

# NELSON MANDELA METROPOLE CHURCH LEADERSHIP

## TRANSFORMATIVE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

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### 1. WHAT NEXT?

As ecumenically representative group of church leaders we need to concern ourselves with the never-ending task of discerning the way forward. What do we do next as body of Christ?<sup>1</sup>

We have a commendable history of being enablers. We discern a common call, and work towards empowering churches and believers to take the necessary initiatives and further the common goals in a way fitting with their own particular identity, style, spirituality and gifting. The way the church cooperated with The Ultimate Goal-Project and with the National Prayer Day-Initiative are prime examples.

Whatever we promote, we need to do it in such a way that we empower the faithful at ground level to do God's work. I propose that we continue to lead by focusing on an common vision and a common calling as church, and less on centralised management. That has been one of our habits, and a good one too. Jesus Christ as Head of his Church directs congregations and faith communities in such a way that a beautiful symphony of joint ministry evolves in a way that human effort cannot hope to organise. That is the promise given to those who seek God's will and obey God's calling: our efforts will be richly blessed beyond our wildest dreams.

In this short document I propose that we do more intentional what we have already been up to over a long period of time. *We, at this point in time, need to promote transformative community partnerships at every possible level.* Some may involve congregations directly, others will thrive in others spheres of society, e.g. Christian businesses, academics, teachers, the public, etc. Some will tend to be more formalised, others will be informal and may exist only for a short period. But all partnerships will have the common goal of doing God's work in weaving healing, justice and joy into the very fabric of our society.

### 2. THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 2.1 Identity of God

A proper perspective on God's revealed identity and the coming of God's kingdom in our world is necessary to develop a sense of evangelical social responsibility. We need to formulate – on the

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<sup>1</sup> By "we" I refer to a more or less undefined *communitas* of congregational leaders in the Nelson Mandela Metropole, a group of friends and like-minded visionaries who meet from time to time, e.g. to have breakfast together. The role of TCN (and Fountain Vineyard in another way) in keeping this band together is much appreciated.

basis of the bible - what we dare to expect of God in our society. Our confession of who God is, and what God is up to, will influence our understanding of our calling in society.

The fundamental Christian confession is that God is a Trinitarian God. God is revealed as a holy Community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is diversity and relationships of love in God. God is relational and social. God is Being in Communion.

The intention of early church was *not* to formulate a Trinitarian *dogma*, but to describe the fundamental reality or landscape that we find ourselves in. We may dare to say that God created the cosmos out of and for relational love. We may also say that God “participates” lovingly in God’s creation.

The Bible portrays an active God, a triune God on a mission. Since the fall into sin God works actively to restore relationships, and to bring healing to the cosmos.

## 2.2 God and salvation

What we confess about God influences our expectation of God’s salvation.

**Example 1:** For some Christians God is not interested in the world. God just wants to save us from the world, for his heavenly kingdom. We are not saved *for* the world, our salvation is that we are whisked away from it. Salvation is *only* to be freed from sin in order to gain access to heaven. The world is damned and will be damned, therefore we do not contemplate the world, we contemplate heaven. Salvation is to have your eternal destination sorted out.

**Example 2:** Others see Jesus as a revolutionary who is not interested in a life bigger than the life we have at the moment. Jesus is only interested in social transformation. Salvation is an improved socio-economic set of circumstances. We are captives of the here and now, that is all we have and all we need.

**Example 3:** For some God is the God of the individual. Whatever we may expect of God, it will be localised in the lives of individuals, be it our *individual* justification, healing, or prosperity. If salvation benefits the individual, then evil, disobedience, illness etc will be localised in the individual as well. We are then blind-sides regarding systemic evil and illness, to be healed by a system-wide response.

The Bible says, I propose, that we take the world seriously as God’s creation. That is simply why so much is said about creation – and our responsibility for it. Creation is to be understood inclusively, it also includes us as human beings. Even after sin damaged creation, God is concerned with his creation. God continues to create a trustworthy world, where it is safe and joyful to live.

Indeed, the triune God is actively involved in God’s creation, bringing healing, justice and joy through the coming of God’s kingdom in every sphere of creation. As holy and loving Community or Partnership of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God brings restoration in relationships, and creates a trustworthy world through love and justice. He opposes brokenness, and brings restoration. God’s ministry is to weave peace into the life of God’s creation. This is a summary of the Christian Credo through the ages.

## 2.3 God's call

God is up to something in every community, and invites Christians to join Him in pursuing God's purposes. His calling is local and specific. Faith communities and individual Christians are therefore held accountable to - through spiritual discernment – identify God's calling on their lives.

God's calling cannot be reduced to involvement in a congregation's programme or the maintenance of congregational interests only. It is broader.

