From Battle of Andringa Street to Peace and Reconciliation of Andringa Street

The debate that ignited recently about the so-called Battle of Andringa Street in Stellenbosch in July 1940 has led to an inspiring example of reconciliation, writes Henry Jeffreys.

History teaches us that war is easy, peace harder, and reconciliation the hardest.

This has also been the hard lesson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Our “war” – the struggle for and against apartheid – was in a way brought to an end with former president FW de Klerk’s epoch-making speech in parliament.

This was followed by the peace process – the release of former president Nelson Mandela, the legalisation of the ANC and other liberation movements, and, on 27 April 1994, the country’s first fully democratic election.

Then came the hardest part: the search for lasting reconciliation. It is in many respects an ideal that remains elusive, despite the best efforts of people such as Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu.

We still have a long walk ahead on the reconciliation road, and it does not necessarily go along the route of the grand epoch. Perhaps there are lessons to be learnt along strange, unknown byways, such as the case of Andringa Street in Stellenbosch, known today for its chic boutiques, music shops, bookstores and restaurants.

In July 1940 Andringa Street briefly became a war zone because of a clash between white students of the university and more specifically those from the male residence Dagbreek, and coloured residents who were at the time still bona fide inhabitants of Stellenbosch – “with title to our properties”, as one resident put it.

There are divergent accounts of what exactly took place one evening at a local shop, Senitzky’s café, and in the week that followed. Apparently it had all started with a tussle about newspapers.

The accounts differ from each other in terms of the extent and drama of the events, or are even contradictory. Some inhabitants of Die Vlakte, then home to the coloured people, who were present are still wondering today how what they remember as a brawl later acquired the character of a “Battle”.

The historian Prof Hermann Giliomee and a co-author, Gustav Hendrich, describe it in an article entitled “Die Slag van Andringastraat: studente-onluste op Stellenbosch, 1940” as “one of the few incidents in South Africa where one can talk about a white riot”.

And if there had been no Battle, why would Die Vlakte’s housewives have kept boiling water ready on their stoves for nearly a week? “For the invasion, of course,” says Aäron Cupido, who experienced the brawl that evening – or the Battle – at close quarters. Whatever the precise nature of the events in July 1940, the incident developed a “personality” of its own as “The Battle of Andringa Street”, and has continued to be a source of tension between the white and coloured communities of Stellenbosch. A blot on the reputation of generations of Dagbreek residents and a festering wound on the psyche of the displaced coloured communities of Stellenbosch. Neighbours, but also mistrustful strangers.

From July 1940 to September 2012 – a good seven decades later. Pieter Nel, outgoing primarius of Dagbreek, announced an apology for the residence’s role in the Battle of Andringa Street.

“We” (Dagbreek), he said in a statement, “assume responsibility for the events of the past and our involvement therein, by apologising on behalf of this institution for our disobedience and lovelessness that led to our actions.”

The statement read further: “This student violence (The Battle of Andringa Street) can be regarded as a precursor to apartheid’s structural violence by way of forced removals from mixed areas, racial classification, the ban on mixed marriages and the Immorality Act.”

Nel’s announcement was not well received in all quarters, to put it mildly – also not among his fellow Dagbreek residents and the residence’s newly elected leadership.

Fortunately the internal unhappiness was short-lived and most Dagbrekers subsequently saw it as a necessary step, not only in respect of the apology but also the possibilities of forging new relationships.
The Maties rector, Prof Russel Botman, recognised an opportunity in the situation. On 5 November 2012 he hosted a special meeting at his home. The guests were students from Dagbreek and members of the coloured community, including some with first-hand knowledge of what had occurred in July 1940. People in their nineties.

The students and the community members had first talked among themselves about what they hoped to achieve with the talks. Thereafter the two groups came together and talked to each other. It was revelatory and inspiring.

To the students, it was an unforeseen experience. They had believed in the apology without expecting something in return.

“I never dreamt of us meeting the people of Idas Valley and Cloetesville (traditionally Stellenbosch’s two main coloured areas) in this way. We are somewhat overwhelmed,” one of them said.

The students nonetheless wanted to know whether their apology was accepted as being sincere.

“We accept your sincerity and your integrity. We realise that it couldn’t have been easy for you and that it is not acceptable to everyone in your community. We know it won’t be,” responded Otto van Noie, a community leader.

Both groups undertook to engage in further discussions and to pursue closer ties.

A joint statement was issued after the meeting, while the Volkskerk van Afrika (People’s Church of Africa), which is very prominent in the coloured communities of Stellenbosch, said in a separate statement that the apology was “accepted unconditionally”.

“But,” warned Reverend Simon Adams of the Volkskerk, who had also attended the meeting, “there is still much work to do on both sides of the fence to bring about true healing in our town and in the bigger context of our country.”

Wiaan Visser, Matie Student Representative Council member in charge of transformation, was one of the first students to whom Nel had spoken about the apology. He and Hanno Jacobs, Dagbreek’s new primarius, talked to By.

“He (Nel) had been away for the July holiday and became gripped by a book Prof Hermann Giliomee had written about the people of Die Vlakte and in which the Battle of Andringa Street was referred to. He was determined to do something about it.

“There were problems with the way in which he handled the matter, but in retrospect most of us bought into it – including the new residence leadership,” Visser said.

Jacobs, too, was unhappy about the way in which the apology had been dealt with publicly, but nonetheless feels strongly that it had been the right thing to do.

“The conversation with the community members is of incredible significance to us. So too the acceptance of our apology. For us it is no longer just about rugby or braai – that kind of stereotyping. We want to make a difference and be socially accountable.”

Both of them experience a lack of leadership, in Stellenbosch and in the rest of the country. “South Africa is still a young country. We’re in the process of trying to forge an ideal. There are still many people who are struggling to adapt. It requires leadership, particularly on the part of our generation.”

They are ready to take up this challenge and realise that the apology has only been a single step on a long, difficult road.

“Our duty,” says Cupido, who in July 1940 confronted a group of “clearly aggressive” students with a pick handle reinforced with a rusty six-inch nail, “is to forgive, even though they (the students) were not personally involved. We may not reject them.”

And so begins the journey, from the Battle of Andringa Street to the Peace and Reconciliation of Andringa Street ... a journey that may also hold valuable lessons for the rest of South Africa.

— Henry Jeffreys is a former editor of Die Burger, an Afrikaans newspaper. Translated from an article