

An Open Letter to South African Political Leaders on Occasion of the 2009 Elections

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Occasion: Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature's 4th Annual Speaker's Breakfast

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Honorable speaker of the Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature, Mrs YN Phosa. Honorable Premier of the Mpumalanga Province, Mr Thabang Makwetla. Honorable MECs. Honorable members of the Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature

Honorable leaders of all political parties in this province and beyond

Leaders of various faith communities within Mpumalanga and beyond

Residents and citizens of Mpumalanga

I bring you warm greetings, from the South African Council of Churches; its leadership and all its member churches!

I bring you warm greetings from the University of South Africa, its leadership, its management, its academics among and with whom I work daily.

My life is led straddling the world of faith and the world of the academy. I take both worlds seriously, perhaps too seriously for my health. As an academic, I try always to strive for excellence both for myself and for the colleagues I am privileged to lead in and through the UNISA Research Directorate. I consider myself a life-long student - I read and research (for) life. However, without faith, I would surely not have attempted any of the things I have been privileged to attempt, let alone make any headway in any of them. Incidentally many of the things I attempt often end, in spectacular failure, at least initially. My prayer to God is not that I be saved from failure; rather I pray daily that I be cured of the fear of failure. Yet, of all the resources, blessings and talents at my disposal I count my faith in God as key. My faith is the fuel that enables me to be and to do. It is therefore most gratifying to have been invited to make a contribution at a prayer breakfast.

It has been a longstanding dream of mine, to have breakfast in this most envied, most self-aware and arguably the best marketed of all provinces in our country. All South Africans know how to say: 'Si vuth'umlilo eMpumalanga'! We are all envious of those of you who live in this beautiful paradise called Mpumalanga. We are thankful to the government and especially all the political parties who make up the Mpumalanga provincial legislature for the custodianship they have jointly taken in managing and leading this beautiful province; not only for the past five years, but ever since the dawn of the democratic era.

2. ON THE CONCEPT OF A PRAYER BREAKFAST

Honorable Madame Speaker, Mrs Phosa, allow me to personally thank you, not only for inviting me, but for originating and giving effect to the concept of a prayer breakfast. It is, in my view, an inspired concept. The concept document on the prayer breakfast describes it as ‘a global phenomenon embraced and practiced by many governments, non-governmental organizations and to a certain extent by private sector organizations ... an idea and practice commonly found in democracies that have a fundamental commitment to religious and spiritual values ...’. I wish this was only true! While a feature of the offices of some political leaders in this country and elsewhere, prayer breakfasts are neither common nor regular events in the annual diaries of legislatures. The language of prayer is neither the major nor the preferred language of legislators and legislatures. It is often felt and often implied – even here in our own country that the language of prayer is somewhat misplaced in the corridors of state power and unwanted in the chambers where laws are made. The language of prayer is often thought to belong to the realm of the impractical and therefore unsuited for the hard and pragmatic world of politics. Indeed, we have observed, in some political quarters a palpable shyness – an ideological embarrassment and uneasiness – with and about prayer.

So; I put it to you, Honorable Madame speaker, that contrary to your concept document’s enthusiasm about prayer as part and parcel of formal politics, I believe the opposite to be true. I think therefore that your deliberate insertion of interfaith prayer into the business of legislating and legislature is a lot more unique, brave and innovative than you give yourself credit for. Indeed, I wish to argue, that the introduction of the language of prayer into the heart of the business of lawmaking is subversive. In modern liberal democracies, such as ours, prayer is, almost by definition, a private and even individualist matter. There is therefore nothing usual about a ‘public prayer breakfast’.

But what you are doing is visionary. What you are doing resonates with the experiences of millions of South Africans, whose belief in the power of prayer is unshakeable. Prayer is at once the most common and the most powerful tool available to millions of citizens in this country. It is common because one needs neither license nor qualification to access it. Unlike some of the services we are promised by governments and political parties, prayer is something we do not have to queue for, pay a bribe for, make an appointment for, submit an application for, be wait-listed for or be investigated for! But prayer is no lame activity. Prayer is the space where humans connect with the divine; it is a powerful fountain of self-discovery, positive attitude and progressive action. Prayer is the tool – in some cases the only tool - that makes people believe that they too matter and they too can! Rather than an escape from reality, prayer is the necessary prelude, the necessary precondition to purposeful attitude and purposeful action.

