

The church is stepping out of the background

There is a perception that the church has been largely silent and possibly detached from the many societal and political challenges facing the people of the Nelson Mandela Bay metro and the rest of the country.

The truth is that church leadership in the metro has been engaging with the political and business leadership for a number of years. Church leaders have provided guidance and moral leadership in the background for a number of years.

Given the seeming inability of politicians to shift their focus away from power-plays within their own organisations and parliament to the detriment of service delivery, the church leadership in South Africa has produced two impressive documents – “The South Africa we Pray For” (2015) and “The SACC Unburdening Panel Process” (2016).

Here in the metro we find politicians so busy with their own personal agendas and internal party politics that they have very little time for their constituencies. To that must be added the robbing of the residents through corruption.

This election year provides the metro church leadership with the responsibility and opportunity to emerge from the shadows and to offer Bible-based solutions to the evils of poverty, inequality and unemployment.

The church already has a practical structure in place for helping to revive the social and economic fabrics of the metro – the Nehemiah Project. It is inspired by the Biblical tale of the priest and businessman Nehemiah who, from around 445 BC, led the people of Jerusalem in the rebuilding of its walls, one section at a time.

We are rebuilding the social and economic walls of the metro wards one at a time by helping and empowering civil society, business and the local political leadership to work together to provide jobs and hope for our all our citizens through sustainable economic development at micro and macro levels.

Our approach recognises that historical segregation has left many wards under-resourced. This is where partnerships with reputable NGOs, church groups and businesses help identify and address the most critical social issues – one ward at a time.

We believe that the Nehemiah model provides the necessary framework for us to work together. Firstly, it provides the compelling vision we need to unite people around an implementable and sustainable plan of action.

What has emerged from the workshops with local churches involved in outreach and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is that a great deal of the effort and resources go to waste because of duplication and little or no coordination between the organisations providing assistance. Our inability or reluctance to work together as churches and NGOs affects mostly the impoverished 50% of our population. If we have a shared vision it is much easier to focus on the critical issue of effective execution and delivery.

The church is facilitating coordination and the development of a shared vision.

Secondly, the Nehemiah project addresses the needs of the whole metro – no ward will be left out.

Thirdly, we have the tools needed to identify real needs. These tools include input from NGOs on the ground in the wards, socio-economic profiles of the wards, social mapping, and the Integrated Development Plan of the municipality.

Fourthly, collaboration and implementation are made easier when key drivers such as NGOs, infrastructure and businesses are already in place. A number of partner organisations have been identified and brought on board.

Within the church structure itself there is a campaign to encourage congregations to recognise the metro as a mission field in which there is no gap between the pulpit and the community. The five focus areas are: healing and reconciliation (healing the past and engaging the challenges of gender, ethnicity and race); the restoration of the family fabric; reversing poverty and inequality; economic transformation; and anchoring democracy, with special attention to combating corruption, maladministration and the decline of trust in public institutions.

Local government is taking note. A milestone was reached in November 2018 when a senior delegation of church leaders met with the mayor and his leadership. The outcome of the meeting was the formation of a working group to focus on behaviour at council meetings, service delivery, combating corruption, and the rollout of the Nehemiah Project.

It is important that the Church plays an ongoing role ensuring that it remains our moral compass and speaks truth to power when and where the need arises.

Through the hosting of a weekly column the Herald will make it possible for the voice of the church to be heard on a regular basis.

For more information on the Nehemiah Project please go to www.tcn.org.za

Bishop Jacob Freemantle: Methodist Church of SA (Grahamstown District)

Trevor Jennings: Transformation Christian Network