

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE LAND DEBATE

The land debates and disputes bears a long and complex history in South Africa. Louis Changuion and Bertus Steenkamp (2012) outline the evolutionary processes of the land tenure from 1671-2011. Land has become an emotive issue in postcolonial Africa, and for us in the Republic of South Africa, the emotiveness is inflated more than anywhere else. This is simply because humans develop some form of emotional attachment to the land. In 1997, Prof Takatso Mofokeng published a moving article titled Land is our mother: A Black Theology of Land. The metaphor of “mother” in the article is loaded with symbolism of how the mother is emotionally attached to the child, that she can sacrifice even her life to save the child. It is expressed in my language by the proverb: “Mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng (Mother defends the child by staving off the sharp blade or knife by her own hand). “Land is an integral part of the whole constellation of life, which cannot be separated into dichotomized compartments or spheres in the African ethical view of life” (Vellem 2016:1)

Historically, the church had been divided also on the issue of the land. This due to the reality of the church of and by the colonisers to the colonised. The mainline Christianity to a certain degree joined the civil government by dispossessing the people of their land. Some Christian denominations still own some land that was either given to them by the then government, after forced removals of the population... and the mission station acquired title deeds or were compensated for development on the land.

I propose four approaches the church should engage in when dealing with the land issue. The church cannot be detached from the real life situation. Theology must speak into the national issues such as land, environment, human dignity, prejudices etc. The first proposal is that of **ADVOCACY**. The church as a prophetic community needs to engage in a process of supporting and enabling people to express their concerns without any fear or intimidation. The dispossessed should turn to the church where they can access information and services. The church community needs to demonstrate public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy that is not biased or prejudiced. There is a need to engage activities that aim to influence decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions. As advocates, the church needs to get government to correct an unfair or harmful situation affecting people in the community. This calls for sympathetic ear on the ground. The settlement may be reached through persuasion, by forcing the dispossessor to buckle under pressure, by compromise, or through political or legal action. Bear in mind the kind of advocacy I propose can be confrontational, but conflict is usually a bad place to start. Good advocates know they must think very hard about any confrontation that's going to be necessary. That's one reason for careful planning of strategy and tactics. Even if the issue seems as clear as a bell, and your choice of actions seems just as obvious, it's a good idea to take another long, hard look.

Secondly, the church's role can be that of influencing **BILATERAL AGREEMENTS**. This is an exchange agreement between two parties in order to give each party favourable status pertaining to certain outcomes obtained from the signatories. The agreement leads to win-win situation. It is not a matter of 50/50 but a matter of restitution whereby all parties are satisfied. This is a bone of contention at the moment in political landscape (Land expropriation with or without compensation... Willing seller, willing buyer system). The influence of the church in these agreements should use the golden rule. This can only happen if the church is attuned to the current policies regarding the land. Both the government and the people should be educated on the pros and cons of land redistribution or expropriation. The church should play an influential role by guiding and enlightening the communities of what it means to occupy the land, how to utilise the land so that food security is not at risk.

Thirdly, the church should walk a journey with the parties involved towards a **CONSENSUS**. This is contributing towards amicable settlement of disputes that satisfies both parties, or where majority decisions should be respected. It is a generally accepted opinion among a group of people. It is a collective opinion - middle ground in decision making, between total assent and total disagreement. The church as the community of faith should play *paraklytos* role of prodding along the people towards a desired achievement. The church is the love of Christ incarnate.

We do not proclaim from the distance, from the security of some haven of self-righteousness, but that we come very close to the people we are inviting, in relate to them in solidarity because we are as much in need of the good news as they are (Kritzinger et al 1994:143).

The church in society is the mouthpiece of Christ, and agent of peace. This is a missiological incarnation par excellence. The church is in eschatological journey as a missional channel in the hurting world. Through proclamation, it brings liberation to the oppressed and the marginalised societies where Christ does not rule supreme. This is not the conveyance of human intellect or eloquence.

Fourthly the church can play the critical role of being part of or the facilitator of **DIALOGUE** regarding the land. Theology of dialogue or dialogical theology is introspective reflections where self-examination is deliberated to assess standing relationships with another view that may differ from one's own standpoint. Kasper (2004:35) speaks of dialogical philosophy that ends monological thinking, and contributes immensely in understanding this dialogical philosophy as:

I don't be without thou; we don't exist for ourselves; We exist with and for each other; We do not only have encounter, we are encounter, we are dialogue.

The same notion is explained by Resane (2018:4) that:

Dialogues often take the form of theological consultations, which highlight differences and seek ways of coming closer together through new understandings, reinterpretation or correction of misunderstandings, and healing of divisions. The process of discussion itself brings people closer together and helps to break down barriers in social spaces, necessitating the need for social scientists' interventions.

Dialogical tasks are carried out transparently regardless of dialogical partners' differences regarding their personalities, convictions, and/or predispositions. The participants carry different personalities and dialoguing with them may bear some dissenting ideas. It is true that

Dialogue makes participants more sympathetic to one another, even when they disagree, and assists enormously in preparing the ground for negotiation or decision-making on emotion-laden issues (Resane 2017a:204).

Consensus and mutual understanding are the goals of dialogue. The dissenting parties around the table synergize towards a unified action in order to address the situation; or clarify any misunderstanding. In theological dialogue, fragmentations, misunderstandings, and misinformation are all addressed because:

Dialogue is a special kind of discourse that enables people with different perspectives and worldviews to work together to dispel mistrust and create a climate of good faith (Resane 2016, p. 62).

Dialogue minimizes prejudice, stereotypes, and inhibitions. Theology has and is always at the center of dialogical tasks to bring harmony, peace, synergy, and stability during the civil restlessness. This is done both internally (ecclesiastically) and externally with other churches and communities, with other religions, and also with modern culture, arts and science, politics and media (Kasper 2004:176). It is a sensible endeavor to dialogue with those holding different worldviews and perspectives. "A dialogue makes sense simply because we have different experiences and concerns" (Holter in de Wit & West 2009:77).

In a nutshell, the church should become like a leaven in the dough, where it is not seen but its presence is observable through its effects. The church is the agent of peace and change. By all means possible, she needs to come closer and engage in robust debates about the ontology of the land. Playing a passive spectator role is an incarnational catastrophe and missiological imprudence. The church is the advocate for the victims of social injustice, a signatory in the bilateral agreements to uplift the disposed, a paraclete towards consensus between the warring parties, and finally a partner in dialogue for the sake of peace, understanding and stability.

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