

## **DIE NEDERDUITSE GEREFORMEERDE KERK: PRESENT CHALLENGES IN THE LIGHT OF THE PAST**

### **Experiences of a dissenter: An evaluation of one's own role in development within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)**

Nico Smith  
URC, Mamelodi

---

#### **Introduction**

Allow me first of all a personal word from my heart. This occasion is a very emotional experience for me. I left Stellenbosch in March 1982 and only now, after nineteen years, do I have the opportunity to speak here again. For sixteen years my family and I had the privilege of being part of this community. What I said and did in Stellenbosch during my stay must have been terribly wrong - to such an extent that nobody considered it appropriate to invite me back here to say something. I would therefore like to express my profound gratitude to the people of the University of Hamburg who organized this symposium and for inviting me to participate in the reflections and discussions on this specific theme.

#### ***Dissenter, deserter or dissident?***

I was rather puzzled when I received the invitation to come and speak at the symposium on the experiences of a dissenter. After I left Stellenbosch, the Afrikaner establishment used to call me a deserter and in Pretoria I was called a dissident. The invitation to come and speak on my experiences as a dissenter thus led me to wonder which of these labels actually fits me. Why have I been asked to talk on my experiences as a dissenter? I've never been called a dissenter before. Am I a dissenter, a dissident or a deserter? What is the difference between these three? I had to consult the Oxford Dictionary to determine the difference between these attributes. I found the following explanations:

- A *dissenter* is someone in disagreement with the views of the Establishment (with capital 'e'), especially in religious matters; a non-conformist.
- A *deserter* is someone leaving a position of responsibility, causing it to appear empty. Often used in connection with a member of armed forces who runs away from his/her responsibility.
- A *dissident* is a person who opposes official policy, who actively disagrees with the established viewpoints. The dissident's viewpoints are more intense than only to differ or to disagree and suggest a more thorough going dispute. A dissident therefore does not merely object to a few scattered instances of injustice. He/she dissents from a whole way of life.

I do not know whether the organizers of the symposium asked me to speak specifically on my experiences as a dissenter because they do not regard me as a deserter or a dissident. My personal feeling is that I am actually a mixture of all these attributes – perhaps a mixed-up mixture. My actions and reactions, I think, have fitted all the descriptions given by the dictionary for the three categories of people. I will, however, accept my assignment to speak

as a dissenter and look at why I have been in disagreement with the views of the Establishment, especially in religious matters.

In identifying myself as a dissenter, it is also necessary to look at the *Establishment* and its views, with which I had been in disagreement. The dictionary gives the following description of the Establishment: 'A group in a society exercising power and influence over matters of policy, opinion, or taste, and seen as resisting change'. The Establishment in which I became a dissenter was specifically the Afrikaner Establishment here in Stellenbosch, which exercised power and influence at almost every level of society during the years I was part of it. One of the main characteristics of that Establishment, I would say, was its resistance to change.

Resistance to change in the Afrikaner Establishment at that time was mainly the result of self-confidence in matters of politics and religion. There was no need for change of opinions, tastes or values. The Afrikaner had the political and cultural power to establish a secured society that could remain static. And most of all, the Afrikaners worshipped God, knew exactly who God is and believed they were living according to the will of God. God had thus been imprisoned as a static God who secured a static society.

The Establishment at that time was much like the American missionary who worked in China for forty years. He then retired and returned to America. At his farewell party, one of his first converts was asked to say something about the missionary with whom he had such a close relationship for forty years. The old man said a lot of plausible things about the missionary but at the end said that the only bad thing he could say about the missionary was that he never learned anything because he always knew everything.

My disagreement with and resistance against the Afrikaner Establishment was particularly against this static and conforming power which it imposed on individuals. A static self-assured community always wants to keep members of the community prisoners of its doctrinal and ideological beliefs. Questioning those beliefs is considered disloyalty to the group and therefore a threat to the group. Becoming aware of the fact that I had been a prisoner of this conforming power eventually led me to dissent from the established way of thinking in the Afrikaner community and especially in the religious thinking of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC).

Having identified myself as a dissenter, I would first like to look at the reasons why I became a dissenter. In what way did my views change from the views of the Establishment and why did they change? What brought me into disagreement with the views of the Establishment, especially in religious matters, while I had been in full agreement with the established views for twenty-five years? Secondly I would like to look at the response of the Establishment to me as a dissenter. In what way does an Establishment defend itself against the onslaught of dissenters and how do you as a dissenter, experience such a defence?

