

A year of listening, learning and standing together

Danie Mouton

For the Nelson Mandela Bay Church Leaders this past year has been one of deep listening and bold engagement.

It has also been a year shaped by one simple belief: God is active, loving, and present in this city, and God calls us to stand with the vulnerable and walk with those who hold power.

The churches in our network are different in size, tradition and style. But we are journeying together because we share a covenant of social impact.

We believe that human dignity matters.

Poverty matters.

Jobs matter.

Inequality matters.

And because these things matter to God, they must matter to us.

This is why churches cannot turn away from the problems in our metro.

When we step into public life, we do so not to promote ourselves, but because God's heart turns toward those who suffer.

This past year, that calling led us into four important engagements.

Our first major engagement was the Citywide Dialogue. We listened to real changemakers.

In March, the Church Leader Network invited leaders from eight different sectors into a citywide dialogue.

These sectors included agriculture, business, NGOs, youth groups, sport, media and of course the church. Dr Braam Hanekom from the Centre for Public Theology helped guide the process.

Leaders who have worked for years in the trenches of our city – people who fix problems, not just talk about them – helped us identify the root causes of Nelson Mandela Bay's systemic failures.

Four broad issues emerged clearly: Youth, safety and security, employment, and local government performance.

We formed action teams with proven changemakers to take the process forward. It reminded us again that God often works through ordinary people who refuse to give up.

Another big step this year was formal metro-wide community engagements.

Church leaders spent time listening to ordinary residents in community meetings in New Brighton, Motherwell, KwaZakhele, Algoa Park, Kariega and Charlo.

We discovered what we share.

We learned that despite our different races, languages, incomes and histories, we share far more than we sometimes think.

Most people in this metro hold deeply Christian values – even if they express them in diverse ways.

We honour hard work. We care about honesty and good manners. We want to raise our children well. We want to live in safety and dignity. We want opportunities, not handouts.

People told us openly how years of poor governance and collapsing services have harmed them.

Many feel robbed of their dignity and tired of empty promises.

A striking theme in every conversation was accountability. Residents want politicians to serve the people – not themselves.

They expressed anger at corruption and the misuse of public resources.

A further venture was a difficult conversation with the Eastern-Cape premier and the metro's executive mayor.

Church Leaders took a bold step when we wrote a letter to President Cyril Ramaphosa. It was a desperate plea about the dire state of our municipality.

That letter led to a meeting with the executive mayor, Babalwa Lobishe, and Eastern Cape Premier Oscar Mabuyane.

Unfortunately, the conversation left us deeply concerned. We felt the leaders fatally underestimate the seriousness of the crisis in the metro.

There was no recognition of gangs infiltrating the city's systems, the collapse of management due to cadre deployment and political infighting, the failure to secure essential infrastructure, the under-resourced metro police, or the economic risks facing our manufacturing industries. These issues determine whether our city can survive.

Although churches are not political, we left the meeting convinced that we must educate our congregations about the importance and power of their vote.

We cannot tell people who to vote for, but we can help them to be responsible citizens.

In December we joined the NMB Civic Coalition to engaged with Cooperative Governance (COGTA) minister, Velenkosini Hlabisa.

COGTA had announced yet another section 154(1) intervention in the metro, the fourth since 2011.

We expressed deep concern. These interventions come and go, leaving no meaningful change behind.

What our city needs is not another quick fix. It needs a holistic, systemic approach: identify root causes, design a clear strategy, and implement real action steps. Without this, we will continue to circle the same drain.

Through all these engagements, we found strength not in ourselves but in God's character.

God is active. God is loving. God is present. God is just.

This is the energy that keeps us going when progress feels slow. This is the reason we continue to listen, to speak up, and to work with others for the common good.

As we look toward the new year, our prayer is simple: May the God - who loves this city more than we ever can - give us courage, wisdom and hope, so that Nelson Mandela Bay may flourish again.

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