

COMMITTING OURSELVES

By Pastor RAY McCAULEY

The role of the Church in action

I want to come from the perspective of my journey, our journey, our constituency. It is arrogant to assume that everyone is on our level or are going through the same things. Some people here have had a great impact on my life when I was blinded by many things. I have gone on a journey, hopefully with the churches I have impact with, and the people I fellowship with, which is still continuing.

One of the things I have realised more than anything, is that the biggest mistake we can make, particularly the white minority, is to say that racism is over. I have about 15 years of dealing with this in my own life and still haven't arrived at the place where I think I would like to be.

Every day we are challenged by things which are deep rooted in our hearts and lives. I think of the many times I have been delivered from racism, and racism is not a political issue, but a moral one. And it will pop up in my own life. Have you ever boarded an aeroplane and been told that there is a black pilot? You begin to realise how deep rooted racism is in our own lives and the perceptions we have. The process is still taking place.

If your church closed down, would the community care? Or would they even know? We must be a church that can make an impact outside of ourselves. A church that will influence the community in which we are placed. Pastor Collins used Matthew 5:13-16. I want to read it from the Message translation. It reads: "Let me tell you why you are here. You are here to be salt seasoning that brings out the God flavours of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness?" St Francis of Assisi said we must all preach the Gospel and, if necessary, use words. The Message continues: "You have lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. Here is another way to put it: You are here to be light bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I have put you there on a hill-top, on a light stand – shine!"

There are four major areas that I believe we had to focus on, and we were strong in one of them, in another we were OK, and the other two we were very weak in our constituency. The four areas were to be socially significant. Poverty is a major problem in our nation and the Church has a major role to play in breaking that poverty cycle, to be morally relevant, to have a strong prophetic voice. We need to emphasise the Spirit to live by, life in the Spirit, the power of Christ in us and through us. Someone said the other day: "My faith has healed me." I said: "No, Jesus has healed you." Even our faith originates from Him, and life in the Spirit is vitally important. We also need to be evangelistically potent.

We were thriving in being evangelistically potent, but yet we had no impact in some of the areas I have mentioned. And so our journey began. I was speaking to thousands of people on a Sunday morning and yet 500 metres from our church, the Group Areas Act was in effect. People who attended our church and sent their children to the Sunday School, could not go to the school in the same area, because they were black. While we were preaching to thousands of people on a Sunday, if you were not white you could not live near our church and get involved in the life of the church. So I began to realise that often we were a church which had little influence outside our own constituency. It is not enough to shine our light on each other. The real challenge is not just for us to make a real difference in this world, but to make our world different. And if light doesn't go into darkness, darkness will come into light.

I began to realise that we had become sub-cultured, "bless me" clubs. As long as my life blessed your life we would all light up and it would be great. I light you and you light me and we are all just light. The real challenge was to go beyond ourselves and make an impact outside of ourselves. We had become in-bred. Many of our churches looked the same, spoke the same, had our own language. I realised that because one day I called for an electrician who wasn't a Christian. When he came to fix the problem, I said: "Praise God, brother, thank you, Jesus, that you are here." He looked at me as if I had lost my mind. His language differed from mine. We at times don't even make sense with our sub-culture and our own language to people outside of ourselves.

So we become irrelevant and are not taken seriously at times, and I am talking from my experience; I am not implying that others have not played incredible roles. The first time I was given the opportunity to be invited into the South African Council of Churches, was through Michael inviting me. When we arrived we were among people we shouldn't have been with. And many people sitting here today made it possible for me to have a Damascus Road experience. We were invited to speak to the Communist Party, and I prayed: "Dear Lord, don't let them infect me." We started the meeting and Joe Slovo stopped the meeting. He said: "Why didn't you people open in prayer?" The late Prof Johan Heyns said: "Prayer? I thought you people didn't believe in it." Joe Slovo said: "No, we practise the Sermon on the Mount while you just preach it!" And my Damascus experience began!

I began to realise that if the Church was to be taken seriously and make the impact that it needed to make, we must be known as the Church that serves the community. We must enlarge our circle of love continuously. We were experts in giving people the answer before we asked the question. Yet people are not really interested in how much you know, but in how much you care. And that we who thought we were actually meeting people's needs, at times were not. Let me give you an example. A young man came to me one day and said: "Pastor, will you please pray for me." I laid hands on him and prayed for him, and he said: "I need a job." I prayed for him and I asked him if he could read and write. He said he couldn't. I realised I could pray to him for ever, but it would not help – he needed to learn to read and write. So we started literacy classes and today that man has a good job.

Many times we give a prophetic voice to the problem without the solution. We tell 15-year-old girls who have been thrown out of their houses and communities, who have no recourse, no finances, nothing to look back on, that they cannot have an abortion. Correctly so. But before we tell them what to do, why don't we have a solution for them? Surely we should be building more unwed mothers' homes? Surely we should have an alternative to abortion, based on the fact that the Church has a solution, not just being part of the problem? And so I began to realise that to be socially significant is being the witness and taking that which needs to be taken into the community.