### **1. What caused me to become a dissenter?**

What influenced my mind towards a change in my views and towards disagreement with the established Afrikaner community and the DRC? In tracing the roots of this change, I found two challenging conversations and two fundamental questions that were put to me. These conversations and questions eventually made me realize that I had since my youth been taught to assume that people of the establishment were always reasonable and right and that I therefore had to conform to their thinking. This became in a certain sense a severe and naive drawback in my personality and was mainly conditioned by the need to be accepted. The easiest way to be accepted in the Establishment was to conform to the thinking and way of life of the majority. But thank heaven; a person's mind *can* be changed.

It would have been disastrous to humankind if human beings were doomed never to change their minds.

- The two conversations that mainly contributed towards my change of mind, were the following:

a) *You must be willing to become a White African*

In 1962 I was invited by the General Secretary of the Students Christian Association (SCA) in South Africa to accompany a group of students from South Africa to attend an All Africa Christian Youth Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya. The Assembly was organized by the World Student Christian Federation in Switzerland and was held from 28 December 1962 to 7 January 1963. The theme of the Assembly was 'Freedom under the Cross'.

This invitation came to me rather as a surprise. At that time I was still a missionary in Venda and had little to do with the SCA. The Executive Committee of the SCA had appointed Prof Lex van Wyk, who was a member of the Committee, to accompany the students. But Van Wyk was considered very liberal in his views, politically and theologically, and I, being considered a conservative Afrikaner, had been asked privately to be part of the South African delegation. Van Wyk and I were the only two more senior Afrikaners in the delegation from South Africa. Lex was rather surprised to hear I was asked to be part of the delegation but, reserved as he was, he never discussed with me why I had been asked.

At the Assembly, we as white South Africans had to listen to viewpoints from students in Africa that caused great concern among the White Afrikaner students. The discussions were dominated more by political freedom than freedom under the cross. Five students from Stellenbosch therefore asked me to arrange for a private meeting with the President of the Assembly who was also the chairperson of the Assembly, Dr John Karefa-Smart from Sierra Leone. We met him in his hotel room one evening. He was very polite but very honest in expressing his views to the students. As Minister of Foreign Affairs of the government of Sierra Leone, he told the students that what was said 'behind the curtains' by the leaders of Africa about South Africa, left very little hope that a white government would be able to survive in South Africa. They should prepare themselves as young people for an independent South Africa under a black government, 'even if it's still going to take quite a time, but it is coming'.

The students were upset and asked him whether we as whites should leave Africa. His careful answer was that the choice would be theirs. If they prefer to remain Europeans, they must rather leave Africa. But if they choose to become white Africans, they must stay because Africa needs them. The students immediately asked what he meant by white Africans. His straightforward answer was that they would have to consider themselves a permanent part of Africa, and not attach any special value to the pigmentation of their skin, considering themselves superior to the people of Africa or claiming any special privileges for being white.

I was personally very enthusiastic about Karefa-Smart's advice to become white Africans. Reporting back to the 'authorities' in South Africa, however, caused great concern among Afrikaner leaders, especially my concern about the 'winds of change' which were blowing over the youth of Africa. My enthusiasm about Afrikaners becoming white Africans, was nipped in the bud. Being in the state of mind I had been in at that time, I felt as though I had committed a crime against my own people. I dropped the idea of a white African and conformed to the thinking of the group. It was only many years later, after I had

broken away from the Establishment, that I took up the concept again and started uttering it to the students at the Seminary in Stellenbosch.

*b) Critical identification versus confrontation*

The second conversation, or conversations, that had a crucial impact on my thinking were those I had with Prof Johan Heyns. We were newly appointed senior lecturers at the Theological Faculty at the University of Stellenbosch. Johan and I were the first lecturers who, having had our theological training at the University of Pretoria, had been appointed as lecturers at the Faculty in Stellenbosch. We were classmates and obviously had a feeling of camaraderie in our relationship.

