

Address at the triennial conference of the South African Council of Churches

Cedar Park Hotel, Johannesburg, 12 July 2004

President of the SACC, Professor Russel Botman,
Vice-President of the SACC, Rev. Dianne Vorster,
General-Secretary, Dr. Molefe Tsele,
Distinguished Delegates and Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to thank you most sincerely for affording me the opportunity to address this important gathering of our religious leaders and to convey the best wishes of our Government to this important Triennial Conference of the South African Council of Churches.

I would also like to extend a special word of welcome to the distinguished leaders who have come from outside our borders. I trust that your presence here will enrich the deliberations around the many challenges that we face as South Africans, as the important echelon of our leadership that is gathered here examines programmes aimed at transforming our country and continent into a better place for all our peoples.

It is now 10 years since we won the democratic victory to which the SACC made an enormous contribution. The 10th Anniversary celebrations that took place in our country two-and-half-months ago, and which will continue during this first year of our Second Decade of Liberation, communicated the message that the masses of our people fully understand and appreciate the fundamental importance of the victory of 1994 to their hopes and aspirations to achieve the goal of a better life for themselves.

These are the same masses who engaged in struggle to defeat the apartheid system, ready and willing to sacrifice their lives if need be, to rid our country of the yoke of white minority domination. They did this because they wanted to translate into reality the vision that the people shall govern.

They confronted the brutal might of the apartheid regime because they wanted to use the opportunity that would be created by the victory of which they were certain, to address the pervasive and deeply-entrenched legacy of poverty and underdevelopment arising from 350 years of colonialism and apartheid, which they knew we would inherit.

They were ready to sacrifice their lives because they foresaw the day when it would be possible for us to say that we have eradicated the extremely painful and destructive legacy of racism and sexism that was a fundamental expression of the system of white minority rule and exploitation.

The people looked forward to a time when freedom would have brought them safety and security after many centuries of state violence and exposure to the most vile abuse at the hands of criminals spawned by the oppressive system, from whose predatory activities white South Africa had protected itself by all possible means, and to which the majority had no access.

They yearned for the re-emergence of a social morality informed by our traditional values of ubuntu, to address the challenge of moral regeneration. This was and is occasioned by the fact that illegitimate rule, the perpetuation of an anti-human social order, and the elevation of the acquisition of money and wealth into the highest of the social values towards which our people should aspire, have combined to produce the social ills of corruption and crime towards whose eradication we are all committed.

The masses of our people also wanted to establish relations of peace, friendship, solidarity and mutually beneficial cooperation between our country and the rest of Africa and the world, to reverse an historical

reality as a result of which our country had become a world pariah, and the fountainhead of racism, aggression, destabilisation and war.

The SACC was an integral part of these masses. Because it shared the aspirations we have mentioned with the rest of our people, it placed itself among them and in their vanguard, to secure the victory whose 10th anniversary we have just celebrated.

I would like to believe that the SACC remains an integral part of these masses, continuing to be inspired by the determination to realise the dream it shared with them as they confronted and defeated the apartheid regime.

The question must therefore arise as to what this Council should do with regard to the task of ensuring that the dreams of the people are realised as speedily as possible. It is perhaps right that, in any case, the fact of the 10th anniversary of our liberation should suggest to us that this Triennial Conference has a duty to revisit this question, even if the Council had answered it before.

Necessarily, the answer to the question must be in two parts. The first has to do with the role the Council of Churches will have defined for itself within the context of a democratic South Africa.

I mention this because it is clear that it has become fashionable among some in our society, including some who claim to have contributed to the democratic victory, to position themselves as what are called watchdogs or advocacy groups.

Of course this is perfectly legitimate and may very well be a necessary task in ensuring that the democratic victory does not lose its way and betray the hopes of the millions who fought for the liberty we all enjoy.

But having been a bold agent for progressive change, the Council of Churches would, I presume, seek to answer the question whether it should continue to act as an agent for progressive change in the affirmative. I must presume that you will find against any suggestion that the Council should on the contrary, in the main satisfy itself with the task of observing, analysing and assessing the actions of those who continue to act as agents of change, content merely to criticise or approve what others are striving to achieve.

As an aside, I must say that clearly the temptation to assume this role is enhanced by the seeming availability of foreign funding for those who would be watchdogs.

