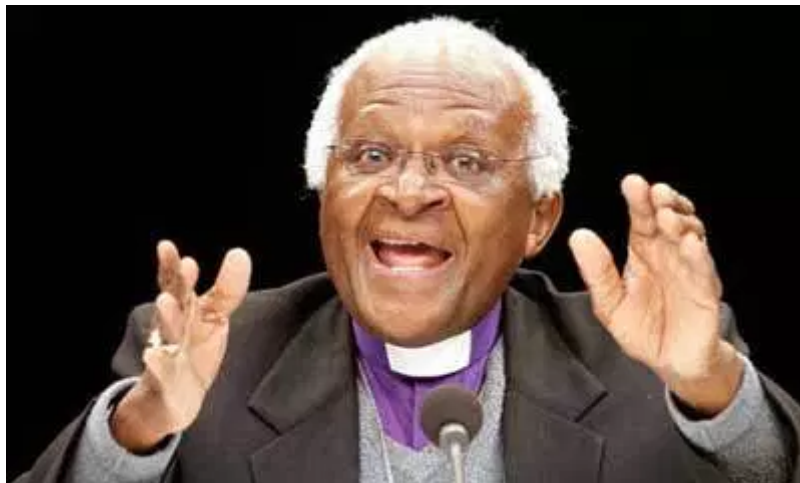


Training the Tutus of the future

LSE Chaplain, the Revd Dr James Walters outlines the challenges in training a clergy fit for purpose in today's South Africa.

In the UK, a conference on the future of clergy training would be of rather narrow interest. But in Africa, Christianity is not a private matter. The provision of education, healthcare and community infrastructure remain heavily dependent on the churches. So a recent colloquium on theological education in Grahamstown, South Africa was in no doubt about the importance of training clergy to be effective and wise leaders.

“In our communities, the first point of reference is the Church,” commented one participant. In a written contribution to the gathering at the College of the Transfiguration, a training college for Anglican seminarians, former Archbishop Desmond Tutu set out the challenge for today's context: “Society is becoming increasingly sophisticated and its members are not shy of asking awkward questions... It is thus of critical importance that those who hope to minister to such a society are well prepared and can hold their own in any situation.”



Former Archbishop Desmond Tutu is one of a number of religious figureheads who led the fight against apartheid

In South Africa, the political contribution of the clergy was particularly significant in the struggle against apartheid. Desmond Tutu is a well-known figurehead. But several contributors to the colloquium had spent time in prison for opposing the apartheid regime. Among them was the Rev'd Professor Barney Pityana who convened the colloquium and whose visit to LSE last year to deliver the Steve Biko Memorial Lecture led to my invitation to be a keynote speaker. A prominent member of the ANC Youth League in the 1970s, Pityana fled to England to train for ordination to the priesthood, returning to South Africa in 1993 to head up the newly established Human Rights Commission before becoming Vice Chancellor of the University of South Africa.

Pityana and Tutu both studied theology in London and there remain great challenges in renewing clergy training in the new South Africa. Among these are shortage of funds, poor English among students, closure of theology faculties and lack of interest among bishops. But perhaps the greatest challenge is the lost sense of direction in the Anglican Church since the fall of apartheid. South Africa faces many challenges – poor governance, HIV/Aids, violent homophobia – but the Church has yet to galvanise its resources and empower its clergy to respond to the new realities in a similar way to the anti-apartheid struggle.

This is perhaps linked to the more fundamental question of how Christian theology and the clergy formation process can become authentically African. The missionary churches empowered

Africans to become active citizens and leaders in the post-colonial era, but questions of true enculturation were deferred. So the colloquium was reminded by another hero of the struggles, the Rev'd Dr Mvume Dandala that theological education was not brought to Africa by the colonial missionaries but began in the School of Alexandria in the second century. Christianity was thriving in North Africa at a time when it had barely taken root in England. So there is much work to be done in rediscovering truly African theologies as well as reshaping the educational process itself to take indigenous knowledge systems into account.

Today's South Africa is a vibrant, dynamic country. But it remains a traumatised society, haunted by the injustices of the past and facing serious democratic challenges under the presidency of Jacob Zuma. The last generation of clergy played a crucial role in shaping South Africa for the better. Today the Church needs to train up a new generation of clergy to help heal the country's historic wounds and build a healthy, cohesive society that takes pride in itself as a nation that Desmond Tutu famously described as "the rainbow people of God".

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