When I became concerned about being a member of the Afrikaner Brotherhood, Johan was the only person with whom I felt I could discuss my concern openly. We had a number of discussions on our membership. I wanted him to join me in resigning from the Brotherhood because I felt that if I left on my own, it would not be taken seriously. But if a person of Johan's status in the Afrikaner Establishment at that time were also to resign, it would influence other leaders of the DRC to reconsider their membership. We had long and sometimes heated discussions on the matter. At two o'clock one night, we decided not to discuss it any further. He would continue with critical identification with the Afrikaner, as he believed that would be the only way to influence the mind of the Afrikaner. I would follow the way of confrontation and would openly say that I could not agree with the political justification, and especially the theological justification, of apartheid any longer. We both promised that it would not influence our friendship and that we would see what came out of our different approaches. Little did I know that the first confrontation I would have with the Establishment wasn't far off.

- The two penetrating questions that were put to me and which gradually influenced my thinking in a decisive way, were the following:

*a) Are you free to preach the Gospel in South Africa?*

I believe many different factors and experiences moved me further and further away from what I had been in agreement with for twenty five years of conforming to the thinking of the Afrikaner Establishment, especially on the justification of apartheid. But the definite crucial point in my thinking about what was happening in South Africa was a question put to me by Karl Barth in 1963. I had just been appointed as Mission Secretary of the Northern Transvaal Synod of the DRC. In preparing myself for the new task, I visited various mission administration offices in Europe to find out how these offices functioned in relation to the established churches in the West and the so-called younger churches in the mission fields.

In Basel, I had a constructive discussion with Dr Raaflaub, General Secretary of the Basler Mission. At the end of our discussion I mentioned to him that I would so much like to talk to Karl Barth but did not know whether it would be polite to just phone him and ask if I could meet with him. Dr Raaflaub immediately said: 'But Karl is my friend. I will phone him and ask if he is available and willing to meet with you.'

Within twenty minutes I was in Barth's study. He started off with a very strange story. He told me that just the previous week he had read a speech by our minister-president, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd. Verwoerd's speech was on the racial issues South Africa was faced with. 'And do you know, what your minister-president said, was almost exactly the same as what a certain president Davis of the Southern States in America said about *their* racial problems a hundred years ago. Must I therefore take it that you people in South Africa are living a hundred years behind the times?'

At that time I was still a staunch supporter of apartheid and I knew what Barth - considering his confrontation with Nazism - was thinking of apartheid. I didn't want to argue with him and smiled rather embarrassedly, saying that it may be true but that I did not visit him to discuss South Africa. I would prefer to talk to him about the future of theology in Europe. Barth was willing not to continue on South Africa and started to explain to me why Bultman's theology would gain much more momentum than his own theology. We had an hour and a half of discussion and I then said that I would have to leave.

Barth then looked at me and said: 'May I ask you a personal question before you leave? Are you free to preach the Gospel in South Africa?' 'Of course,' I said. 'I'm completely free as we have freedom of religion in our country.' Barth immediately responded by saying that *that* was not the type of freedom he had in mind. He wanted to know whether I, if I came across things in the Bible that were not in accordance with what my friends and family believed, would be free to preach about such things? I was once again embarrassed and said I really didn't know, as I had never had such an experience yet. Barth was then leaning a little forward in his chair, saying; 'But you know, it may become even more difficult. You may discover things in the Bible that are contrary to what your government is doing. Will you be free to preach about such issues?' Once again I had to say I really didn't know. Barth then just said: 'It's OK. You may go.'

In the tram back to the city center, I was thinking about Barth's question: 'Are you free?' I said to myself, I'm sure Barth thinks we in South Africa are Nazis and he wanted to warn me against apartheid. In some way I felt like Peter whom Jesus asked three times; 'Do you love me?' But since that day, the question whether I was free, kept returning to my mind and I couldn't rid myself of it.

#### *b) What do you mean when you say...?*

The second question that rattled my thinking was a question often put to me by my neighbour across the street in Van der Stel Street where we lived, Johan Degenaar. When we had a conversation and I would make statements generally accepted by the Establishment, Johan very often stopped me and said: 'Wait a minute, what do you mean when you say...?' I then had to listen to his analysis of my statements and usually had to discover that they were unfounded. He never asked the question in an aggressive way and I could never 'smell' any unjustified criticism in his analyses. He always did it in such a gentle way that I couldn't become furious or even only cross with him. But with his analytic mind, he helped me enormously to look at my own personal convictions and beliefs and not to simply echo the convictions and beliefs of the Establishment.

