



Tuesday, 14 July 2020

Dear friends

In SA we are well over 100 days into lockdown and we are just hitting the peak of infections. As at the 13th July, there were 288 000 cases in SA with 4172 deaths and 138 000 recoveries. Health care systems in Gauteng and the Eastern Cape are under severe pressure with beds, ICU's ventilators and support staff stretched to breaking point. Although also feeling the pressure, the numbers of infected people, and those who have died, in Zimbabwe and Zambia continues to be relatively low, for which we can be extremely thankful.

In this month's letter, I want to address some of the other issues that are taking place but receiving scant attention as we focus on the COVID pandemic. The first is the scourge of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly in South Africa. The SA President, in his address on the 21st June 2020 called this a "second pandemic". The numbers are harrowing: the number of women killed or assaulted or raped by an intimate partner and the number of children abused in what should be their safest possible space: the home. It is regrettable that the SA government, which seems so focused on addressing the evils of alcohol and tobacco, has done extraordinarily little to address the horrific abuse of women and children in SA. And we, as SA men must also take our own place of responsibility for this plague on our women and children. Although we may not be guilty of abuse personally, every abuser is a son, a brother, a husband, a father, an uncle, a cousin or a friend and it is our responsibility to call out abusers when we become aware of them. Turning a blind eye as a family member or friend verbally abuses an intimate partner or a child is not acceptable – we should call out those who do not treat others with respect in public, because, what happens in public, is replicated in private if it is not challenged. I have always told the women who have been physically abused by a male partner and who have come to see me that there are two certainties: first, a man who hits a women once will hit her again, and the second time will be harder than the first. Second, a man will not stop hitting until the woman is dead unless she moves herself away from the situation. This is also where the church should play a role in providing safe spaces for women who are in abusive relationships. Many do stay in those relationships, and get exposed to danger every day, because they have no other choice. The church should be at the forefront of providing temporary places of safety for women and children who need to be removed from an abusive situation.

While GBV is an issue in all countries, the issue I want to highlight in Zimbabwe is the growing economic catastrophe that is unfolding there. Unemployment is at 90%, the currency is in free fall and hyper inflation of around 800% pa is ruining the ability of people to cope with the challenges posed by the COVID pandemic. Ordinary Zimbabweans are forced to scrounge for food, while politicians blatantly steal money earmarked for the poor, for COVID responses, PPE's and the like. As the situation spirals, the Zimbabwean ruling party has taken to arresting opposition political opponents and civil society activists. As a Church we have to offer our support to our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe. We think of our ministers in congregations, suffering under these exceedingly difficult circumstances, yet still able to do the work of ministry, preach the gospel, feed the hungry and provide support for the

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weakest in their society. Once again, we must commend our congregants in Zimbabwe for their amazing ability to continue to function despite the immense challenges they face on a daily basis. While we may not be able to offer much in terms of financial aid, we can assure our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe of our on-going support in prayer, as they continue to advance the rule and reign of God in their country.

In Zambia, President Lungu recently pardoned a number of prisoners in the fight against the COVID pandemic. Among those released were homosexual couple Japhet Chataba and Steven Samba, who were sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment in November 2019 after being found guilty of "performing unnatural acts". It is a deplorable reality that, in our region, people of same-sex orientation are still being persecuted and maligned. Members of the LGBTQI+ community endure terrible oppression, and the arrest of a gay couple in Zambia serves to remind us of this. It is also an indictment on the church that we have not done more to speak out in defence of members of the LGBTQI+ community. Our own members look to us for comfort and support in trying times, and our continued unwillingness to speak on their behalf undermines our claim that the gospel calls us to fight against all forms of social injustice.

Yesterday, we had a meeting between officials of the UCCSA and the UPCSA about the emerging crisis in Northern Mozambique. Although we do not have churches in Mozambique, the UCCSA does and they are being affected by a disturbing rise in militant Islamic insurgency that threatens to destabilize the entire Southern African region. If not addressed soon and directly, the effects on Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zambia and South Africa could be very dire indeed. We have agreed that we will approach the governments of SA and Zimbabwe as well as the respective Councils of Churches to see what can be done to address this worrying development before it engulfs our entire region in an extremist conflict.

It has also been disturbing to say the very least to observe the incident at the International Pentecostal Holiness Church (IPHC) in Johannesburg where, as a result of leadership dispute, five people were shot dead. As terrible as that incident is, it was a shock to read that the dispute arose over an amount of R1 billion-rand, extensive land holdings in different provinces of SA and a number of luxury vehicles, including Rolls Royce's and Bentleys. Just how a church managed to acquire assets and resources like this when the majority of their members are poor and indigent people should be examined. And how succession is handled in these churches is also something that needs closer scrutiny. That such an organization should flourish off the backs of the poor is something that casts shame of the entire Christian community in Southern Africa.

Friends, let us not allow the COVID pandemic and the responses to it so overshadow all that we do, so that it allows unscrupulous agents in our society to avoid accountability and to act without scrutiny. Let us hold one another to a higher standard and demand justice on behalf of those who cannot do so themselves.

Please stay home, stay healthy and stay safe

Regards.



Peter