

Access to water is a shared right – and responsibility

As I write this article, our average provincial dam levels were hovering around the 50% mark for the first time this year.

We have been praying and hoping for this prolonged drought to be broken for the last few years and, if memory serves me correctly, our last flood was in 2006. Since then we have seen a steady decline in our water supply to the point where Day Zero is a real possibility and could give us the unenviable title of first city in South Africa to run out of water.

How did we get here?

Is it possible that our provincial and local leaders ignored all the warnings and signs that the so-called experts gave us? I don't think so...most people were aware that a water crisis was brewing in our province. A few weeks ago, we read about 11 000 reported water leaks in our city although I think that that figure has been revised to about 6 000. Apparently, these leaks account for 44% of our water usage!

So, what is the real problem? Is it the decreasing annual rainfall, the failing infrastructure or just plain mismanagement of water?

It is clear that our metro does not have the capacity or plan to deal with this crisis as there are significant leaks all over our city which I have seen first-hand. Some of those leaks have been reported weeks and even months ago.

Apparently, the metro just does not have the manpower, skill or finances to deal with these leaks. Serious questions have been raised about the use, misuse or non-use of funds that have been allocated to address this issue.

Our metro leadership are not the only ones to blame. We, as citizens also have to carry the blame – we are constantly crying about our human right to water, but abuse and ignore our responsibility to use water sparingly.

How many areas and homes regularly have water pipes ripped off and stolen leaving uncontrolled leaks and small streams running down our streets? There are the building and civil contractors who damage underground pipes and just don't care. Homeowners see leaks outside their gate and just don't report it.

These have become a common sight, especially in the Northern Areas where I work. There are also our more affluent areas where limited usage is just blatantly ignored and disregarded. All of us have a right to water and all of us have the responsibility to look after our water. So, all of us are to blame!

This problem is also becoming worse, especially in our poorer communities, where the water is turned off regularly sometimes for days and weeks without any warning or explanation. Any attempt from these poorer communities for some explanation is usually ignored.

Water tanks are dispatched to certain areas and many can be seen walking in the streets with five litre bottles and containers. Many can't even wash or care for their young, sick, aged or frail because of a lack of water supply.

Imagine not being able to wash and you have to go to work or attend church? Slowly, but surely, these communities are getting impatient and I can see that they are reaching the end of their tether. Their frustration is that it seems as if nobody cares about them or speaks up for them.

This is where I believe that civil society and religious leaders need to step in. We have a responsibility to address these issues on behalf of those who are marginalised. We also cannot ignore these communities and think that the problem will solve itself.

We need to realise that this is an urgent and present threat to our metro and its people. I shudder to think what will happen when some of our communities become impatient about having to queue to share water from tanks. Our leaders have to be called to account as to their water management and our citizens have to be called to account as to their water usage.

We are able to live without electricity but not water! Our water problem is getting worse and the church, religious and civil leaders have to get involved by being proactive because being reactive will be too late.

Let us not allow abnormality to be our new normal, let's not bury our heads in the sand and play the blame game! If we continue on this path, even if the rains come and our dams overflow, we will be faced with the same dire challenge in a few years because we refuse to be accountable for the one resource that sustains all life on earth, water!

Pastor Russell Viljoen from the Ebenezer North Church.