

SACLA II – Pretoria – 7 to 11 July, 2003
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RIVERS WE STILL HAVE TO CROSS (The Unfinished Reconciliation Agenda)

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What a joy it is to be here again this evening and to see all these wonderful faces and people and the opportunity that God has created for all of us to meet each other.

I have been given a watery theme and I don't think I am going to be sharing anything new with you. As I have walked around, put my nose in, seen what you have been discussing, I know that you have been talking about unity all day today. My contribution would be to float some submerged issues and challenge us to move forward, and I do hope that each of you are ready for a challenge.

I have been involved in reconciliation situations over the past 25 years, many of them involving church leaders, and my real passion is to see the Church working together in fulfilling the Great Commission.

The Scripture story which I have taken is from Joshua 1:8-15, Joshua 2:1 and Joshua 3:5-11. This is the story of the Israelites, when Joshua was told by God to muster, to gather, to get all these Israelites together. Now you know there were thousands of them and to get thousands of people together is never an easy task. They were different tribes, they had their own leaders, they had their own ideas and paradigms, just as we have today.

So as I talk about mustering the masses, I want us to get a picture of a huge river flowing and in this river are many islands. And what I am going to talk about is building bridges over these islands so that we can get over the rivers. First of all, I am going to talk about mustering the masses, getting them all together.

At this assembly, we represent a very small percentage of the Church in South Africa, and our real work will begin in earnest as we return to our constituencies and our own communities. Our greatest challenge would be to get the people at grass roots level together to where we are in our minds. We will need to go back, we will need to share the facts and inspire them to sanctify themselves, to disciple their communities and their cities. One racial group cannot do it on its own, one denomination cannot do it on its own, one organisation cannot do it on its own. Nor can the men or the women do it on their own – we need each other and we need to work together.

May I submit to you the idea of our churches or organisations being these islands, working very well where we are but each of us limited by our resources and giftings and opportunities. So we need to have access to each other. Our impact on our nation will mean that we need to see the whole Body of Christ working together.

Certainly at this conference it is an opportunity to connect and network, but I believe we need to build bridges that will last. These bridges need to be built on biblical principles of servanthood (you have heard that), of humility (you have heard that), of patience (you have heard that), of respect (you have heard that), and inclusiveness. As islands in a river are cut off when the river flows strongly, we would need to create a more permanent solution. We could wait for the river to drop when there is a drought but this would only be temporary. If your connectedness is dependent upon the elements and not on bridges, which are going to be built with effort and sacrifice, you will leave it to chance.

Bridges are what connect. Sometimes people become bridges. Maybe God is calling you to be a bridge, to join a community, to join an organisation, to join racial groups together. And let me tell you, it is not easy being a bridge. I have been a bridge to many people and organisations. Some of them walk over you with slippers. They are gentle. They talk nicely to each other and they reconcile. And they walk together and cross over together. Lovely gentle people. There are some people who have hobnailed boots, and when you are a bridge they stomp all over you with those hobnailed boots. Sometimes they get to the middle and they meet the other person and they decide this "ain't gonna work", and they start stomping some more, back to their own corners. Being a bridge is not easy. But we need to be determined to bring reconciliation in our nation and in our cities and in our communities. We need to determine in our hearts that we will do all we can to build bridges, so that our unity becomes a witness to the world of who Jesus is.

My Scripture is: "I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." That is Jesus' prayer for the Church.

I would like to highlight some of these rivers that divide the islands. May I introduce one which we have already spoken about this morning: diversity. There is a real struggle in many Christian's minds that makes them believe that every Christian should have the same flavour. In spite of globalisation that is enhancing integration, we also see tribalism, racism and xenophobia on the increase. God's gift of racial and cultural diversity should be seen as a source of strength and enrichment. Diversity does not have to bring division, but we need to preserve our diversity and enhance wholeness.

Just think of the 12 tribes of Israel: each one had its own identity. In the story of the 12 tribes, we see the Reubenites, the Gaddites and the half tribe of Mannasah had already received their inheritance on that side of the river. You know, God does not always deal with all of us in the same way. Some people get their inheritance before others. Did you know that? But one of the interesting things is, God has a time for each one of us. I'll be talking about that a little bit later.

The second river we have to cross is the one of tribal and racial differences. These are no problem to God. They are part of His design for humanity. The black/white issue or the brown/pink issue is a global and historical fact. We may talk about black and white, but I have never seen anybody black and I have never seen anybody white. We have pink people and we have got shades of brown and very soon the pink ones are going to get browner and the brown ones are going to get pinker and you might all be looking like me in another hundred years!

We do have our different cultures. We do have our different lifestyles but that does not elevate one above the other because this is what leads to racism and we have already had 40 years of this evil. The Church today wants to move forward. There can be no doubt that our Christian faith exhorts us to work for true reconciliation, genuine peace, based upon truth, repentance, justice and love, and we need to deal with this on both a personal and collective level. We cannot challenge the world if we have not challenged ourselves. This is what it is about. Challenging ourselves. We need to become an inclusive community where diversity is safeguarded, equality is assured and participation and accountability is encouraged.

