

Dennis, P, Mlotshwa, T & Mukuka, G (eds) 1999 – The Casspir & the Cross: Voices of Black Clergy in the Natal Midlands

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Reviewer: Rev M J Manala

This publication represents the results of a creative venture by the Oral History Project of the School of Theology, University of Natal, which started in 1994. The aim of the project, namely to retrieve silenced memories of Christian communities that had suffered under apartheid, has been achieved, bringing a new and more reliable perspective into South African Christian church history. African ministers' reactions to the apartheid policies of the state and the effect of these on churches they served in the Natal Midlands from the accession of National Party rule in 1948 until the dawn of democracy in 1994, are recorded in the book. 34 persons, 32 of whom are ministers of religion, 1 a prophetess and 1 a minister's relative, who worked in seven mainline and ten African-initiated churches during the said turbulent times, were reportedly interviewed intensively.

That gives the publication a great measure of originality and credibility, more especially because most interviewees were interviewed in Zulu, which is their mother tongue. No claim is however made by the editors that the publication is untainted by artificiality, as that would not be truthful. The interviews are indeed classified into artificial groupings and some parts have been edited to ensure legibility and intelligibility. The importance of the publication resides therein that it brings to light hidden feelings and experiences of the clergy who were directly or indirectly involved in or affected by the anti-apartheid struggle.

The context in which violent acts took place, is well-sketched, with a list of interviewees, abbreviations of organisations, churches, institutions and a historical synopsis highlighting main figures, events, and important relevant institutions between 1948 and 1994.

Chapters one and two highlight the discrimination which was observed and experienced in concrete life situations, for example at home and in the workplace, and its negative effect on church life and work, both spiritually and financially. The Natal Midlands ministers also stress the significance of one of the important pillars of apartheid, namely the Group Areas Act, which literally tore communities and the church apart. Forced removals as recounted in this book are presented in such scintillating terms that a vivid picture of the pain and suffering inflicted upon the people and on the church, both as a community and as an institution, is given. It is interesting but disturbing to also read about discrimination in the church, manifested in structural settings like separate theological training colleges, disparity in stipends, inequality in housing and living conditions. That situation, it is rightly pointed out, unfortunately weakened the church's witness against the state's institutionalised discrimination.

Chapter three concerns attempts by black ministers, later also including lay church members, to organise themselves in forums aimed at uniting black ministers and members against church discrimination and oppression practised by the white section of church leadership and membership. It is important to note that these forums were deliberately designed to exclude white members and that they contributed towards bringing black ministers into leadership positions in different churches and toppling white supremacist policies, actions and structures. The purpose of forming these forums was therefore to overcome the situation in which whites controlled all institutions and took decisions affecting the lives of black people in a way that disadvantaged them.

Chapter four deals with resistance and protest politics and actions precipitated and perpetuated by the process by which the pulpit and church programmes were engaged in inciting people to revolt against apartheid. The active involvement of the church in the struggle against apartheid would, as could be expected, bear serious consequences for the church and more especially for the clergy. It indeed led to more arrests and banning of the involved clergy and Christian organisations. The arrests ironically also intensified commitment and determination to fight against apartheid. Resistance was later to extend to all areas of life: the civic, labour, education, training. The phenomenon of informers and infiltration as a means of destabilising political dissent and strengthening the state's ruling power is recorded in interviews. Such a situation could only result in mistrust, which later led to horrendous black-on-black killings, which later became commonplace. The situation was exploited by the faceless so-called third force to perpetuate violence and destabilise attempts at establishing and maintaining peace. Some forces preyed on division, which fanned more conflicts.

Political strife and hostilities affected church worship and activities adversely in some areas in the Natal Midlands. During those violent times many people, including two ministers of religion, reportedly died in the Imbali area. The situation was exacerbated by the animosity caused also by faction fights. It is interesting to note that ministers in those areas took seriously and fearlessly their prophetic task. We are told they played the role of uniting the people by offering their services to all without discrimination. They also report about meetings convened to resolve differences, meetings which were unfortunately often disrupted by the police who always found reason to disperse them, as well as by some young people who had the cheek to declare certain people unwanted and expel them from their areas. No-go areas became the order of the day. Such a situation of intense enmity and violence fanned by warring parties and the supposed-to-be peacemakers, the police, could only lead to untold misery and further death as it did, necessitating countless political funerals which reportedly raised emotions to dangerously high levels.

It is amazing to realise, through the stories of the interviewed ministers, just how one thing led to another. Another problematic phenomenon alluded to, is the one concerning refugees who flocked to churches in the areas under discussion. Noteworthy about the refugee question is the lack of co-operation some refugee groups displayed, expressed also in their refusal to leave from the African Congregational Church even after other refugees had left churches in which they had found accommodation, only to bow to the Natal Council of Churches' command.

The sixth chapter highlights a healthy mixture of aspirations, patience, impatience and an experience of conversion from race-based hatred to race-blind all-conquering love and service. It highlights aspirations for the development of new attitudes, aimed at promoting active participation of all people in the reconstruction and development of the apartheid- and violence-destroyed country, in ecumenism. A further recorded ingredient of the future vision, is that of patient engagement in the process of educating communities about apartheid to preclude the possibility of having formerly oppressed people themselves become oppressors. The negative aspect, namely impatience and despondence about unfulfilled promises and lack of substantial change, is an important element which is introduced to interact with the above-mentioned positive ingredients in order to generate a realistic programme for a meaningful future and practical national living. Also shared, in grand style, is Fr B Mngomezulu's own experience of conversion from race-based hatred to race-blind all-conquering love and service and the need for such a conversion in many South Africans. This could help to seal our nation building process and to ensure its success.

After serious reading and reflection, it became clear to me that this publication represents an important contribution in a country in which facts have often been distorted by biased perceptions. The existential perspective of pastors who were directly involved and affected brings an important empirical

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dimension to the birth of our new history. The value of the information compiled in this book resides therein that editors attempted as far as is humanly possible to compile the information as raw as possible. Of importance is also the fact that differing views and perspectives of interviewees seen also in the light of their different church traditions come out clearly. This publication will without doubt form an important part of every caring citizen's bookshelf. It is highly recommended for people interested in the South African nation building and healing process on the way towards a common nationhood.
