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Challenges Facing the Church in Southern Africa

1. Introduction

I am grateful to the Almighty God and to The Presbyterian Church in Canada, for an opportunity accorded to me, to receive the Award for service on “the cutting edge of mission”. It is true that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts nor are our ways his ways (Isaiah 55:8). God is not time bound. In Namibia, we do not have the Presbyterian Church; however, the Lord has made it possible for me and my family to share fellowship with you in this wonderful way.

I have been in your beautiful country a few times before. I remember when I came to visit with the United Church of Canada; it was a few months before I was ordained as Deacon in the Anglican Diocese of Namibia. Through sharing my experiences on the journey of seeking ordination in my Church, I was tremendously encouraged by my fellow Christians in Canada not to give up hope in pursuing ordination to the Priesthood. It was here where, once again, I heard God’s call in the words of the Prophet Isaiah ringing very clearly in my ears: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” I was ready to answer: “Here am I, send me, Lord!”

Thank you very much for your kindness in giving me such an award. As I am receiving this award, I am sharing the honour in three ways: first with my family who has always understood when I had to leave them for many weeks on my travels; secondly with my Church which has opened doors for my education and exposing me to the world; and thirdly to my beloved country Namibia, the land of the brave, where God has created me for a purpose.

2. My Story

I come from a humble background. My father has been a polygamist. My two younger sisters and I were born when our father was doing business in the area. We never had an opportunity to spend any memorable time with him. One of the things I have missed so much when I was growing up is sitting on my father’s lap as a child. He was never there. My mother played both her role as mom and that of dad. It was not easy growing up because we never had basic necessities a child would want to have. However, my mother tried her very best until I’d finished school and made it in life. At a very early age I decided that I was not going to allow my child to go through the same situation I went through. I decided that if there was going to be a child in my life, I would only have it with a responsible father and a committed husband in a proper relationship (marriage, that is). The Lord has been merciful and he rewarded me with a wonderful relationship with Kuutumbeni Kathindi to whom I got married in 1988 and we have been abundantly blessed with two children: Xungi and Maguno and a wonderful extended family including their niece Melecia.

My opportunity to develop in life was given by the Church when I was granted a scholarship to study a short English course in England in 1980. I had to improve my English because I studied in the Afrikaans medium of instruction in high school. After an English course I got an opportunity to further my studies

with the Episcopal Church in the United States of America where I studied for a BA in Sociology and a Master in Theological Studies.

My story is characterized by two threads intertwined. One thread being working in my Church and another one being working in an ecumenical movement, the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN), the Fellowship of Councils of Churches in Southern Africa (FOCCISA) and globally. My involvement with CCN started when I was working as a Youth Director in the Anglican Diocese of Namibia.

The Church's response to what was happening at the time in the apartheid system was very appealing to a young person who had just returned from a study period of six years in the USA.

Although the issue of pursuing ordination in my Church was a challenging one, I thank God that I was ordained Deacon in 1993 and a Priest in 1994. After my ordination I continued to work at CCN and helped my Church on a part-time basis and this has continued until today.

In 1988 I became a Coordinator of the Women's Desk at CCN. I dealt with issues of mobilizing and building awareness among women on understanding their rights and on how to respond to the issues affecting them every day. CCN also adopted the World Council of Churches Program: The Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women: 1988-1998. Women were also mobilized to prepare the nation for the reception of their children who returned from exile in 1989. In 1996 I left CCN. In 1997 I was the first woman priest to be instituted in the parish of Grace Church in my Diocese. I was appointed Archdeacon in 1998 with several parishes under my care.

In 1999 I came back to CCN as General Secretary – first woman to hold the position in the country. Having been one of the first women in some positions in my Church and in my country in itself has not been very much important to me. What has been most important is doing what I felt the Almighty God was calling me to do. Some of the experiences I have gone through in my life have been so humbling that I knew right away that it was from God and obviously I had to be very faithful.