One person I am a fan of is Peter Storey, and I read all his articles or as many as I can. In an article published in August 1994, he speaks and teaches us about reconciliation and gives us six principles for reconciliation. I know there are many people here today who are dealing with those same issues in your groups, as you sit next to each other on the lawns and on the chairs. Let me help you understand the elements in reconciliation as Peter Storey puts it.

He says we need a prime mover; someone needs to take the first step, with a will to forgive in order to restore relationships. You may need to be that prime mover. You may need to be that person who is going to hold out their hands to somebody else, and you may need to take that step today or tomorrow.

The second thing he says we need to do is that people need to engage. You need to be able to meet face to face. Reconciliation cannot happen at a distance.

Number three, the trust must be told. We need to listen to each other's stories. Many have said they were not aware of the foul deeds that were committed in the name of separate development, but, having heard, we all need to examine ourselves and check what our sins are. They may be sins of omission: things we should have done that we didn't do. Or they may be sins of commission: things we did do which we should not have done. But we need to hear the truth.

The fourth thing that we need to do is that we need to have a genuine repentance with listening to the stories, with telling our stories. We need to be genuinely sorry. And I believe churches have failed. They need to create space for people to tell their stories, for people to repent and find forgiveness. I think this morning when we had Izak Burger and George Mhlobo together, it was a wonderful moving testimony of people who had listened and who were genuinely sorry.

The fifth thing we need is restitution. How can we help rebuild our nation? Let me tell you that for the two-and-a-half tribes who received their inheritance and blessings there was no rest for them until the whole of Israel had won their land. The landowners, those who have, need to assist the landless or share their wealth and expertise to empower the previously disadvantaged. People are still disadvantaged. And we need to help and hold hands together.

We need absolution. The need for forgiveness needs to be unconditional and complete. The ingredients of grace and love are essential for those of us who were oppressed. We need to have a willing heart to forgive. Martin Luther King says: "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a permanent attitude." We need to be walking around with a heart ready to forgive, and forgive and forgive. This is the journey we need to take. My concern is that the Church is addressing racism but, I feel, a little bit too lethargically. We need rigorous intervention. We need strategies for time frames and outcomes. We need space for forums and workshops where this can take place on local and national level. We are doing this on a national level like this but I believe it needs to happen at local level. We need funds to make this happen; it is going to cost us, but we must invest in these things.

Prejudice is personal. It could also be structural. And perceptions and structures need to change for surely we are not of the world, we are of the ecclesio, we are God's called-out people. Our values are very different to the world.

The other river I believe we need to cross is denominational differences. This is not new. It began in the early Church, and Paul addresses it in 1 Corinthians 1:11-17, where they came to him and said: "I am of Paul," "I am of Apollos," "I follow Cephus," and "I follow Christ." My struggle is not about denominations but with the denominational pride with which some sprout their label. I believe that denominations assist with structures and accountability. But we are all one in Christ and we must know that our people will never just leave our church if we are teaching them the truth, if we are feeding them, if we are caring for them. I believe that denominations need to be engaging each other. I applaud national councils like the South African Council of Churches and The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa, which bring together other denominations at various forums. They play a key role in breaking down barriers. But I believe this is all at the top. It needs to filter down to grassroots. We do need to find each other in the community if we are to tackle the giants at grassroots.

The fourth river that we need to cross is our theological differences. Now some of you will say that you are a Calvinist. "I am an Armenianist. You will never get that out of me." That's okay. Do you know George Whitefield and Charles Wesley had major differences? And for all the years they argued, they could never be friends. They fought, but when they got older, they got wiser and they reconciled, praise the Lord, and I want to read you an excerpt from Charles Wesley's letter to George Whitefield. He says: "Our one contention now, our single aim, is to pluck poor souls as brands from out of the flame to spread the victory of that bloody cross and gasp our latest breath in the Redeemer's cause. This is important, the Redeemer's cause."

There is also the divide between the charismatics and the non-charismatics. It is evident in this conference in the way we worship – but it is not divisive. I have watched as we have put together SACLA over the past two years. I have watched the national council, people from various denominations coming together, and this council worked together in a spirit of meekness, humility, sensitivity and openness to God. There were no big people or little people. There were just God's people, all wanting to do His will for the Church in South Africa. Personal agendas were put aside. You know, we so easily abhor the sins of lying, of stealing and adultery, but not of judgementalism and pride. To me this is a sign of decreasing grace. Much of the criticism which leads to disagreement and division is not primarily because of superior convictions but because of unsanctified egos and uncrucified flesh. You can be right in opinion and wrong in spirit, and you can be wrong in opinion but right in spirit. If I were to choose, I would choose the latter.

James 4:12 reminds us not to judge each other as there is only one judge and law-giver. Let us keep the unity in the bond of peace, my brothers and sisters. Let us not major on the minors but find areas of commonality and celebrate.

We do have another river to cross, and that is the one of economic differences; our wealth or lack of it. Jesus said: "The poor you will always have with you." Eighty percent of the wealth of the world is in the hands of 20% of the population. And it is the same here in South Africa. The two-and-a-half tribes of Israel who received their portion were commanded to help the other tribes gain their inheritance. Too often we are satisfied with our portion but we offer no assistance to those who are struggling or are even trying to begin. We are afraid that they might go bigger than us, be more successful, and if we do assist, it is with what we have already used or just a little bit.

