

PRESENTATION IN RESPONSE TO PROF ROBERT MEAGHER ON WAR AND MORAL INJURY

Let me firstly **introduce myself** - not only for good manners' sake, but I learned from the distinguished German theologian Jürgen Moltmann that people not only listen to WHAT you say (the content), they also listen to WHO the person is: who is saying that?

I am Willem Boshoff, a **full time minister** of the Dutch Reformed Church Queenswood, Pretoria. I also served in Louis Trichardt in the Limpopo province and in Marondera in Zimbabwe. I am 59 years old, in other words I have served in full time ministry in the Dutch Reformed Church for 35 years now.

I did my **national service** as a conscript in 1987-1988 and joined the SA army on a short term basis for another 4 months, while waiting for an employment permit from Zimbabwe Home Affairs. After high school I studied at the University of Pretoria for 7 years, so I did my national service as a chaplain, not as a 17 year old, but as a **married man of 24 years old**, with 3 university degrees and a post-graduate diploma behind my name. This is important for our discussion, because my military training was not as a combat soldier. My mates and I were prepared for 4 months, to serve as **chaplains**. We did a shortened basic training and a shortened leadership course. Shortly after Easter of 1987, I started working as a chaplain in the SA army, with the rank of second lieutenant, wearing the purple beret of the chaplaincy.

In preparing for this conference, I realized I am the only conscript of the Old South Africa participating. I couldn't rely on **my own experiences only**, so I talked to a number of people about their time as national servicemen. Of course that system ended about 30 years ago in the early 1990's, which means the youngest conscripts are now almost 50 years old. A lot of dust had to be blown off, 30 years later...

The **first impression** is that, 30 years later, things are **not neatly sorted out** and put to bed, so to speak, in the hearts and minds of our generation.

We were **trained to block things out**, not to talk about it. It started with our letters to our loved ones. All national servicemen were told not to give any details of their whereabouts or names of officers in their letters to their loved ones, because the letters were read and censored. An individual, for example, who wrote jokingly that the army was much like a circus, equally many clowns, but many more tents, was kicked off a leadership course immediately! In other words, your starting point, after a traumatic experience, was to block things out and not speak about it, not even in a letter to loved ones. Unfortunately, things that were blocked out, remain in the sub-consciousness and will continue to haunt you, even decades later. One person said to me

his wife sometimes has to duck and dive in the middle of the night, even to this day, when he still fights his war in his nightmares.

This **conference serves a purpose**, I think, because experiences of the 1970's and 1980's live on in the hearts and minds and spirits of men now 60 or 70 years old. I also think "moral injury" is a very useful conceptual tool to get a handle on what is going on in our spirit.

Let me hasten to say that **not all experiences were negative**. There was much to enjoy. For many it was an adventure and a transition to manhood; leaving your mothers nest and coming into your own in a world of men. Nowadays there are reunions taking place – 40 year or 50 year reunions of men who suffered together during their basic training, or in combat, and as a result became lifelong friends.

You were also somewhat of a **hero**. Not only your family, but the community went to train stations to see off the boys going to report for national service.

The talk was how these **boys would come back as men** a few months later. They were fit and strong. The girls admired their toned muscles and healthy tanned skins. They always came to church in uniform and their mothers were so proud!

In the circles where I grew up, there were **no questions** about the **validity of our Border War**. Both the USSR and Communist China were very active in Africa, expanding their spheres of influence. That was the perceived threat and that was what we were fighting against. We counted ourselves with the free world and were willing to defend that freedom.

The SA Army also did good work through their communication operations, for example they set up clinics and sent national service doctors to remote villages for 2 years, teachers in uniform taught in rural black schools, many agriculture projects were set up or supported, etc.

But the point remains: despite the positive personal experiences, the damage of the Border War of the 1960's – 1990's live on.

I want to **pause for a moment** and **broaden the scope** of this conference. Not only the "diensplig" generation is involved.

