213.