#### ▪ The moment of liberation

Gradually I became convinced that I wasn't free. I was conforming all the time to what friends, family and the church were saying. I was too uncertain of myself to take a personal stand on matters. The breaking point only arrived one night, ten years after the question, 'Are you free?' was put to me by Barth. In one of the cell meetings of the Brotherhood, a crucial decision had to be taken on a purely political matter. While I was given to understand when I became a member of the Brotherhood that the Organization had nothing to do with politics, all members of the Brotherhood were requested that night to confirm their loyalty to the Nasionalist Party with their own signature. I refused to sign and walked out of the meeting that night, knowing that my confrontation with the Afrikaner Establishment had begun. I went home, woke up my wife and told her: 'I'm a free man!'

## 2. How did the Afrikaner Establishment respond to me as a dissenter?

There were mainly two responses from the side of the Establishment. The first response was from friends in the Afrikaner community and secondly response from persons in leadership positions in the DRC.

### ▪ *The response from friends*

Soon after I left the Brotherhood, the dean of the faculty at that time came to me and begged me not to say anything against the Brotherhood or the government. After two years, he said, they would have forgotten about you and you would be able to have a peaceful life. But if I were to start speaking out, he warned, life might become miserable to me. The dean was a very soft-spoken, fatherly type of a person and I knew he was really concerned about a possible rejection of me by the Establishment. He himself almost had the same experience. I thus promised him to try to keep silent.

What was sad to me was that some persons, who were my close friends when I was still a member of the Brotherhood, all of a sudden didn't come to visit me anymore. I went to some of them who sometimes visited me and they poured out their hearts to me because of their uncertainty about their membership of the Brotherhood. All of them to whom I tried to speak, immediately drew my attention to the formula that was circulated within the Brotherhood cells when a member had withdrawn, namely that the brothers would have no further communication with the deserter. They bluntly refused to have any further discussion with me on the Brotherhood. It became a very lonely road to walk.

Some pastors of the English speaking churches in Cape Town must have heard that I had left the Laager and started to invite me to come and preach in their congregations - which I gladly did. In those congregations, I felt free to say what was in my heart although I was usually warned by some of the pastors please not to mention political matters in my sermon, as some of their members were very sensitive to politics in the church. The fellowship with these pastors, however, was a real encouragement to me and strengthened me to feel that I was not so totally out of order and balance in objecting to the direction the country was moving in. But I had to discover that even among English speaking South Africans, apartheid as a political system was highly valued and speaking against apartheid in their churches, was also not regarded as necessary and of vital importance to the church.

It was mainly through my contact with the English speaking churches that I started to realize that to keep quiet about apartheid was another way of cooperating with the regime. Keeping quiet was a recipe to allow the government to continue on its way of devastation. I decided that I would start on a very low key to speak out on matters on which I had certain convictions without considering whether it was acceptable to people in the society at large. I even dared to start speaking out against the Brotherhood. This caused me to be visited one night by two members of the Brotherhood, who came to warn me that unless I kept my mouth shut on the Brotherhood, the consequences might be very severe for me. They left my study without receiving any pledge from me. I nevertheless knew that I was a marked man and that whatever I said would be interpreted as being against the Afrikaner and the Brotherhood.

### ▪ *Responses from persons in leadership in the DRC*

My position within the DRC became more and more an irritation to some in the leadership of the church. I was called various times over a period of seven years to appear before the Executive Committee of the Curatorium of the Theological Seminary and taken

to task. It would be impossible to relate the details of all these meetings. It would be a long and tiresome story that I will perhaps have to write down at some stage. But it is, however, necessary to relate some of the reasons for my appearances before the Curatorium in order to give an indication of what it was all about, what 'sins' I had committed and how the Executive of the Curatorium responded to them.

My first call to appear before the Curatorium came when I wrote a letter to the Afrikaans Newspaper, DIE BURGER, rejecting a viewpoint expressed by Johan Heyns at a gathering on the Day of the Covenant in Pretoria. Heyns, staunch Reformed theologian that he was, wanted members of the Afrikaans speaking churches to be more interested and involved in socio-political issues of the day. In those days there was a strong feeling in the Brotherhood that Afrikaners should be much more in active support of the policy of Separate Development as it was called. In this regard he made the statement that many members of the DRC were not interested enough in political issues because of the presence of a strong trend of pietism in the DRC. Pietism, he said, was never interested in political matters and wanted to strictly separate politics and the church. He called upon Afrikaner Christians to participate in a more vigorous way in politics and not to leave politics to the government of the day.