I would like to add three (maybe four) groups to the conscript generation:

1. The **men and women in uniform**, who were not conscripts, but **professionals in uniform in the old order** South Africa. In my research for a PhD, they were identified as the group that suffered the most intense personal losses. Many had to cut short their careers. Many individuals who had a proud, decorated career, today find themselves in a space where their proud careers are demonized.

“How could you...???”

Many of these individuals live with emotional and spiritual scars, because of what they or their colleagues have done in war, because of their training for warfare, because of the gruesome scenes they have witnessed, because of the constant danger and fear they had to face.

2. **Children and close family of all men and women in uniform**, both professionals and national servicemen. As children they identified with the battles their parents fought. When we talk about possible moral injury, it would be a mistake to leave them out of the equation. Military people look back and notice the difference between children old enough to internalize their parents’ war, vs those who were not. Robert mentioned that moral injury can be passed on from one generation to the next and I agree.
3. And then I want to add one more item, because we talk about moral injury and strategies to possibly heal that injury. That is a present day dilemma in South Africa: the **high incidence of violent crime**. Allow me a minute to explain:

In crime rate statistics, SA rates **third** in the world, behind Venezuela and Papua New Guinea only.

In 2021 we recorded **76,86 crime incidences per 100 000** of the population.

Plus-minus 25 000 people are murdered each year. That is 68 per day. (SAPS statistics 2021/22). Your chance is one in 3 000 to be murdered. Add to that almost as many attempted murders, and your chance to end up in a life threatening situation is one in 1 500.

The statistic for assault with the intent to inflict grievous bodily harm is in the order of 180 000 cases per year. Your chance is one in 350 to be attacked and assaulted in a serious way.

The question is: **How do good people react** and live their lives in a society like that? The police and the state security systems have failed us. So, their only option is to take personal responsibility for their personal safety.

I know of people who are armed all day, every day. Civilians know they are not safe and they have to protect themselves and their families. Many civilian people in SA today have taken the same decision as the convoy driver, called “Sally” in Robert Meagher’s presentation. They haven’t killed. They haven’t been attacked. But they have taken that decision and they have probably rehearsed it in their heads many times: They will shoot to kill, in order to protect themselves and their loved ones. They have crossed that line. They have broken the biggest moral taboo one can break. They are willing to kill.

They are **morally injured too**. Politicians often talk of “the war on crime”. It is a war, fought not only by the SAPS, but also by civilians and civil institutions. Civilians have been drawn into a war.

Then, lastly, as an afterthought, I also have a question about the very **realistic computer war games**. People who often play those games can only win if they kill off the enemy. I know it is a virtual reality, but I still think the question needs to be asked. Don't players condition themselves to kill? I leave it there...

I think in our context we need to **acknowledge** this, and in our discussion **include morally injured civilians** to the morally injured veterans who served in different colours of uniforms.

But let's get back to the national servicemen of 30-60 years ago and the baggage they still carry.

Many still **react to certain impulses**.

One friend tells me his daughter laughs at him every time he jerks with fright, even today when he hears **a sound** that reminds him of a land mine explosion. His task as a national serviceman was to sweep rural farm roads in the Limpopo Valley, where there were quite a few farmers killed by land mines at the time.

Others react instinctively to the **smell** of blood or gun fire; **images** related to images of the enemy or a battle field.

In SA not many war movies are made, as in the USA, but **many books** were published the past 30 or so years about the Border War: some serious soul searching, some jokes and funny stories, some full of bitterness and others light-hearted.

In the recent past the **remains of fallen soldiers** was dug out in Angola and re-buried in South Africa. A relative of mine was deeply involved in that. It was a deeply emotional process for the families involved.

Expeditions of retired soldiers visited old skirmishes sites in Namibia and Angola and met the local people, decades after the war ended, to get closure for themselves. Reports of those pilgrimages were published in news papers.

There is no doubt in my mind that there is a lot of **unfinished business** because of our Border War. Men have nightmares, relationship problems, problems with anxiety and depression, etc.