Inspired by your innovative, brave and creative tradition of a public prayer breakfast, I decided to write an open letter to South African political leaders on occasion of the 2009 elections.

3. AN OPEN LETTER TO SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL LEADERS

Let me first assure the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), that contrary to a fairly recent experience, my open letter will not lead to the formation of the hundred and forty fifth political party in the country. Let me also assure you that this letter is not a pretext to yet another church man seeking space and fortune in South African party politics. Nor is this open letter a pretext for endorsing any particular political party or political leader in this country at this time. Unlike Helen Zille's recent 'Open Letter to Jacob Zuma', this is not an open letter to any single political leader, but to all of you, Helen Zille included.

Indeed, I wish to hasten to add that, my letter is no occasion for massaging the many and considerable political egos that occupy our political landscape. It does not stem from any undying or unconditional faith in politics, political parties or political leaders. As a Christian and as an African, I regard politics as an important arena where we contest, imagine, deconstruct and construct, shape and reshape the crucial issues relating to our coexistence in this country, in this world at this time. In this sense, the cliché that says, politics are far too important to be left entirely to politicians, is most correct. And yet, I do not put my ultimate faith in any political system, political party or political leader, now, here or anywhere. All political parties, all political leaders and all political systems are temporary custodians and mere tools in our hands and ultimately in the hands of God. Though I should be delighted to see many Christians approaching and evaluating politics from the point of view of their faith; I shall not put my faith even in those political leaders who are Christian, including those who trade on their *Christianness*.

In and of itself, the presence of priests in political parties - regardless of whether that priest is called Kenneth Meshoe, Mvume Dandala or Jacob Zuma - adds no automatic and no special value to the politics of our country.

I am worried that given the perceptions of glamour, power and wealth associated with politics for a long time, and certainly over the past fifteen years, our country's political arena has become a magnet for all manner of people whose ambition is to use politics as the shortcut to fame and influence; those whose main (if not only) interest is their own ascendancy and their own acquisition of power for themselves.

As a proud South African, who miraculously survived the 1976 uprisings, I now am concerned about the prospects of this beautiful country whose birth I saw as a young adult in 1994. I worry essentially, not about the conduct of any single political party; I worry about the nature of politics emerging in my beloved country. Increasingly, ours have become what French scholar, Jean-Francois Bayart has termed, *la politique du ventre* 'the politics of the stomach'. We have witnessed with shock and horror as the politics of the stomach played themselves out in our parliament through the practice of floor-crossing and its consequences. It is my suspicion that these politics of the stomach may, until now, constitute the only possible explanation, as to why, one of the first acts of our first democratic government was to negotiate and eventually sign the arms deal. My suspicions can of course be laid to rest if our next president will institute the commission of inquiry on the arms deal, which so many of us, have called for.

In the battle for the hearts and souls of South Africans that comes with election contests, I have observed the ascendancy of a culture of 'disgrace politics' rather than the 'politics of affirmation'. In cahoots with certain elements in the media we have observed how you have effected what some have called the *tabloidization* of South African politics. Week in and week out, we have been served dirt upon dirt, scandal upon scandal about those politicians and those political parties regarded as rivals earmarked for 'elimination by disgrace'. In keeping with the culture of disgrace politics, we have seen journalists and politicians abandon all ethics and all manner of political etiquette in pursuit of the warped 'glory' that comes with the downfall of a disgraced political opponent. I have observed and listened with dismay as you denigrate, despise and insult one another under the pretext that this is robust politics. Together with many fellow South Africans, I refuse to accept the politics of disgrace as the politics that define my country and my people. It is possible to conduct politics on the basis of respect, affirmation and persuasion. I therefore call on you all to abandon the path of disgrace politics and begin now to charter a path of politics based not merely on affirmation but based on persuasion.