I dared to write and say that Heyns was barking up the wrong tree and was making pietism the scapegoat for the lack of interest of Afrikaner Christians in politics. The real reason, I wrote, was that since the Anglo Boer War the DRC, because of its close identification with the conquered Afrikaners, had landed up in the lap of the Afrikaner people (nation, volk).

Gradually, being an Afrikaner had become so intertwined with being a member of the DRC, and thus being a Christian, that it became difficult to distinguish between being a member of the DRC and being an Afrikaner.

It was especially since 1948 that the members of the DRC felt quite safe about politics, as the Nationalist Party, which most of the Afrikaners supported, took over government. And as most of the members of Parliament were members of the DRC, the new government was considered to be a Christian government. The members of the DRC thus felt they could leave society and politics in the hands of capable Christian politicians and a Christian government who would do nothing that was not in accordance with Christian principles and civilized standards. In this way they became loyal supporters and co-workers of the government and its apartheid policy for society and therefore they were, as members of the DRC, not interested in or concerned about socio-political matters.

Students in the Seminary asked me during a lecture to give a further explanation on having called the DRC (in the newspaper) a lap dog of the government. I pointed out that the church, according to our Reformed Calvinistic understanding of the relationship between the state and the church, is supposed to be God's watchdog in the world. The church's function as a watchdog was in particular applicable to governments transgressing their political limits. In South Africa, however, the DRC had become domesticated as a watchdog for the government to bark at intruders like communists, liberals, terrorists, etc. The essence of the problem thus was that the DRC identified itself so closely with the Nationalist Party government that it became difficult to distinguish between the two. Pietism was not the problem; the problem was the captivity of the church by the Afrikaner.

The letter caused a vehement reaction in long and furious letters in DIE BURGER and the DRC church magazine, *Die Kerkbode*. I kept silent at that time, realizing I had rushed on to dangerous terrain and that I had to tread with caution. When the storm calmed down, I was called to meet with the Executive of the Curatorium. This was my first experience of

having to face the DRC authorities to be accused of doing wrong. I awaited the meeting with fear and trembling, not knowing what the outcome would be.

The main concern of the Executive was that I was accusing the DRC of something that, according to them, was not true. How could I say the DRC landed in the lap of the Nationalist Party Government? The DRC had throughout its history always kept a distance from every government and never openly supported any government. I then also heard that I was reported by students for saying that the DRC had been domesticated as a watchdog for the Nationalist Party government. I would have to realize that if I said things like this, the Seminary would get a bad name and church members would start withdrawing their support of the Seminary. As a result of this meeting I realized just how different were the terms in which the Executive and I were thinking about the DRC.

If I mention the names of the members of the Executive at that time, those of you who can still remember them will realize that a meeting with them was not held in a Sunday school picnic type of atmosphere. I was whipped in a terrible way and went home feeling like a bad boy who just had a proper hiding. I promised myself that I would try to prevent another of such meetings. Little did I realize that many such meetings still lay ahead of me.

My second appearance before the Executive came shortly after a sermon on the day of Pentecost. The professors of the Seminary in those days still had to preach two sermons every year in the local congregations in Stellenbosch. I had been invited to preach in the mother church at the morning service on the day of Pentecost. The stumbling block in my sermon was that I said the Holy Spirit was a spirit of communication, as proved at the day of the outpouring of the Spirit when people started talking to one another about God and the actions performed by God in those days.

I suggested that we should implement this function in our church fellowship in a very practical way. We could, for example, sometimes invite members of the Rhenish congregation, only about three quarter of a kilometer away from us, to come and have a cup of tea or coffee and a sandwich with us after the morning service. In that way we could have fellowship with our brown brothers and sisters, belonging to the same family of Dutch Reformed Churches and to share with them our common faith in God and the Holy Spirit. I didn't have any aggressive or confrontational intentions in the sermon. One of the local pastors also didn't pick up anything controversial and thanked me very heartily in the vestry after the service for a very practical sermon.

