

## **Address at the Conference of the South African Christian Leaders Assembly**

Pretoria, 8th July 2003

Master of Ceremonies,  
Distinguished Leaders of the Christian Faith,  
Delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am truly pleased to be part of this historic conference of the South African Christian Leaders Assembly (SACLA).

In 1979, when you met for the first time, almost 23 years ago, the founding philosophical basis of this organisation was partly prompted by and in response to the dehumanising and anti-Christian system of Apartheid.

This system, inhuman in conception and design, was decidedly meant to create and enforce inter-human hatred and divisions predicated and justified on the basis of a false Christian faith.

Apartheid was derived from a crude and vulgar misreading of the Word of God, and its architects drew on any number of fictitious justifications they could think of from the Bible, which they imposed on multitudes of well-meaning congregations on every blessed Sunday.

Quite rightly, many of you had the courage of your convictions to stand up against a system that stood for everything that was against the basic tenets of Christianity.

In challenging the fallacies and falsifications of this quasi-religious system, you were responding to the Christian call never to apostate in the face of danger, or shirk your responsibilities to combat these false prophets. Many even sacrificed their lives for this course.

Today, your conference is taking place in a different, and indeed, quite the opposite context to the one of 23 years ago.

You are meeting in a period marked by unprecedented process of entrenching democracy and a human rights culture, a period in which the seeds of non-racialism, non-sexism and a new set of values that affirm the humanity of us all are beginning to germinate.

It is a time when freedom of religion, like all other constitutionally guaranteed freedoms, is part of the pillars of our democracy.

But equally, this is an era replete with challenges and difficulties whose origins reflect our collective past.

Some of these include the challenges of housing shortages, unemployment, crime, poverty and illnesses such as Aids and TB. These challenges still face our growing democracy, despite the impressive advances that our peoples and government have made.

We all recognise the significant role that Christian leaders have played historically in helping to overthrow apartheid and to correct past injustices in South Africa. Yet, the past is still with us and your support to overcome the legacy of our unfortunate past requires, more than ever before, that we plan and act together.

As we all know, the legacy of apartheid has ravaged our country in very profound ways. We are still confronted by the need for reconciliation among our people. Part of our new struggle is to reconstruct and develop our damaged society.

Yet there are still many in our country that, nine years after the demise of apartheid, still do not accept the need for active and conscious effort to reconcile our peoples. To these people, apartheid has been defeated and there is no need to talk about racism even as its legacy continue to characterise the lives of all our people.

We need to recognise the profound impact that racism has had on our society, materially, psychologically, spiritually or morally. We need to recognise that many South Africans are still hurt and still feel the pain and consequences nine years later. If we deny the fact that we have not yet dealt with the century-old effects of racism, then we would not be able to respond adequately to our challenges. As a result, these consequences may very well be with us for a long time to come.

As religious leaders, perhaps it would be important to take an active role in fighting the legacy of racism, ensuring that we find practical ways and means of reconciling our people and communities, such that we would speak in reality about a unified non-racial and non-sexist society.

Religious institutions, such as yours, are uniquely placed to work with government to accelerate the process of fighting poverty and helping our society to work for real reconciliation. Twenty-three years ago, you bravely and at great cost to many among you, chose to chart a path through a contextual understanding of your mission. Once again, your mission calls for a reappraisal on the basis of the real conditions that face all our people.

Our common base of a sense of South Africanism, calls for the intensification of the church's historic ministry to the poor, so that together we can strengthen the values and orientations on which the future of our country depends. These include the values of sharing, solidarity, compassion, sacrifice, service to the people and deep commitment to work and assist the weak and the poor.

Of importance, we need to work together to infuse these attributes to all our people so that we begin to create South Africans whose main characteristics are honesty, integrity, service and volunteerism. Together we should strengthen the work that we are doing, like the on-going campaign of Vuk'uzenzele and Letsema.

In the past the church has produced many outstanding leaders. Should the Church stop playing this role, our future would indeed be poorer.

As leaders in various fields, your service to all our people remains of critical importance. We are happy that you continue to play this crucial role and we affirm and applaud your dedication to programmes that continue to better the lives of the people.

We are confident that SACLA would continue to look at ways of collaborating with many sectors of society, both within the Christian fold and outside it and find mechanisms of engaging government and other organs of civil society, so as to increase our collective impact on nation building and the transformation of our society.

Further, we would like to urge the Church to maintain an open line of communication with the government and to continue to be vocal on moral and other matters of national importance.

Many of the leaders here were part of the processes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As we know, the report of the commission has been handed over to government and we are already acting on the many recommendations of the Commission.

At the same time, the process of reconciliation has not ended with the finalisation of the work of the Commission. We therefore urge our leaders in the Christian faith to lend a hand as we continue with this challenging task.

We make this request confident that it will find resonance with the ministry of the Church and that the various congregations that make-up your membership have many committed and able leaders that are ready to take this work forward.

Reconciliation is a process, and so is healing, especially when multitudes of victims of apartheid share time and space with their former tormentors.

The spiritual deliverance you are capable of effecting to ease this state of our nation is immeasurable.

I appreciate your kindness for affording me the opportunity to share this brief moment with you.

I thank you.