I would like to believe that the Council of Churches would decide, and indeed has decided, that its principal task is to continue to play its part among the forces in our country that have defined themselves as actors for the progressive reconstruction and development of our country. Behind the Council are the millions of South Africans who belong to the affiliated member churches of the SACC.

These are the same millions who, only two-and-half months ago voted us into government. I can say this without fear of contradiction that these masses also see themselves as part of the great army of change that must work together to overcome the legacy of our racist past.

I am certain that because of this, they fully understood what we meant when we spoke about a people's contract to create jobs and fight poverty. I am equally certain that because of this, they have understood what we meant when we put forward the concepts traditional to African social practice of letsema and vuk'uzenzele.

Having defined itself as one of the actors for the progressive reconstruction and development of our country, the Council of Churches would then have to answer the question of what it has to do practically to contribute to this outcome.

In this regard, I must express my sincere appreciation for the processes we have together established, which allow for regular consultation between our government and our religious leaders. Undoubtedly we will have to work at the task of ensuring that these processes work better than they have in the past, but at least we do have a starting point.

The Christian Church maintains daily contact with the millions of our people. It is daily exposed to all the challenges that face us as a people and a country. It has the social infrastructure that not only reaches the people, but also has the possibility to make an impact on the lives of these masses, consistent with the popular aspirations the Council of Churches shared with the people as they engaged in struggle for freedom.

I therefore remain convinced that the Christian Church, like all the other faiths in our country, has the possibility to make a critical contribution to the achievement of the goals of national reconstruction and development.

I am certain that the people's contract to create jobs and fight poverty will be enormously weakened if it does not include within it the Christian Church and the other faiths, pursuing the goals that we have set ourselves as a people.

This brings me to the consideration of the second part of the possible answer to the question as to what this Council should do with regard to the task of ensuring that the dreams of the people are realised as speedily as possible.

This has to do with answering the question of what constitutes the main agenda of our process of reconstruction and development. As we all know, many in our country give varied answers to this question. These varied responses to this question tell us that our different experiences and expectations as a people dictate that indeed, we will provide different answers informed by our different interests.

Needless to say, the national response to this question - what constitutes the main agenda of our process of reconstruction and development - will determine what we do as a country, what we will do with the human, spiritual and material resources we are able to muster.

Undoubtedly the agenda before the Triennial Conference and the resolutions you will adopt, will have been and will be informed by your determination as the Council of Churches and its membership of what constitutes the national agenda.

If I may, I would like to refer to comments I made nine years ago in 1995 in a public lecture at the University of Port Elizabeth, under the title - "Is there a national agenda - and who sets it?"

I asked then, as I would like to ask our religious leaders gathered here - "Is there a national agenda around which the whole country should unite?"

"If there is, the question arises: Who has set that agenda? If there is not, the question remains to be answered, who shall set that agenda?"

I said then that, "I am told that the Chinese have a proverb which says that the felling of one tree makes more noise than the growth of an entire forest..."

"(But) all around us a great forest of millions of healthy trees is growing quietly but steadily. We owe that process of the renewal of our country to the efforts of millions of our people, including you who are gathered here.

"But if we were not participants in this historic process of the birth of a nation which the nations of the world support and watch with great interest and optimism, we might be tempted to believe that all that was

happening was that a single tree was being felled, so intense is the absence of focus on all these things that make for the happy and prosperous South Africa for which our people sacrificed.

"To respond to the effort to set a national agenda focused on the single tree, (which therefore projects only the negative), all of us as ordinary citizens of our country have an obligation to join together to nurture the forest of the positive construction and development of our country.

"It must be a fundamental element of the definition of our democracy that the people shall govern! Let us join our legislators in our millions and together with them, (whom we elected to be our public representatives), say loudly: This is the national agenda which we, the people, have set.

"Let us, in a real and meaningful way, take our destiny into our own hands!"

By this means, I am appealing to our leadership gathered at this Triennial Conference of an outstanding combatant for our liberation, the SACC, to participate in the critical process of setting the national agenda and thus help all of us as a people, in a real and meaningful way, to take our destiny into our own hands.

As Government we believe that we have a clear understanding of what the national agenda is and are determined to do everything possible to pursue it, working together with the people and all their representative formations in the people's contract we have spoken of.