At the next meeting of the church council there were some letters from members of the congregation complaining about my sermon. Their main objection was that I had misused the pulpit as a political platform to express my political views. They accused me of having misused the opportunity granted to me to preach God's Word in their congregation and preached politics to them. I was a member of the church council and thought that the complaints would be turned down as absurd. To my utter surprise the church council decided to refer the letters to a commission who would negotiate with the objectors to find a peaceful solution. One of my colleagues at the seminary was appointed chairperson of the commission. What I couldn't understand was that nobody in the church council complained in the vestry when the minister thanked me so heartily and now, where the matter had come up at the church council meeting, nobody stood up to say that the complaints should be ignored.

Again I had been called to appear before the Executive of the Curatorium. I was told that I should have realized how sensitive the members of the DRC are about meeting socially with non-whites. As a professor, I must take into consideration the responsibility I have in what I say and preach. I couldn't understand that even those in leadership in the

DRC could still believe that having tea together as members of two churches which belonged to the same historical background, could be considered as unacceptable. Once again I was confronted with Barth's question: 'Are you free?' Did I have to keep quiet and stay within the bounds set for me or did I have I to be willing to speak out clearly on what I honestly believed?

A third meeting with the Executive was about taking students of the Theological Seminary to Crossroads and Khayalitsha where black women were protesting against their houses being demolished by the authorities. They were to be transported on military trucks back to the Transkei where they came from. A hundred and fifty women refused to return and went on a sit-down strike in front of the administrative offices of the authorities. After a week of sitting there in mid-winter, the English churches started taking blankets, food and clothes to the women and their children. The DRC, however, didn't want to comment on the women's protest. The students then asked me whether I would be willing to accompany them to the women to hear what they had to say about their protest. I willingly did so and it caused once again an enormous polemic in the press. And once again I was called to answer to the Executive, who considered my actions an embarrassment to the DRC.

I do not want to go in to more detail about why I was called to order by the Executive of the Curatorium at various times. Whatever the reasons were, the fact of the matter was that I was not allowed to express my convictions, whether they were right or wrong. Maybe the real problem was that I wasn't clever enough to say things in such a way that they would not upset people. In essence it was all about the power the DRC could exercise to compel its ministers and professors to conform and to speak the language of the Afrikaner in that time. You were not allowed to disagree or if you did disagree, you had to do it in such a way that it would not be taken seriously.

It was only after I left Stellenbosch and entered the world of the blacks, that I have really seen and experienced what happened to the blacks under apartheid. I felt guilty for previously not having spoken out much more clearly and protested much more vigorously. I couldn't believe that I could have been in Stellenbosch for sixteen years and never realized what was happening to the blacks in the country. How was it possible that my colleagues and I had ears, the ears of Christians, but our ears did not ring in the presence of the misery and malice suffered by the blacks during those times?

The sad thing is that we could have known if there was any real concern about the blacks in the politics of the government. It was only when I personally lived amongst the blacks that I started to realize that those who were faithful to the Gospel and were preaching the Gospel in its full consequences during those dark days of crime against the blacks, couldn't but be drawn into conflict with the authorities. Those were the people whom I also, during the years of conforming to the Establishment, considered to be radicals and communists. It will forever remain a mystery and a tragedy that people could have preached the Gospel in such a way that while a most unchristian system was ruling and ruining the lives of millions of blacks, no red lights started flickering.

I know I have usually protested in a wrong way. I have been told so often by a dear friend who shared many of my convictions that I have a wrong style of protesting. I should do it in such a way that people wouldn't feel affronted. I should be mild in my criticism in order to get people to accept my criticism. Those who thought it was all about the correct style of criticism, eventually had to discover that even the most cautious style was not to change the thinking of the Establishment. Those were serious times and I still believe that, no matter what style a person adopted in an attempt to change the thinking of the

Establishment, the attempt would have failed. What was needed, was to remain faithful to the Gospel, whether it had any or no effect.

The question is, however, did *my* style of protest make any difference? No! Definitely not - at least not amongst the whites. But in a time when the credibility of the church was under severe scrutiny amongst the blacks, I could at least help them to believe that the church *can* make a difference and convinced them because of my affiliation with the church and my identification with their struggle for liberation.

Looking back on the nineteen years since I left Stellenbosch and the DRC, I have no regrets of having left Stellenbosch. It is true that I sometimes do long back to this wonderful place to live in and all the wonderful people I learned to know here. I wouldn't be human if I did not sometimes have the desire to be back here. In particular I was very often longing for an opportunity to enter into dialogue with my colleagues at the Seminary again. But such an opportunity never came my way.

