

How the church can empower the youth

Tukela Zamani

With youth month just behind us, it is important for us to reflect on what it means to be a young person in South Africa.

What the young people of 1976 fought and died for, how far we've come in advancing those objectives, and how we got to where we are today.

On the 16 of June in 1976 an approximated 10 000 young people from schools in Soweto took to the streets in protest the introduction of Afrikaans as a language of instruction in black schools.

Afrikaans was the language of the oppressor and the Decree of 1974 to force black schools to use it as the language of instruction sought only to produce better servants and gardeners.

When what was intended to be a peaceful protest erupted into a violent exchange of tear gas and live ammunition from the police, and stones from the young people, the protests quickly spread to townships all over the country.

On that day it became apparent to the entire world that the young people of South Africa were not just protesting the introduction of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction, but they were protesting decades of systemic inequalities, segregation, and the brutality of Apartheid.

The June 16 uprising is recognised as a turning point in the anti-apartheid movement, catalysing international condemnation and sanctions against the South African government. The young people of 1976 contributed to the eventual dismantling of apartheid and the establishment of a democratic government in 1994.

The young people who we celebrate on the 16 of June each year were primary school and high school students.

Hector Peterson, the first child to get shot and killed by the apartheid police during the uprising was 13 years old and Mbuyisa Makhubo who is seen carrying his lifeless body in the iconic image was 18.

Astonishingly, when the time to shape the South Africa that the 13- to 18-year-olds of 1976 fought and died for, youth was classified as being 18 to 35 years old.

Could this have been because those who were sitting at the decision-making table realized that if they recognised youth to be 13-to-18-years, adulthood would have to be 18 to 35, and they would have very little time left to enjoy the spoils of the newly attained democracy?

Today, we have 13- to 18-year-olds who are completely detached from all political, civic, and economic activity.

The 18- to 35-year-old so-called youth, who in other developing countries are pioneering industrial and technological innovation, are shepherded by the South African government to run spaza shops, hair salons, and grass cutting businesses.

In other developing countries this demographic is shaping progressive government policies.

In South Africa they are competing amongst each other for youth league quotas. Ultimately, we have the same people who were sitting at the decision-making table in 1994 still running the country today, and this is by their own selfish design.

We are told today that young people are not participating and adding enough value to the economy while the reality is that it was decided for them in 1994.

We are told that young people are disengaged from politics and civic activity while the reality is that they were deliberately excluded in 1994.

If that was not enough, young people are bombarded with messaging that promotes instant gratification and hyper-consumerism in the media every day.

So, young person you are on your own.

The system is not designed to favour you, but to keep you down instead.

It is therefore our responsibility to channel the spirit of the young people of 1976 and revolt against the suppressive system and usher in a new order that appreciates your energy and creativity.

This uprising will not be one of marching the streets and throwing stones.

This uprising will be one of self-empowerment through passionate and authentic activism in both the political and economic landscape.

We cannot begin to change a system until we thoroughly understand it.

The church has a role to play here by getting involved in the political education of the youth and their responsibility to vote.

Too many do not understand the power of the vote – the very thing generations who came before them fought for so long and so hard.

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