

## **Election crossroad for church, politicians and municipality**

Ed Richardson

Ward councillors – both the newly-elected and those who have been in council before – should by now be settling into their duties as public representatives.

According to the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) *Handbook for Municipal Councillors*, “Effective representation requires that the councillor knows and understands the interests of the people in their municipality.

“This means all residents in the municipality. Councillors need to have a thorough understanding and knowledge of the main issues in their municipality.

“They are the link between the public and the council and owe their primary loyalty to their public”.

What better link to the public the councillor serves than the churches in their wards?

The people who voted for them are sitting in the church pews, and it is the church leadership which has to provide support for the day-to-day challenges which face congregations.

Churches daily deal with the evils of poverty, inequality and unemployment.

Ward councillors need to be constantly reminded and updated about the challenges.

According to the Local Government in South Africa Toolbox for Local Councillors, “Communities are continuously undergoing change. They are confronted by day-to-day problems. The nature and the cause of problems also change over a period.

“Councillors have to be in touch with these changes and the needs of residents. In addition, councillors have to keep residents informed about decisions taken by council”.

There is nothing political about engaging with a democratically elected ward councillor.

Romans 13 states “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established”.

In layman’s terms, we have to work with the representative we have.

The challenges facing ward councillors are huge. Promises were made and expectations raised during electioneering, and they now have to deliver.

Delivery is, however, largely out of their hands. Councillors do not physically fill potholes or fix streetlights. They rely on municipal employees to carry out those jobs.

All councillors can do is to bring the problems to the notice of the relevant departments in the municipality and to lobby on behalf of residents.

And we all know that our municipality is largely broken due to years of political interference and mismanagement by appointees with the right contacts rather than the correct qualifications.

This is where pastors need to step up to their calling as leaders in the communities they serve.

You are in a unique position. The demotivated, disenchanted and sometimes dishonest municipal employees can be found in your churches on a Sunday, or are known to members of your congregation.

Walk with them to understand their frustrations and to help them to do their jobs properly.

1 Thessalonians 5:11: "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing".

And then hold them accountable.

Galatians 6:1-2 states "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ".

There are also more practical ways to support the people living in your church ward – the mission field at your doorstep.

The church has physical resources which the municipality has lost due to vandalism, theft and illegal occupation.

Church buildings can be used for adult education, for small businesses like sewing or appliance repairs or for workshops and meetings.

Of even more value is the skills and knowledge residing in the congregation. There will be successful businesspeople, coaches, mentors and project managers who will be happy to help the metro to achieve its potential.

Some churches are blessed with an abundance of these people. Here is an ideal opportunity to break down barriers in this, the most divided city in South Africa.

Parishioners should be encouraged to put their names forward for ward committees, which represent different sectors in communities.

Ten members are elected in each ward to assist and advise the ward councillor and increase community participation.

"They can be very useful for spreading information, assessing needs, building partnerships, consulting the community and picking up local problems with services," according to the toolbox.

The Nehemiah Vision for Nelson Mandela Bay provides the framework under which this participation between all the different stakeholders in the metro.

Its focus areas are healing and reconciliation, restoration of the family addressing inequality in health and education, tackling unemployment and poverty, economic transformation and anchoring democracy.

These are the building blocks needed to restore Nelson Mandela Bay as a metro which provides for its people and attracts the investment needed to create sustainable jobs and engender hope in our youth.

There is no time to waste. Contact your ward councillor today and invite them for coffee to discuss how your church and congregation can help them to make a difference in the lives of the people who you both serve.

And never stop praying for and with them.

**Ed Richardson for Transformation Christian Network.**