In 1991 when Archbishop Tutu sent me to attend the World Council of Churches' 7th Assembly in Canberra, Australia, I got elected to serve on the WCC Central Committee, not knowing anything about CC. I did not refuse the nomination because I knew that it was meant to be. I believed that such an experience was meant to prepare me to be a leader in the ecumenical movement in my country – as General Secretary of CCN.

3. Namibia: The Land of the Brave

Our country Namibia is in the Southwestern corner of Africa, bordered by The Republic of South Africa (RSA) to the south, Angola to the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, Botswana to the east and Zambia to the northeast. The size of the country is 824,292 square kilometers, thus slightly less than British Columbia. Our population is 1.8 million people. Our capital city, Windhoek, has 250,000 inhabitants. We export natural resources like diamonds, uranium, copper, zinc, beef, fish, grapes, and karakul skins.

The territory was colonized by Germany in 1884. South African forces invaded it in 1915 and it remained a mandate of South Africa (SA) until 1946. Instead of developing it and leading it to independence, SA applied the system of apartheid (racial discrimination). Through this system Namibians were subjected to suffering and oppression. They protested through a liberation movement, the South West Africa's

People Organization (SWAPO), which brought about free elections supervised by the United Nations Organization and independence on the 21st of March 1990. We are proud to be an independent nation able to choose our own leaders and make our own decisions.

4. The Church in Namibia

Christianity came to Namibia in the middle of 1800. The main churches are Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Dutch Reformed. 90% of the population is Christian. Early on in the Namibian history, the Church played a significant role in providing health services and education for the Namibian people that formed the basis for the struggle for independence.

The Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) was established in 1978 as a Christian Center. Christians came together with a purpose to respond to the challenge of the oppressive system of apartheid. There were many problems caused by the system of apartheid: the contract labour system was oppressive and any attempts to resist the apartheid system were punished with imprisonment, torture, humiliation and death. This led to many Namibians leaving the country to fight for the liberation of the country from South Africa. The apartheid system imposed an inferior education system called Bantu education aimed at educating black people halfway and did not allow their potential to be developed fully like those of the whites.

The CCN provided alternative programs and projects, e.g., health and social services, legal aid, advocacy, food aid, contextual theology, literacy, English language and scholarships to address the crisis at the time. This was made possible by generous donations from Churches, solidarity groups and other organizations in the world. CCN was identified as a suitable institution to receive the exiled Namibians during the UNO supervised repatriation program.

5. Challenges

Our Sub-region, Southern Africa, is in a crisis as many regions in Africa and other parts of the world. As much as the sub-region has been witnessing political stability in the past thirteen years, new challenges are manifesting themselves in different forms.

The biggest challenges we are facing are: drought (El Niño), the HIV/AIDS pandemic, violence against women and children, the Land Reform, reconciliation, etc. Mission on the cutting edge will have more meaning when it addresses issues of evangelism, pastoral care, caring for the elderly and youth work. The Church in Southern Africa is therefore grappling with the challenges they face in the context of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the mission to which the Almighty God has called us all to respond. God himself prepares us and shapes us for his mission. He predestined people like Dr. E. H. Johnson to make a difference in his Church. This is the difference we all must try to make in our every day work.

5.1 The Drought (El Niño)

We are experiencing unusual phenomena of a change in the weather patterns. Our farmers are no longer sure when to start cultivating their fields because the rains are no longer coming at the usual time. This situation has caused our countries to suffer from drought and having a burden of feeding so many people and prevent starvation. The people in the rural areas and in the informal settlements in

cities are the ones who are it the hardest by the crisis. The subsistence farmers who depend on rain are left without hope and as a last result they have to beg for food.

The effects of drought differ from one country to another. In some countries, like Lesotho, people are faced with real famine and Churches, Governments and Non-Governmental Organizations are compelled to respond to the crisis. Namibia has been experiencing the challenge of drought for many years now. Our government, with assistance of the Church, has been responding faithfully to feed those who are highly affected. The sad news is that this seems to be a vicious cycle, happening every year, thus taking up a good part of the national budget.