Thirdly we must be a people who are "given". The lowest level of Christianity is to be blessed, and charismatics love to tell you how much they are blessed. But it really doesn't impress me that much, because the lowest level is to be blessed. The highest level is to be a blessing. Even a TV advert came out of that. A young boy comes out and sees a man cleaning a beautiful car. He walks around the car, touches it, looks at it, and his eyes get bigger and bigger. The owner looks at him and says: "Son, you like this car? I just want to tell you, my brother gave it to me." This young boy looks at him and says: "Your brother gave it to you?" The owner looks at the boy and says: "I'm sure you wish you had a brother like that." What the young boy says astounds this man. He says: "No sir, I don't wish I had a brother like that, I wish I could be a brother like that."

If we want to make an impact in our nation, we are going to have to realise that we must live a life of giving. A fulfilled life is a life for others. It is important that we don't leave this conference as swamps, but as rivers. Everything we learn, everything we experience, everything we encounter, should be shared and should be used to help others.

Often, pastor's lives of happiness depend on having. I think the Apostle Paul gave us the great example. He said: "I can live free of circumstances. I have learned that when I have nothing or when I have everything I am content." That I believe is our challenge. It is important for us to realise that we must not complain about what we commit. It is vitally important for us to continue to be part of the solution. We have to leave this conference being purpose-driven. Any time a person has a gift or a talent and loses the purpose of that gift or talent, it is abused.

I began to realise that it is wonderful to have a vision for the church, but you need to get people more committed to the cause than to the lifestyle. Vision is great, but the reason we are here first and foremost is because we love Christ. And we are committed to the cause of Christ first and foremost. And the Church can be distracted, especially in our constituency, where many of us want to live in denial.

Don't think we can say everything in our country is over with, it is all in the past, everything has been dealt with, and that it is OK. There is still a lot of racism in the hearts of many people. I have heard people say: "You know the truth, the truth will set you free," but until we deal with truth openly and honestly, it doesn't set us free. And when I thought I preached the truth, some people got up and walked out while I was preaching. It didn't set them free, it made them mad.

But we are committed to the cause of Christ and not just to the lifestyle. I believe it is vitally important that we all realise that no church can be alone in its mission. Some of the greatest impact I have ever had is from other people who had nothing to do with my constituency. And I thank God that I could learn what it meant to be evangelistically potent, socially significant and morally relevant. It is not good enough to say some churches are strong in one area and others are strong in another area. We need to be balanced in every area. And the challenge is that whenever you take an experience or a truth and replace it with Christ it becomes imbalanced. And so we need to embrace all. We can have unity in the midst of diversity. I thank God that I have learned from being on the Religious Leaders Forum, of being involved in the South African Council of Churches, of having maybe been forced years ago into coming into an alliance for a common goal.

You can form an alliance with any person for a common goal, it doesn't mean that you are insecure in what you believe and that you are going to renounce what you believe. But when it comes to the morality of this nation, we are going to have to form alliances with all sorts. We have common goals, even with the politicians.

We can embrace change with stability. We don't have to throw truth away, we can add truth to our truth. Some pastors when they return to their local churches, change everything, according to the conference they have just attended. They will return from a Praise and Worship conference, remove the chairs from the auditorium, stop preaching and just jump up and down and have a party! Never throw truth away. Just keep adding truth to it. We are all on this journey together. And the more we learn, the more we find out how little we know. It is an exciting journey. We are a great country. We are a great people. Africa is going to be an incredible blessing to the world. Watch and see. We are going to rise to the potential we have. I am excited about it.

Sometimes it is painful, and not all pain is evil. If you are having a heart attack and you are rushed to hospital because of the pain, that pain is a blessing! Some pain is necessary. Short-term pain, long-term pleasure. But I thank God. I am excited about the journey.

Lastly, "Blessed are the short winded, they will be invited back." I had a visiting preacher one night, and when I got up to give the benediction, I needed a shave! In our constituency we were taught the longer you preach the more anointed it is.

We must be fulfilling the Great Commission daily. We are the only people who can take the New Birth to our generation. And there is truth in the saying that if you can change the colour of a person's heart, the colour of the skin no longer matters if the heart is truly changed! It is vital for us to continue to have the opportunities to witness, to be the light, to be the salt, to make an impact and to change people's lives. But we must never underestimate the power of God to bring change. He has changed all of our lives, and he has changed many lives which, if we were God, we would not have changed. But He does it. And it is vital that the Church keeps its witness very strong, that conferences like these are continually placed before us, that we are challenged to be the Church, the light and the salt.

"Father, I pray that we as a whole will be taken seriously. Thank you for challenging people in this place this week. I pray, Lord, that we will not miss this opportunity we have in our nation and in Africa to be the salt and light and to bring the New Birth to mankind. For God so loved the world that He gave His only beloved Son. If we can go into all the world, and our world might be in sport, business, community, cities in rural areas, in disadvantaged areas, the world we go into might preach the Gospel to every creature. Father, my prayer is that we not say to you: 'Follow us, Jesus', but that we will follow you. That we will realise that you are not just a nice, comfortable God, but you are a God who challenges, stretches. That is my prayer today, Lord, that we will have unity in a greater dimension than we have ever had before, right in the midst of diversity. Thank you for the courage it has taken for the leadership to run with this conference at a time when many people don't see how important it is. But the fruit of this conference will speak for itself. Bless each and every person here and let us see them as valuable and precious and that not one is here by accident but on purpose. In Jesus' name."