At the centre of that agenda stands the struggle against poverty and underdevelopment. In this regard, we are determined to address the challenge of job creation, understanding that this problem cannot be addressed effectively and in a sustained manner by dependence on social security grants, among which is the much vaunted basic income grant.

In this regard, we have insisted and will continue to insist that the idea that the government has access to inexhaustible amounts of money, or an open ended possibility to borrow money or spend money it does not have, is false, amounting to no more than an illusion.

At the same time, painful though this may be, we must also accept that it will take much more than one decade of freedom to wipe out the problems of poverty and underdevelopment that have accumulated over three-and-half-centuries.

The cold reality is that it is impossible simultaneously and in a short time to find all the means we need to realise the objective of a better life for all. To argue otherwise would be nothing but mere pretence.

Nevertheless, whatever the limitations, I will make this commitment to you and to our people that we will sustain the progress we have made in the first decade of our freedom, which has meant more, but not enough jobs, houses, clean water, better nutrition, free basic services, free medical care, an improved and improving social security net, better access to educational opportunities, and so on.

Secondly, I will also make the commitment to you and to our people that we will continue to work to ensure that our economy grows and expands, to produce the material means without which it is impossible to achieve the goal of a better life for all.

In this context, we will also work to ensure that wealth in our country is shared more equitably, to raise the standard of living and the quality of life of the poor, and gradually close the enormous disparity in income and wealth, which continues to characterise our society.

I have no doubt that we will make visible progress with regard to both these objectives.

Necessarily, and thirdly, the improvement in the quality of life of our people to which we have referred, must include better safety and security for all, the transformation of the socio-economic conditions that result in the poor preying on one another in many violent crimes against one another, the all-round and sustained improvement of the health of our people, attending to all the causes of morbidity and death that afflict our people, and the improvement of the overall environment in which the people have to live.

Once again, I have no doubt that we will make visible progress with regard to all these objectives.

Further to this, and fourth, I am certain that our country will continue to occupy its place among the global pace setters with regard to the important challenge to create a non-racial and non-sexist society.

As Government we are convinced that we cannot claim to be making advances in the continuing struggle for reconstruction and development if we do not achieve significant and continuous progress to eradicate the racial divisions we still experience and secure the emancipation of the women of our country.

Related to this, and as the fifth point on the national agenda, is the great importance we attach and will continue to attach to the issue of the national cohesion, which we must also achieve by respecting and promoting all our cultures and languages even as we continue to work for the development and entrenchment of a common patriotism and shared pride in our country and its diverse population.

The unity shown by our people as we celebrated our 10th Anniversary of liberation and rejoiced at the decision of FIFA to allow us to host the 2010 Soccer World Cup gave us an indication of how far we have moved away from the long years when we were a divided society, incapable of uniting around a common cause.

We are an African country and as a Government are privileged to have the opportunity to play a role in the historic process of the renaissance of our continent and Africans both in Africa and the Diaspora, as the sixth point in our national agenda.

In this regard, we have a responsibility to contribute to the solution of the problems facing the peoples of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Sudan and the Cote d'Ivoire, which continue to harbour the potential to claim many African lives.

Similarly, we must, with the greatest determination work to promote the agendas set by the African Union and its socio-economic development programme, NEPAD. This will require that we take new decisions about the additional human and material resources we need to dedicate to this purpose.

And this I can say, that we are convinced that Africa, our continent, and we as Africans, have never had a better time to take charge of our destiny, however limited our resources. We will do everything we can to seize this moment, pursuing an agenda we have set ourselves as Africans, and not another set by others who might have stronger voices than we.

The last point on the national agenda we must mention is the mobilisation of our people to sustain their role as their own liberators, which they played as we fought for our liberation from racist oppression and exploitation.

The task of these masses today is to join the people's contract for a better life for all, inspired by the confidence that the fact that they succeeded to defeat the brutal system of apartheid, means that there is nothing that will stop them from achieving the goal of the full restoration of their dignity as Africans and human beings.

I am confident that, true to its own historic traditions, the SACC will march side by side with these masses, once more to help produce a humane outcome that others will again describe as a miracle.

At the same time I would like to believe that the Conference will identify itself with the national agenda I have sought to explain, and therefore take the necessary decisions relating to what the Council of Churches and its affiliated churches will do to ensure the successful pursuit of that national agenda.

I am privileged and honoured to wish the Triennial Conference of the SACC success.

Thank you.