



# THE UNITING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Tuesday, May 18, 2021

Dear Friends

This is my second to last letter to you as Moderator of the General Assembly and I thought I would use the opportunity to share with you some thoughts I have around the challenges facing the UPCSA as we move into the future. These reflections are included in my report to General Assembly, but as many of you won't get to read that one, I thought I would share some of those thoughts here and in my final letter next month.

## **Natural Disasters**

Here is the Southern part of Africa, it seems that we just come through one crisis, only to be hit by another. No sooner had we processed the devastation and loss of life caused by Cyclone Idai, than we received the news that people in KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape had been hit by torrential rain, flooding, landslides and enormous losses of property and lives. On a weekend where we were celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus, almost 100 people lost their lives and so many others lost their homes, their possessions and were left destitute. As a Church, we are reminded that we should mourn with those who mourn and, so, our hearts go out to those who lost loved ones and possessions in these devastating storms. At times like this, we feel helpless. It feels like we are at the mercy of the forces of nature which are way too powerful for us to try and hold back or control in any way. It is no wonder that the ancients identified the forces of nature with chaos and evil.

## **Sexism, Misogyny and Bigotry**

When, at the 2018 Assembly I planned to have an event "celebrating" four decades of the ordination of women, many of our women leaders pushed back and said that it was inappropriate to celebrate an experience that was, for them, only painful. Having heard this, I think it important that we, as men, must take responsibility for – and repent of – our sexism, bigotry, and misogyny, whether covert or overt, that has led to the experience described by the women leaders in the Church. I long for a day when we will acknowledge our cruel ministerial gender stereotypes and our entrenched patriarchy, truly repent of it, and shatter the glass ceiling that prevents more women from entering leadership positions in our Church. I am not sure if quotas actually work, but maybe we are going to have to do something like that in our Sessions, Presbyteries, General Assembly and in our Committees to ensure that women do not remain relegated to an inferior position in terms of numbers and influence. How many of your Session elders are women? How many women Commissioners are there at Presbytery and Assembly? How many women are office bearers in Presbyteries? How many women are members and Convenors of General Assembly Committees? Why, twenty years into union, have we had only one Moderator who was a woman and why are so few women nominated by Presbyteries? I know it is tricky for me to speak about these matters and I risk raising the ire of some by doing so, but I do long for a day when the Church truly is a place where all feel at home.

## **Gender Based Violence**

During the lockdown, we became sensitized to the scourge of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly in South Africa. The SA President, in his address on the 21<sup>st</sup> of 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