The question is, could I not have done my resistance and protest in a more effective way if I would have continued in Stellenbosch? I don't think so. After all I have seen, heard and experienced since I entered the world of the blacks, I am convinced that if I had continued with my task in Stellenbosch, I wouldn't have known anything of what was really happening to blacks under apartheid. As whites, we were all prisoners of our history that also kept us prisoners of a Gospel we could use to protect our hopes and desires, and, above all, our privileged position. Who can ever expect that we would have preached against ourselves?

After what I have seen and experienced in the black community during the past nineteen years, I believe that our generation of whites will have to continue to confess that we have failed the Gospel in its full consequences. And with this confession I will continue in spite of the fact that many think it is pathological to keep on confessing. Knowing what had been done under the disguise of the Gospel, I can never ever forget the tragedy that we as preachers of the Gospel have failed the Gospel in South Africa.

In this regard I have to state in all honesty that the way the Gospel was preached by the churches in South Africa, could not have changed the direction of history in South Africa, least of all preventing apartheid or bringing it to an end. But because all the churches have failed, it gives us as white Christians no reason to justify ourselves as not being guilty. We should rather ask ourselves whether we as members of the churches allowed the preachers to spell out the consequences of the Gospel to us.

Considering my experiences amongst the blacks since I left Stellenbosch, I would like to point out one specific observation I have made during those years. Working and living amongst the blacks, I've learned that the essence of the ideology of apartheid was disrespect for the human dignity of blacks. It became clear to me that there was a lack of pure and clear Christian anthropology in the churches in South Africa and particularly in the DRC. Personal salvation and a sound relationship with God overruled the teachings of the DRC. But a correct relationship with God was not strongly enough related to fellow human beings, if at all.

In daily contact with the blacks, seeing and hearing how they experienced their daily lives amongst whites, made me aware of a painful phenomenon in our South African society, namely that whites in South Africa have developed a functional view of blacks. Blacks were in South Africa to be servants of the whites. They were workers who were present in our midst only to fulfill a certain function. Especially after 1948, when the concept of independent homelands for the blacks was emphasized, this functional view was emphasized more than ever before. Whites were made to believe that when they see blacks going around in the so-called white areas, they must remember that blacks were only

temporarily present in the white areas. They would all have to return to their homelands where they would be granted the opportunity to achieve all the privileges whites were enjoying. They were only in the white areas to fulfill a certain function. They were not first of all fellow human beings who also had their hopes and desires. They were only functions.

I experienced the harsh reality of this attitude the first Saturday after I had been installed as pastor of the black congregation in Mamelodi. A white man phoned me and said he had heard I was the new pastor of the black congregation. He needed my advice urgently. The black man who worked in his garden did not turn up that morning. He went to the servant's room in the backyard and discovered he had died in his sleep. He didn't know what he should do next. I advised him to contact the man's family and inform them about his death. They would come and take care of the body and arrange for the funeral. But he didn't know anything about the man's family. I advised him to contact the police in the area the man came from. They would be able to trace his family and inform them. He didn't have the slightest idea where the man came from. I asked him about the man's church affiliation. He had no idea. Never spoke to him about the church. I then asked how long was this man working for him. Forty years! I couldn't believe it. Forty years and he had never asked him about his family, where he came from, etc. I was utterly shocked.

Little did I know how many similar cases I would come across during my ministry in the black church. Women who worked in the houses of white families for thirty and more years suddenly die. These women were caring for the household, preparing the meals for the families, taking the children to school and fetching them again after school, etc. Time and again it was the same story. The employers didn't know a thing about these women. I became painfully aware of the fact that black people were seen purely as functions, implements, with whom you do not communicate. The employers have not been taught by the churches that a human being is of the utmost value in the eyes of God, that it is written on the forehead of every human being: 'Handle with care – great care. Precious but fragile ware'.

In regard to the necessity of teaching a proper Christian anthropology to the students preparing for the ministry, I would like to relate one last incident that took place at the very last moment before I finally left Stellenbosch. We were to leave on a Wednesday morning. The students at the seminary used to have a prayer meeting on Tuesday mornings. They asked me to attend the prayer meeting and at the end, just say a final farewell. I did so and once again caused unhappiness through what I said as my final greeting. I told the students that I believe white, black, coloured and Indian students will one day have to be allowed to sit together in the lecture rooms at the Seminary, listening to the theology being taught and then giving their input from the different contexts from which they came. Only then would it be possible to receive a proper and relevant theological training at the Seminary.