God always call us in partnership with others. Through spiritual discernment we do not only discern our local and specific calling, but also the partners God gives us. Those partners are not only other congregations or Christians, but can involve any other person or agency, e.g. businesses, government institutions etc.

To be a disciple of Jesus, means to be called. To be a Christian faith community means to be called. And this call has – always – social and system-wide dimensions.

## 2.4 God's kingdom

God's kingdom and the church is not identical. The kingdom is bigger than the church. The church, as community of believers, is a sign, a foretaste and an instrument of the kingdom. The church is everywhere. It follows that the daily work believers do is also part of the kingdom, and serving the kingdom.

We therefore need to look at our daily work as sign, foretaste and instrument of the kingdom. The police officer, the veterinarian, the medical doctor, teacher, shop-owner, all of us are partners in the coming of God's kingdom.

## 3. TRANSFORMATIVE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

### 3.1 Conceptual

The concept of transformative community partnerships (TCP) is a way in which Christians and others join hands to weave trustworthiness, healing, justice, peace and joy into communities. We do it practically, with an eye on God's future for us. The biblical expectation of a blissful future, energises us to change this world in the direction of God's new world at the end of this age. We call this change biblical transformation.

**A vital priority for Christian leaders is to strategise in order to bring Christians and agencies purposefully in contact with one another, in order to form transformative community partnerships as a way of taking hands to join God in God's mission.** These partnerships will include all role-players. The idea is to discover who the partners are that God gives us for our particular calling of mission.

### 3.2 The church's collective role

What can the ecumenical or collective church in our metro pole do to further partnerships? A few ideas:

1. Promote the vision.
2. Train members to partner. Various agencies offer partnership training for specific purposes. We may also developed our own training.
3. Discover and introduce partners to one another. We need a strategy to help us see God's call, to see various possible partners, and to meet them.
4. Workshop specific areas, let's say education or the environment, and form partnerships to support the task of education.
5. Identify and communicate the stories of various partnerships that may already exist, although we do not see them for what they are.
6. Set believers free to do what God calls them to do – we do not claim their time and resources exclusively for the congregation's program.
7. Prayer
8. Identify ways to represent, or invite, the community into the congregation's life, e.g. during church services.
9. Promote an asset-based approach to community transformation.<sup>2</sup> Those formed by Western cultural values often view so-called underdeveloped communities as empty jars in need of

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<sup>2</sup> **Asset-based community development (ABCD)** is a methodology that seeks to uncover and utilize the strengths within communities as a means for sustainable development. The basic tenet is that a capacities focused approach is more likely to empower the community and therefore mobilize citizens to create positive and meaningful change from within. Instead of focusing on a community's needs, deficiencies and problems, the ABCD approach helps them become stronger and more self-reliant by discovering, mapping and mobilizing all their local assets. Few people realize how many assets any community has, for example:

- Skills of its citizens, from youth to people with disabilities, from thriving professionals to starving artists
- Dedication of its citizens associations — churches, culture groups, clubs, neighbourhood associations
- Resources of its formal institutions — businesses, schools, libraries, community colleges, hospitals, parks, social service agencies

By the late 1990s, communities around the country were mapping and using these resources in imaginative ways, bringing them out of the closet and into creative synergy with each other, with dramatic results. Asset-based community development has provided leaders and institutions in all sectors with an approach that is relatively cheap, effective and empowering, that avoids paternalism and dependence — an approach that can be supported by all parts of the political spectrum and initiated at any level of civic life.

The first step in the process of community development is to assess the resources of a community through a capacity inventory or through another process of talking to the residents to determine what types of skills and experience are available to a community organization. The next step is to consult with the community and find out what improvements the residents would like to make. The final, and most challenging step, is to determine how the residents' skills can be leveraged into achieving those goals.

**A word of warning:** Using this model, the communities who hire ABCD speakers to influence their citizens are sometimes looking for an opportunity to create artificial community consensus. By creating farmed neighbourhood associations they

being filled with help from the outside. In this frame of mind the Western culture is superior and we need to bring those being left behind to the same standards by delivering a superior package of knowledge and skills. This approach disregards the resources God is providing in every community.

#### 4. THE NEXT STEP

This short presentation is intended to stimulate thought. We should **workshop** the idea of community partnerships as a possible way forward for the church collective in our metro pole to promote Christian change in society.

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sideline actual community participants who often do not agree with the city policies. These artificial groups use the Delphi technique to block participation by real community members who raise points that are avoided by city sponsored neighbourhood groups. Under the guise of creating 'sustainable communities' neighbourhood associations will be developed that are run by hand-picked city insiders who will rubberstamp city programs like redeveloping neighbourhoods and redesigning streets. This visioning is supposedly community based but is not. They shut down any dissenting voices and marginalize, ridicule, attack, silence, and ignore those who do not agree. (Source: Wikipedia)