

## **The freedom to disagree**

An historic summit of religious leaders in SA was held at Rhema Church in Randburg (Johannesburg) on 13 February this year. Approximately 800 leaders from different religious persuasions met to consider ways and means of addressing and curbing abusive and illegal practices of some Christian leaders toward congregation members as reported in the CRL Rights Commission report of 2015.

The summit commenced with a welcome by Pastor Ray McCauley from Rhema who made two telling comments during his introduction. He summarised the general mood of the floor by commenting that some of the delegates seemed to him to be a bit nervous. He also made it clear to everyone, including the CRL Rights Commission, that government should follow the church and not the other way round – which was met by loud applause.

The delegates were understandably “nervous” for a number of reasons. The meeting was convened at the very short notice of two weeks. The list of invitees was also incomplete and not properly representative. The agenda and documents were only e-mailed the night before the summit. The absence of explanation as to how the summit task team had been appointed, coupled to the presence of the chairperson of the CRL Rights Commission on the stage, all added to the “nervousness”.

The Chairperson of the CRL Rights Commission, Mrs Mkhwanazi-Xaluva, then addressed the delegates in what can only be described as an adversarial manner. She challenged the delegates that unless they did the work of “proper” self-regulation, the government would step in and do the work for them.

Even though as individual Mrs Mkhwanazi-Xaluva is fully entitled to her opinion and has the right to express it, she cannot do so in her capacity as representative of a commission appointed by the state. This is what made her statement unfortunate: It exposed a very dangerous root problem, namely an attempt by government to control or regulate religious affairs.

Our constitution protects and regulates this relationship between state and church, as does the Bible in Mark 12:17, Romans 13:4 and Matthew 16:19. The state holds the “sword” of civil authority whilst the church holds the “keys” to the kingdom of heaven. The potential dangers of state interference in church affairs are numerous. Entrenched rights such as freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of association and the right to protest could be jeopardised, amongst others. An essential component of all these rights is the basic right of disagreement.

Despite gallant efforts by acting chair of the summit, Bishop Moso Sono, many delegates loudly started exercising their right to disagree by expressing their disappointment with what they saw as the unconstitutional process that led to the summit, with the comments of the CRL Chairperson, and with regard to the undemocratic process of the appointment of the task team.

After an extended time of allowing delegates to express their views freely, the floor voted in favour of breaking up into smaller groups to commence the process of much-needed dialogue in six defined areas of concern. These included matters such as creating a legal and constitutional

framework, working towards a code of conduct and best practise and starting to identify the core values in our multi-faith society.

As leaders we truly are concerned about the frequent illegal and irresponsible religious practises of some leaders that violate the rights and dignity of our people and bring the church into disrepute. These instances must be investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice. This is part of the mandate of the CRL Rights Commission. In the meanwhile we, as church leaders, owe it to the God we love and the people we serve to get our own houses in order.

In the process, in a healthy and inclusive democracy, we must protect and treasure the right to disagree, allowing everyone to express their opinions and beliefs freely. Out of respect for our fellow citizens who might not hold to our beliefs and practices, we also need to work on the manner, the how of disagreement. We simply cannot afford to lose the very freedoms that define us as a nation.

Although much work still lies ahead for us as religious leaders, the process has commenced and must continue expeditiously. We committed to this process at the summit and agreed unanimously that, in order to protect freedom of religion, the following values would be worth pursuing as we proceed: human dignity, mutual respect (including the right to disagree), humility, honesty, integrity, transparency, social justice, restitution, reparation, ubuntu, love, life and community.

We owe it to God. We owe it to our members, and we owe it to our nation. Let's attempt to agree on these core values without forfeiting the right of agreeing not to agree.

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