

Focus on cultural similarities rather than differences

In the present era our country faces a world of irony and paradox. The divide between the rich and poor has never been wider and continues to increase.

At a time when the flow of information and the ease of communication have advanced beyond our wildest imagination, understanding between different cultures has tended to be on the decline, leading to tension and conflict.

I am persuaded that, while economic factors are often at the heart of the cause of conflict, issues of culture and cultural diversity are also prominent causal factors.

In terms of good citizenship there needs to be increased recognition and respect for the cultural heritage of all the different groups that have a stake in our society. It is essentially about what each group regards as its key defining features, what it sees as the things to be proud of in its history and the factors that have shaped its current identity in a modern world.

This is largely something that must come from the group itself, and not from what others perceive or deduce about the group. It is not about political correctness or ideological rigour. It is simply about who we are, what we have been over the years and how we strive to move together towards greater social cohesion.

There needs to be greater understanding and appreciation of the ways in which these threads of cultural heritage have become woven into the complex mosaic of beliefs, attitudes, habits and practices.

As Christians we need to actively promote the notion of good citizenship as a dynamic and constantly negotiated reality in a multicultural society. This recognises that good citizenship cannot simply be about a fixed set of finite prescriptions decreed by state officials or other bodies.

At its heart, good citizenship must be about dynamic sets of values, beliefs, attitudes, habits, procedures and practices that citizens subscribe to and aspire towards.

Heritage is about group identity and is at the heart of culture. It helps us understand ourselves in relation to others in terms of similarities and differences.

It is what enables us to discern and appreciate the various strands of the rainbow nation of South Africa. It is the life story of each group and includes chapters of interaction with others.

So, when we talk of our South African heritage for instance, this would include the chapters of colonialism slavery and the segregated life that in fact constitute the embryo of such a heritage.

I recognise that such a heritage would encompass different forms of religion, language, ethics, morality, food, fashion, music, poetry and other art forms that peculiarly define what it is to be South African.

The challenge for us then becomes whether we choose to emphasise those things that separate us or those things that link us. In other words, heritage can be a double-edged sword. It can be used to justify forms of discrimination and injustice in society, or it can be used to link groups in a stable and dynamic society.

Tolerance is a major part of the foundations of good citizenship and a just society. Despite this it would be naive to assume that all groups in society are necessarily in favour of tolerance.

There will always be bias, stereotyping and prejudice, if cultural diversity is a given fact of life. Some may argue that these are negative tendencies that should be dealt with

firmly through courageous resistance. Others may argue that the way to deal with these tendencies is through altruism and self-sacrifice to benefit others.

In our country, a sense of celebration manifests itself in many ways all the time. So, we need to be alert in promoting it wherever and whenever it can be found.

It is in the enjoyment and passionate following of cricket matches between SA and Australia or rugby between SA and New Zealand or soccer between SA and Egypt, knowing that team rivalries are rooted in a heritage of past conflicts and disagreements that are far removed from sport.

Celebration can also be seen in the mixed crowds at the 1995 World Cup rugby final that captured the nation's diversity.

This is an indication that diversity must be strongly celebrated in a multicultural society for there to be peace, progress and stability. There is no guarantee that these things will fall into place, but the government does have an obligation to support and promote tolerance, liberation and celebration in a society that takes pride in being multicultural.

Finally, a word of caution for those who are Christian. The Bible reminds us in 1 Peter 3:15, "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..."

Bishop Edward Daniels: Anglican Church of SA (Port Elizabeth Diocese).