

The church is not a building – and we must do more than pray

Trevor Jennings

Those of us who lived through the struggle years will remember the vital role the church as a whole played in supporting the oppressed and bringing about the changes that led to the first democratic election in 1994.

However, to a lay person, it seems that the church leadership and clergy felt that their calling to bring about change in society was no longer relevant when the new government took over.

With a few notable exceptions, the church seemed to shift its focus internally. It was more important to grow congregation numbers and build the mega churches made so popular by the American televangelists who had become so popular locally.

Pastors have become the drawcard, rather than the Word and the difference that the members of a congregation make in the lives of others.

Morality and the interests of society outside of the church buildings and structure were left up to the politicians – and they have been more than happy to fill the vacuum.

The church, therefore, should accept some of the responsibility of the moral failure of those in government who have stolen billions from the poor and needy.

Without the evil of corruption at all levels of government, much more progress would have been made in overcoming the triple challenge of inequality, poverty and unemployment.

It must be added that the private sector is also part of the problem. Bribery and corruption do not happen in isolation – there must be two parties, at least.

Some company owners and shareholders continue to exploit workers, and profits come before sustainability and the environment.

And yet the church at large was silent – even though Proverbs 31:8-9 (NIV) tells us to “speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

To be fair, there are signs that the church is once again being steered by its moral compass. The South African Council of Churches (SACC) has been playing a more active role in civil society for some time.

Unfortunately, the need for the church to be more active in bringing about change has not been embraced at local level – again with some notable exceptions.

For the most part churches remain divided by race and class. Yes, there are the occasional attempts to bring people together, but they fizzle out as people retreat back into the perceived safety of their own buildings.

An example is vaccinations. The SACC is unequivocal in its support of vaccinations – the website encourages visitors to “roll up your sleeves” and be vaccinated.

How many pastors and/or bishops have come out publicly and encouraged their congregations to vaccinate?

Sporting codes have said they will require all spectators to show proof that they are full vaccinated before they are allowed onto the stands. For many pastors the focus is on getting as many people as possible into the building in order to top up depleted bank balances rather than the safety and health of the worshipers.

Church leaders have a responsibility to share the real science behind the vaccinations rather than blindly accepting the fake news that is so prevalent in some Christian circles.

Little progress will be made on combating inequality, poverty and unemployment for as long as the economy is subjected to lockdowns and foreign tourists are too scared to visit the country.

This brings me to my next important point as a lay person. For me, prayer is not enough.

When pastors and church leaders tell me they are going to pray about a problem, but do not have any action plans to deal with it, they lose my respect.

James 2:14 puts it succinctly: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?”

Just think what will happen if the 80% of South Africans who profess to be Christians start living their faith.

That 80% includes many who are blessed abundantly with resources, finances, and time.

1 John 3:17-18 states: “if anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

When showing our love with actions and truth it is important not to reinvent the wheel. There are numerous Christian organisations and churches which just need our support in order to expand their ministry.

Within your own congregation there will be people who are quietly getting on with God’s work. Find out who they are.

By all means pray for them – and then do something.

Start small, but start today.

Transformation Christian Network (TCN) has challenged believers to devote just one hour a month to making a difference.

Trevor Jennings is one of the founders of Transformation Christian Network