Kairos Document is still applicable

Theological text is celebrated around the world and still provides lessons 30 years on

THE 30th anniversary of the Kairos Document was celebrated in Johannesburg recently by representatives of various religions and countries around the globe. Drafted in 1985 by a large group of Christians in South Africa, including professional and so-called lay theologians, this document explored faithful and obedient, relevant and appropriate responses of churches to the challenge of apartheid.

Capturing the spirit of that time, it highlighted the desperate need to address the plight of many wronged and marginalised South Africans as well as to advance dignity, healing, justice and freedom for all, especially for the most vulnerable and excluded ones.

True to the meaning of the word Kairos, the document made clear that, as a country, we arrived at a specific moment in time, a moment of opportunity and potential, a favourable moment that constituted a challenge for decisive action.

What made the Kairos Document particularly relevant at the time was its resistance against the state theology and church theology. Back then, state theology was viewed as the theological attempts to justify the apartheid status quo of racial and socio-economic oppression. Injustice was blessed, the will of the powerful was canonised and the poor were oppressed into passivity, obedience and apathy.

While state theology tried to justify apartheid, church theology sought ways of negotiating with the apartheid state. It proclaimed reconciliation without justice, forgiveness without repentance and morally unacceptable compromises. It did not distinguish between the overt and covert violence of the state; the individual and institutional, structural and systemic violence of the state, on the one hand, and the resistant and defensive violence of the oppressed, especially oppressed young people, on the other hand.

Also, it intended sustaining a law and order that did not address the plight of those who were disadvantaged and wronged by oppressive policies and practices. Sadly, church theology paid lip service to reconciliation and justice and failed to do a thorough social, economic and political analysis of the apartheid society. It was naive about the importance of changing political policies and about developing the political will and political strategies to change society.

Since both the state and church theology failed to address the wrongs of apartheid, the Kairos Document proposed prophetic theology as an alternative to help overcome an oppressive system and to advance a society of dignity and healing, justice and freedom. There were several reasons why prophetic theology was considered a more suitable vehicle to help end apartheid.

This type of theology is about envisioning. It pronounces the vision of a new and transformed society. It is a vision of realistic, resilient and responsive hope that translates into concrete liberating and dignifying action.

Prophetic theology is about criticism because it courageously spells out where we do not adhere to the vision of a transformed society. It forces churches and other religious bodies to critically investigate their own personal and collective betrayals of the vision of a society of dignity and justice (self-criticism).

Prophetic theology exposes in a clear manner the betrayal of the vision of a new society in political and economic life, in ecological matters and in civil society (public criticism).

Prophetic theology is about story telling because it prioritises the stories of especially those who are disadvantaged by certain policies and practices. Helping to unmask the so-called unintended negative consequences of well-meaning policies, prophetic theology urges faith communities to participate in policy making, policy implementation, policy monitoring and policy revising processes.

Given the role of prophetic theology in bringing about a just and equitable society, it becomes clear why the Kairos Document pleaded for so-called intelligent prophetic engagement with public life 30 years ago.

Although our context has changed over the last three decades, this document might still provide some lessons to us and other societies today. It argues that we cannot speak credibly about public matters if that speaking is not accompanied by thorough social analysis.

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