

WITNESS
20.07.23

Passion for uni

What would happen if all Christians spoke with one voice?

PHILIPPE DENIS

I was recently in Geneva. I went to see Jerry Pillay, an old friend and colleague, who became the general secretary of the World Council of Churches a few months ago.

His office is on the first floor of a vast building embedded in a complex called the Ecumenical Centre on top of a hill overhanging the Lake of Geneva.

"You know what I am doing?" he told me. "I try to get the leaders of the Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox churches to speak to each other." Not an easy task when one knows how bellicose Cyril, the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow, a close ally of President Putin, has been since the start of the war in February 2022.

But that is Jerry's job. The WCC's task is to foster unity among the Christian churches which are historically divided.

Virtually all the mainline Protestant churches, the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches and a certain number of Pentecostal churches are member churches.

The Roman Catholic Church is not, but participates in the activities of a few joint committees. The WCC is a world body. In South Africa we

have the equivalent at national level, with the South African Council of Churches, at the provincial level, with, in our province for example, the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council, and at the local level with ministers, fraternal.

This made me think of a past which we tend to forget.

In the late 1980s, one could see Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist and other church leaders marching in the streets of Durban to denounce the injustice and the brutality of the apartheid regime.

The WCC was a thorn in the side of the white government.

In 1969, it created a huge controversy by deciding to fund, through its programme to combat racism, the humanitarian activities of the liberation movements in South Africa and elsewhere. In those days the churches, or at least some of them, formed a coalition and it is no exaggeration to say that they had an impact.

The proof is that the Security Branch, out of frustration, felt the need to bomb the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches and of the Southern African Catholic Bishop's Conference in 1988.

And today? I am one of those

who think that we are confronted, in South Africa, by a crisis of the same amplitude as the one we faced in the years of apartheid.

It is, however, of a different nature. The enemy 40 years ago was the state which used violence to maintain an unjust regime. Today the enemy is multifaceted.

Crime has reached unprecedented levels, the infrastructure is crumbling, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening and an army of corrupt civil servants and service providers, from the top to the bottom of the social scale, lay their hands on the resources of the state, depriving the poor of the services and support they are entitled to.

The culprits are rarely sanctioned. We no longer have a single-enemy but we are nevertheless in deep crisis.

If a good number of church leaders and large sectors of the churches were united to defy the apartheid regime in the 1980s, why not today? I see two good reasons for that.

The first is that unity is a central part of the Christian message.

"That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you," Jesus is remembered for having said, according to the Gospel of John. Epistle after epistle, Paul hammered

the same message, proof, one might say, that the early Christians were fractious and needed to be called to order.

The Christian churches have been divided from the start but that is the good news, there have been attempts to reunite them all along. Christians should have a passion for unity.

In fact, not only Christians. All human beings should have a passion for unity.

More than ever an inter-religious dialogue is necessary around issues of death, life, justice and peace.

The second reason for the churches — or, if we broaden the scope, for the faith communities — to unite is that the ills that destroy our society today are all due to the complete neglect of basic moral and religious values.

Take the 10 commandments for example. One of them is: "Thou shalt not steal." Is not corruption theft? And therefore a sin?

And what about tax evasion? Why don't the churches calling a spade a spade?

Choosing one's private interest to the detriment of the common good is a sin.

Officially a majority of South Africans identify themselves as Chris-

tians and many of them are practising Christians. And yet nepotism, corruption and crime are on the rise? How do we reconcile the two?

Let us face it. The Christian churches have lost the prophetic edge they once had.

Where are the Beyers Naudé, Desmond Tutu and Denis Hurley of today?

The need for justice is the same as before. What would happen if, once again, the churches were speaking with one voice against the gradual dismantlement of the country through greed and the pursuit of individual interest?

Is it because many of our acquaintances, friends and even family members are now among those who are doing the stealing, the looting and the corruption?

Or is it because we have allowed loyalty to political friends to outweigh the teachings of our faith on care for each other especially the poor and needy?

Philippe Denis is a member of the Dominican Order. He is a recently retired professor of history of Christianity at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He currently works as a researcher at the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council.