I lose sleep at night over the increment of incendiary and irresponsible language – from the leaders of virtually all of the so-called major political parties - in the conduct of politics in our country. I am unable to understand the logic that informs such recklessness. There is no doubt in my mind that South Africans will neither be swayed nor cowed by reckless and irresponsible language. But it concerns me that such language has the potential to plunge our country into the abyss of strife and violence. Indeed such language remains the greatest single threat to peaceful and successful elections in 2009. I am horrified that, when incidences of violence and intolerance do occur, the responses of some of our political leaders have been most unhelpful. Invariably, some leaders appear adept at seeing such incidences either as occasions for or part and parcel of their electioneering. A political incidence of disruption and violence has no place in the election campaigning of democratic political parties. Together with millions other South Africans, I have been horrified at how some political leaders, following incidences of violence and intolerance, move swiftly to apportion blame proportionally or wholly to the supporters of the other party. My heart is saddened by the apparent lack of will by political leaders, to condemn unequivocally all incidents of political intolerance.

I note with concern the extent to which the poor and the vulnerable are slowly receding from the radars of your political programmes and manifestos. Many of you appear to speak about poverty as if it exists on its own; as if it is not 'flesh and blood' persons who are actually poor. Others among you, even suggest, perhaps not in so many words, that the poor are lazy and dependent so that the function of government and your parties is simply to cure the people of sloth and dependency.

I have also listened with shock to some clever statistical argumentation that suggests that there has been a decline of poverty – defined in all sorts of interesting but unhelpful ways - and unemployment. Such arguments, while cloaked in shades of scientific objectivity also veer towards the denial of the reality of poverty among the people of this land. Indeed I have often been worried that our political parties seem keen to eliminate the poor rather than eliminate poverty.

Having read almost all of the political manifestos from all of the political parties, I am almost sure that few South Africans will use them as guidelines for their voting choices. Replete with policy-speak, South African high English, political clichés, economic jargon and long-winded wordiness, many of these documents are quite simply unreadable. In an era of mobile, video and internet technology, I am a little surprised that most political manifestos are not only hard to come by, but they appear mainly in one mode. Many of these documents appear designed to mystify rather than clarify.

In these elections, South Africans are looking not only for clever political programmes, they are also crying out for leadership. Almost all of you, the newly formed parties included, appear to operate on and around the notion of a single and strong leader – who will become not only the face but the father and (in a few cases) the mother of the party. Such leaders are often artificially ‘imbued’ with all sorts of moral and superhuman qualities. But this model of leadership has not been very successful. Indeed it is this model of leadership that is responsible for the sorry state of our politics – ruling party and opposition party politics. What did the humble leader do? What happened to communal leadership? What happened to servant leadership? What happened to *ubuntu* leadership?

I have heard in recent days much talk about morality and moral leadership. But I have seen and heard little substantiation of these notions. South Africans will not be misled, again! with false, narrow and individualistic notions about morality and sin! They will not be distracted by clever decoys and red herring. South Africans want to experience the moral stature of your structures, policies, processes and your collective leadership. When rural children pillage cow dung in order to find food therein – that is a moral issue. When people living with the HI virus die needlessly and prematurely because of political bungling and lack of will that leads to the unavailability of ARVs; that is a moral issue. When women are raped; battered and killed with impunity; that is a matter of morality. When South Africans cannot sleep in peace in their own homes, for fear that criminals can come in plunder, rape and kill; it is a moral issue. When some become filthy rich and do so overnight, while millions are still waiting to cash the 1994 cheque of democracy; that is a moral issue. When the burden of caring for the poor is increasingly being shifted to the poor themselves; that is a moral issue. This is what South Africans understand about morality.

I know that South Africans will vote some of you into power on April 22nd this year. Please do not misread the meaning of this. If South Africans vote any of you and your parties into power, they will not be giving you a blank cheque; they will simply be entrusting you, in the most provisional manner possible, with a temporary and conditional sub-letting permit, from one set of tenants to another, in order for you to become the political custodians of this beautiful southern most tip of the African continent. Please do not play games with the dreams and hopes of South Africans.