My **own involvement** as a chaplain was to preach the gospel, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Our senior chaplain was very clear about that. But we also did our bit to **legitimize our war** and paint a picture of a good and a just war. The communist party and black liberation movements were banned and illegal at the time. Liberation theology and black churches became the vehicles of resistance to the old regime and we confronted and rejected that political theology and its connections with communism.

I was **not aware** that the Iron Curtain was about to be dismantled and that the old school communism was about to collapse and therefore not be a threat to us any longer. The fall of the Berlin Wall shortly after I completed my 2 years came as a complete surprise and I also didn't understand the significance thereof. We were young and naïve, like all conscripts.

Someone said this week: "I saw many bodies of dead terrorists. I had no sympathy. We actually celebrated. I didn't recognize the image of God in them." As a national service chaplain, I was not equipped to recognize the moral injury, let alone intervene and help. The help veterans received, was mostly from their buddies who understood their situation, often with the aid of enough brandy and Coke.

I did my **Border duties**, not on SWA northern border as most others, but on the **Mozambique border**, a small strip of land south of the Kruger National Park and north of Swaziland. The border was secured by an **electric fence** and patrolled by the SA army. I never witnessed killing, but I saw the bodies of under-fed Mozambiquans under that fence, because it was lethal. Those were desperate, hungry civilians, not "the enemy". There were so called "guides", who had a thriving business of helping Moz people to cross the border illegally, just a few km from the border post.

During **dark, overcast nights or during new moon** there were always illegal crossings, either by cutting trees and letting it fall on the fence, or by creating a tunnel underneath and lifting the wires with forked sticks. I heard the stories of Moz mothers with babies on their backs, who outsprinted our young soldiers to escape to the paradise of food and job opportunities on our side of the border. Why was this problem confronted with military force?

I had the opportunity to raise the question about that lethal electric fence at the general's order group.

In conclusion: To have practical relevance, we have to think of **ways to treat or heal moral injury**.

I am a minister of religion. Therefore my first question is **what the church can do**? And frankly, if the church (DRC) doesn't do anything about the dilemma, no one will. I must add I do not think of the church in its synods or important meetings, but of the church as local congregations.

I want to suggest a number of practical interventions:

1. **Leadership.** Everything stands or falls with a leadership that has the courage to re-open a conversation and lead congregations in collective mourning of our collective war

burdens. This workshop might provide an impetus towards that end. Leaders need to be sensitized and activated to do the hard work of grief themselves.

2. Deliberately use moments of **confession of guilt and sin in our worship services**. A worship service is a safe space (holding environment). You can allow yourself to be dependent, vulnerable, weak in that space. There are not many such safe spaces where you can deal with the darkness, evil, confusion, bewilderment within yourself. You can dare to trust God and trust your brothers and sisters in faith with your inner secrets. Forgiveness is a gift from God. I heard a testimony this week from a veteran who said he eventually found peace in God's forgiving grace.
3. **Church music**. Prof JJ Hamman of Princeton University asked the question: "How can you have liturgical integrity, if your music does not speak to the sorrow and uncertainty your Gospel community is experiencing?" We need music and songs that can carry disappointment, grief, tears, disillusionment.
4. Make use of the **Biblical lament**: the book of Lamentations, and the large number of laments in the Psalter. The raw and real emotions, the political incorrect and theological incorrect utterances can help us to be more honest. It can help us with the vocabulary of loss and sadness and grief.
5. **Pastoral care**. I don't believe that pastoral care is a professional ministry. I believe that in a healthy congregation everyone cares for everyone. Leaders can set the example to engage in honest conversations, re-open a forgotten conversation, hopefully push through to life-giving and new identity forming conversations. R Meagher said it: "...listen long and hard."
6. **Rituals**. We don't have community rituals to mark the end of war, or the healing of moral injury. We need to be creative. R Meagher pointed out that military parades are not helpful. I suggest we re-visit Holy Communion – it speaks of sorrow and death. We need new ways to make real the connection between our wounds and the wounds of the Lord. The crucified God does not shy away from insults, pain, agony, blood and death. Jesus is the Man of Sorrows, familiar with suffering. We need to find healing through His wounds.

