



THE UNITING
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
IN SOUTHERN
AFRICA

Tuesday, January 14, 2020

Dear Friends

I trust the New Year has begun well for you and that the festive season was not too overwhelming or busy and that you have had some time to get some rest. I write to you at the beginning of what, in the Lectionary is called "Ordinary Time". After the Seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany, and before we enter Lent, we go through this Season of Ordinary Time. We will pick it up again after Pentecost, right up until the week before Advent. I reflected on this notion of Ordinary Time today, as I began work again after a short break. I am not sure about you, but for me, very little seems ordinary.

It does not seem ordinary that we are already into the third decade of this century. I think most of us can remember the turn of the century when so many of us were concerned about Y2K and whether we were going to survive or whether we were going to be consigned to some dystopian future where all computers had stopped working and we were forced to chisel our messages out on stone tablets once again.

It does not seem ordinary that we should struggle, as so many do, just to survive. Although the Y2K crisis never happened, we find ourselves facing all sorts of different crises in the three countries of the UPCS. Crippling drought is wreaking havoc to communities in Zimbabwe and Zambia, many of which were hit so hard by Hurricane Idai in 2019. In all three countries we are plagued by persistent power outages, which we euphemistically call "load shedding", while the specters of poverty, corruption and the abuse of power loom over so many of our people. Yet, the birth of the baby at Bethlehem reminds us that in the midst of our darkest times, God's light can shine the brightest and that even when corrupt rulers try to destroy God's work, but God is mischievous and subversive and outwits the arrogant and the proud.

It does not seem ordinary that we should stand, again, on the cusp of a possible war between global superpowers. With that in mind, I thought it a good idea to remind ourselves of what we believe about peace and conflict:

We should oppose all unnecessary build-up of armaments and unmask all propaganda that distorts the truth or dehumanizes the enemy. If it is ever right to fight in a war, it must be patently a war to prevent an even greater evil. It must be a last resort: every way to settle the conflict by negotiation must have been tried. There must be a reasonable prospect of success, and unnecessary violence must be avoided. No one may serve in a war for political or economic gain or in an army used to maintain an unjust and oppressive political status quo. Unless convinced that a war is justifiable and necessary, everyone is bound to refuse to fight in it and refuse conscription. No soldier may obey any command that is contrary to conscience, no matter the cost. (UPCS Confession of Faith: para 26.4)

It does not seem ordinary that we should have lost one of our brightest and best in December last year. Although I was not able to be present at the funeral of the Rev Prof Dr Vuyani Shadrack Vellem, I thought I would share with you my tribute to him:

I first met Vuyani soon after union when he was minister at GG Ndzotyana in Stellenbosch, and I was at Milnerton. Even then, 20 years ago, he was a fiery personality, one who didn't suffer fools gladly. He was passionate about issues, especially pertaining to race and identity and was not afraid to call our injustice,

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PBO 18/11/13/1612
Moderator: Rt Rev Dr PD Langerman BCom, LLB, BTh, MTh, DMin
General Secretary: The Rev L Mpetsheni PGDSS MTh
Clerk of Assembly: The Rev WV Mkhungo DipTh
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unfairness or inequality wherever and whenever he encountered it.

Although I didn't always agree with him, I regarded him as something in the mould of one of the OT prophets: addressing issues that the court prophets and establishment priests were too enthralled by the trappings of power and privilege to be able to even see. I regard Vuyani in the same way I regard people like Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko and Prof James Cone: people whose strong Christian faith made them passionate advocates for the dignity of black people and powerful advocates for the advancement of African personhood. He was quick to come to the aid or defence of those who were considered to be outcasts, marginalized or disenfranchised, and to take on the power structures that denied people their rights and their dignity.

A soaring intellect, he never lost the ability to connect with people and to give voice to the aspirations of ordinary people for justice.

As the second General Secretary of the UPCSA he came into office at a time of great transition in the life of our Church. At a time when the union itself was facing some of its greatest challenges, he was one of those who managed to keep us together.

His doctorate opened the door to academia, and I think this is where he will be most remembered. In his contact with students, his lecturing, his writing and his widening ecumenical influence, he came to the attention of a far wider audience. Consequently, he became influential in academic and ecumenical circles as a strident voice for those with whom he identified, arguing passionately and strongly for a "black theology of liberation", a project of liberation of the underside of modernity. His argument was not so much against racism because he saw racism as a by-product of something far deeper. He challenged white supremacy, superiority and entitlement in that he identified these as the foundations for racism. Not only did he fight to de-colonize the communal space, but he sought to dismantle the very categories and binaries that came with the colonial project.

Vuyani was taken from us far too soon and far too young. A sharp intellect, an inquiring mind and a fearless activism on behalf of those on the fringes of society made him a voice for liberation who was not afraid to speak out against injustice wherever and whenever he encountered it, no matter the personal cost. A passionate fighter for justice and a significant voice in our country and beyond, he will be greatly missed. My thoughts and prayers are with Phumeza, Phili and Vuvu and all of those who mourn his untimely passing. May you, his family, friends and colleagues know the comfort of Christ as we commit Vuyani into the hands of God. May he rest in peace and rise in glory.

My hatred for the disease that took Vuyani away from those who love him, leads to my plea to all the men who read this: please make sure you are tested regularly – at least once a year – for all forms of cancer, especially prostate and testicular cancers. My plea to all the women who read this is please make sure you are tested – at least once a year – for all forms of cancer especially breast and reproductive organ cancers. Many of these life-threatening diseases can be treated, if they are caught early enough, but are almost always fatal if diagnosed too late. The suffering of those who fight cancer is heart-breaking and the toll it takes on family, friends and church community is massive. The tragedy is that in many cases the suffering can be alleviated by a simple test performed on a regular basis. We must act together to ensure that this silent serial killer stops murdering our fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers.

Your partner in the gospel



Peter

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