

Church should reclaim its leadership position.

It is self-evident that the people elected to steer the Nelson Mandela Bay metro have failed abysmally.

When the CEO of the local business chamber sees fit to go on radio to call on companies and residents to take ownership of their neighbourhoods because the municipality is dysfunctional then you know that the system has collapsed. The political leaders have been squabbling for power and the trappings that go with it since the local election. They have essentially not met once since then to do what they are paid to do – tackle the many challenges facing the metro.

Therefore, it is time for pastors to show leadership in civil society as well as in their congregations.

The late Christian scholar and preacher John Stott in his book "Between Two Worlds" says a preacher should stand with one foot in the ancient world of the God-revealed biblical text and with their other foot firmly planted in the modern world in which the pastor and their congregants live.

They have the responsibility to be activists in civil society. James 1:22 states "But be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

Their mandate comes from God. Christ holds the majority in the metro. The combined church has more members than the politicians have voters.

Politicians will even be members of the churches whose congregants are personally affected by the absence of service delivery.

They should be held to account. Hebrews 10:24-25 states: "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching".

Being a civic militant is not the same as being a political activist.

The World Bank defines civil society as "the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations."

This puts the church firmly in the realm of civil society.

Getting involved does not necessarily mean taking to the streets in protest against the injustices being perpetrated by the politicians. Nor does it mean establishing yet another organisation.

There are plenty of non-profit and church organisations in the metro which are already doing God's work. Without them the poor would be even worse off than they are at present.

Civic action does not just happen – it needs a leader (that's you pastor), it needs buy-in from the congregation, it needs a plan, and then it needs resources.

So, the first step is for the church leadership to establish from the people in their own church where their priorities and interests are. This can take the form of a sermon followed by a call to action, a meeting or a survey.

There are no right answers – the needs are huge.

Filling potholes blesses everyone who relies on the road for travel and commerce.

Extra lessons for students will better prepare them for jobs in a tech-heavy world. Teaching young adults to use a computer or to drive makes them more employable.

Coaching a young entrepreneur lessons their chances of failure.

Then, of course, there is the need for people to eat.

But, rather than just dishing out soup and bread, set up a kitchen where meals are prepared by the beneficiaries. They learn new skills, and gain self respect.

For some it will be their first introduction to the world of work, where one is expected to be on time and to perform certain duties – more essential life skills.

Having established where the hearts and resources of the congregation is, the next step should be to contact all the pastors of the churches in your area to establish what they are doing, or have plans to do. Then share resources in order to scale the work that is being done by building on the foundations that are already in place.

Church buildings should not stand empty six days a week barring weddings and funerals. They should be vibrant places of teaching and sharing for the rest of the time.

Another often untapped resource is the people in the congregation. There will be people with the skills, time and will to get involved.

Retired people are one group, the other being the unemployed youth. They desperately need experience to add to their CV and will benefit working with older people in order to serve others.

If there are no churches in the area which are involved in the actions identified by the congregation, the next step is to identify non-governmental organisations which are doing God's work, even if they are not faith-based. There may well be congregants who are already involved in one way or another.

Again, the idea is to build on what already exists rather than wasting time and resources duplicating it.

Where there is no suitable partner, it is then incumbent on the congregation to establish the organisation needed to deliver on the mandate revealed through prayer.

Then there is politics. Pastors need to provide guidance on how to identify candidates who are genuinely concerned about people.

Encourage civic activists in your area to stand as independents, and provide them with as much support as possible.

Voting for political parties in the hope that anything will change has been proven to be a waste of a vote that so many suffered for.

The bottom line is that we Christians have no option but to be active in civil society.

James 4:17 tells us: "So, whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

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