Let me tell you those two-and-a-half tribes: they sent their fighting men, ready, armed, right at the front of the procession as they moved into the Promised Land to fight the giants. They sent their best. We need to give of our best. Sometimes we look at the recipients and we want to hold them accountable. They are

ultimately accountable to God and what you have is not yours, it is God's, for you are the Lord's and everything you have is the Lord's. You just need to be a good steward of what God has given you.

There are two more rivers to go. Gender differences. You know I am a woman, I don't have a title, I am not a cardinal, I am not a bishop, I am not an international speaker, I am Esmé. So I come here just as a woman wanting to share with you and help you to understand how we can work together. In this account of crossing the Jordan we see the women were left behind. We know today the women go to join the war. Times have certainly changed, but the differences between men and women are real. I would like to encourage in the Church a practice of partnership for the Gospel's sake. God's command to go is for the women of the church as well. He does not have different commands for women and for men. He does not have different judgements for women and men. He will judge women in the same way He judges men.

You remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira? They both committed the same sin; they both received the same judgement. Women have some idea that we are going to be cared for in a way, because we are married and our husbands. No, we are accountable for who we are. And men only you can release the women in your church to serve as equal partners in proclaiming the Gospel for over many years you have tied us. I want to say that the idea of women serving in leadership is not one of pride but one of just wanting to serve their Lord and Master in a spirit of humility and servanthood. So let us work in submission to each other and model true Christian partnership to the world.

People always say to me: "Women must be in submission." And I say: "Sorry brother, you are my brother in the Lord. I have one person on this earth that I submit to and that is my husband." And, shame, he has a hard time of it sometimes to help me see that but that's the person I submit to, but we submit one to another, for you are my brothers and sisters in the Lord. And this is what should help us and this is what will bring unity when we understand who we are. Let's work in partnership.

The last one I need to mention and this is the one of the generation gap. That's another river we need to cross. It's great to have all the young people in front here. I love you young people! And you know as I get older I appreciate you even more. You kind of get to a stage when you don't have so much energy, so the young people will make it happen and they come to you for the wisdom and I love that partnership and I want to encourage the Church to build a bridge over that generation gap. We do not want to lose our young people.

One of the things that I am looking to in the boards on which I serve is that we have somebody representing every decade so that we have a 20-year-old, a 30-year-old, a 40-year-old, a 50-year-old, a 60-year-old, and, if they are still okay when they are 70, 80 or 90, they can serve on the board. But it is good to have somebody from every decade so that we can learn to work together and that we can understand the situation we are in. For us to be a transforming Christian witness we need to be a reconciled community. The spirit of reconciliation, peace and love should characterise our actions. Ephesians 4:3 says: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

There is a need to work together in cities or your geographical areas. We need to strengthen and support each other in our cities as we go out to fight the giants, for each city has its own challenges. We need to strengthen our ministers fraternal and our ecumenical forums, and we need to talk together. There is a need for spiritual insight that will bring faith as you work together. We need to create a holy vision owned by the whole faith community.

As they were going to set out, they stood at the river, and, in Joshua 2, we see that Joshua sent out two spies. What I would like to encourage here is that we also need to do research. We need to know our facts. We need to know where we are. We need the Christian academics to do research for the Church on social issues. They need to inform the Church. There needs to be a partnership between academic institutions and the Church as servants of each other. And as we go out we need to know what we have to do.

The last thing they did as they moved out was to sanctify themselves. As they stood at the River Jordan, as the masses had all come together, Joshua said: "Sanctify yourselves, consecrate yourselves, for the Lord will do amazing things among you." We need to sanctify ourselves. There are many areas that you can think about in which that you need to sanctify yourself.

We need to cross the Jordan together. We need to engage in Christian ministry together. Our hands and our hearts need to be clean. We need to be determined to follow God's pattern for crossing the River

Jordan. The Ark is a symbol of His presence and blessing. We need to follow the Lord. We need to take time as we go to fight the giants out in the world. Please don't get sidetracked.

You know there are some people who are about to cross the river. The Lord has opened up a pathway for them to cross but they don't want to go that way. They would rather look for a boat or a 4x4 – the easy way out. But there is not always an easy way of doing things God's way. The easy way is not always God's way. It is going to cost us to move forward together. As we begin to cross the river, don't examine the geological make-up of the riverbed.

I want to encourage us that when we get to the other side, as we have worked together in our communities and in our cities and areas to build altars in remembrance of what God has done in our midst, we do not forget to build altars and move on together. There is so much that the Church needs to do, but our success will depend on how much we will sacrifice to build those bridges for the Church to be a visible unity and how committed we are to work together to fight the giants. Are you ready to fight those giants? Are you ready to do it together? Will you say to the person sitting next to you: "I am with you; we are going forward together." For certainly we are God's people together. Don't get distracted. Move on and do what God is calling you to do.

God bless you.