When we left the hall, I could sense that the lecturer who led the prayer meeting that morning was upset. While we were walking down the corridor, he asked me: '*Waarom wou jy nog vir oulaas die denke van die studente verwar?*' (Why did you still want to confuse the minds of the students?) I knew that many students had the same thoughts. I can't remember what I answered the lecturer. But what I've heard – I haven't seen it personally yet - but I've heard that at present my dream became a reality. Students of all ethnic groups in South Africa are at present attending classes at the Seminary. I believe, and hope, and even pray, that a proper Christian anthropology will thus be able to become rooted in the theological education at the Seminary. *Teaching a proper Christian anthropology to the students, preparing themselves for the ministry in the DRC is, what I believe, the main challenge for the DRC in the light of the past.*

### 3. An evaluation of my role in the development of the DRC

It's difficult to evaluate one's own role in a situation in history. As far as the history of the DRC is concerned, I doubt whether I have played any role in the development of the church. I believe the DRC wasn't really concerned about what I've done and said during my stay in Stellenbosch. I've been much more of an irritation to the church than a real threat. In this regard I have fulfilled the proverbial role of a horsefly, continuously irritating the leadership in the church.

Concerning the development in the DRC - if there was any development it has taken place since I left the church. I have had very little contact with the DRC since 1982. During the past nineteen years I received an invitation to preach in a DRC congregation in Pretoria only once and that was at an evening service where not too many people were present. The leader elder of the church council phoned me before the service and said that the church council had decided to invite me but he would like to tell me that they don't want to listen to any accusations. That was the last time I received an invitation.

What I know about development in the DRC, which I suppose implies change in the church, is that even today, pastors in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, only smile when they hear about change in the DRC. They know there is a lot of talk by the church itself about the changes that took place in the church since 1990. But to them the acid test for change in the DRC still remains the willingness of the DRC to unite with the other churches of the DRC family. Before such unification has taken place, it will be hard for the DRC to convince the other churches that there was any development in the church and that the church has thus changed.

I believe there were some developments in the beliefs and attitudes of the leadership in the church. But real change still has to come. And it will only come when the present developments in the leadership of the church have reached the ordinary members in the pews. If that will happen within the present generation of the leadership in the DRC, still remains to be seen.

Eventually, I believe, it will be sociological and psychological dynamics in society that will bring about real change in the church. Like political dynamics had to change the attitude of whites towards apartheid, likewise dynamics in society will have to bring about the changes that are necessary in the church. It seems as if in our modern world, the church doesn't have the spiritual dynamic and power anymore to change the minds and attitudes of people on social and political issues.

### 4. Conclusion

What I have learned from my own experience as a dissenter is that it is hard to struggle against the spirit of an Establishment and to make contemporaries share feelings and ideas counter to the general run of their hopes and desires. An Establishment is usually not changed by individuals but by dynamics in history and society that an Establishment can't control. Yes indeed, it is hard to swim against the flow of history. But the hardness of the way is no justification for *not* walking such a way and not trying to swim against such a flow.

When the Berlin wall came down, the venue where Checkpoint Charlie had previously been the checking point for entrance into East Berlin, was completely demolished. There was only an open space left with a small heap of stones on which a plaque was attached with a quote from the Roman historian, Titus Livius, reading: 'There are times, people and events on which and whom only history can pass final judgment. The only thing that remains to be done by the individual is to report on what he saw happening and what he

heard.' It's what I saw happening and what I heard during my years in Stellenbosch and after that I have tried to recapture in order to report on a fascinating time in my own life and in the history of our country.

In conclusion I would like to plead for tolerance from those who have shared the history I have related here today. They may or may not share my interpretation of what I experienced in Stellenbosch. It may well be that what they have seen and heard of what I have reported on, is to them totally different from my personal report on it. But I had to be honest by reminding myself that I must be free to interpret what I have experienced in my own way and not in a way that will please my friends. Perhaps the best way I can say it, is the way Frank Sinatra did it in his very popular song: 'I did it my way'.

Experience is all about seeing and hearing and one's personal response to what one sees and hears. Many others have responded in a different way than I did. But this is where tolerance is so important in human relationships and especially in the church. By being tolerant enough to allow one another to respond in a way that is true to oneself, makes life tolerable and fascinating. For such tolerance, I plead.