5.2 The HIV/AIDS Pandemic

One of the biggest challenges in the Church in Africa today is to promote adequate response to the scourge of HIV/AIDS, the greatest threat to abundant life in contemporary Africa. Namibia is the second worst affected country by the pandemic. Her neighbouring countries, Angola, Botswana, Zambia, South Africa, Zimbabwe and others in the region are also not spared.

Each and every Namibian family has lost loved ones to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. There are families in Namibia that are managed by children who have become orphans because both parents have died of AIDS. In Namibia the estimated number of orphans is about 82,000.

In some of our regions children are forced to travel long distances to work after school in order to feed their siblings. CCN is involved in facilitating help for some of these children to cope with the difficult situation which they find themselves.

Communities affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, drought, poverty, violence against women and children have become new frontiers of mission. This is one of the challenges the Church in Southern Africa is expected to respond to.

In regard to HIV/AIDS the Church of Christ needs to find ways of how to deal with stigma, fear and discrimination against those who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. The burden of dealing with death is so real in our communities. So many people are dying every day than we have ever seen before. Our pastors/priests are literally tired of burying the dead. Funds are needed to organize retreats to strengthen these pastors. The energy, stamina and sanity of these clergy must be preserved in order for the work of the Church to continue.

Despite this seemingly bleak picture, I believe that the message of the Risen Christ still has meaning in a desperate situation like ours. The Church of Christ can still give hope to God's people in such a hopeless situation. Christ must still be demonstrated in what we do and in who we are as his followers in Southern Africa. We depend on the power of the Holy Spirit that sustains us.

The Council of Churches in Namibia has established a Voluntary Counselling and Testing Centre (VCT) at the CCN Headquarters. This service provides an opportunity for people to voluntarily have their blood tested in order to know their status and receive counselling in how to take control of the HIV virus and how to prevent it. The efforts to establish such a service were done to respond to the crisis although there was no budget line in the Council. We wrote letters to our Christian friends inside and outside the country. We were supplied with medical supplies and some money. In this way we were able to establish the Centre that was the first Church-based centre in the country. The demand for more such

Centres in the country is very high. Many Churches have the potential to run these, but they need resources to establish them.

Most of our member churches have established programs to deal with the HIV/AIDS pandemic in their churches. Churches have joined hands with the Ministry of Health and Social Services, to fight against the pandemic. The Church in Namibia has also responded to the increasing number of orphans in our country in establishing the Church Alliance for Orphans (CAFO). CAFO's aim is to empower Churches and Faith Based Organizations in responding to the crisis of the orphans and other vulnerable children in our communities. Through CAFO Churches and Faith Based Organizations are empowered with information and their capacity is built in dealing with the crisis. We are seeking wisdom from the Almighty God and support from fellow believers and people of good will to win the fight against HIV/AIDS because we cannot afford to lose; it will be too costly.

The HIV/AIDS crisis has devastated the lives of women and the girl children in Namibia. In most cases women are rendered powerless, as they have no say in matters of sex. Women face the violation of their rights and dignity as their husbands infect them and they have no freedom to say no to unsafe sex. The girl children face the danger of being infected through incest and rape by older men who sometimes happen to be their family members. This devastating situation leads women to die faster because their willpower to fight AIDS has been weakened by the agony and pain caused by betrayal from their partners.

5.3 Violence Against Women and Children

Our Sub-region has welcomed the effort of the WCC to introduce the Decade to Overcome Violence (2001 to 2010). Our countries have experienced so much violence and women and children have been highly affected. During the recent years the rates of rape, domestic violence, and sexual abuse have escalated in a dramatic way. Namibians have seen unusual cruel incidences of violence. There have been killings of girlfriends by their boyfriends and wives by husbands who also in the end take their own lives. Killings and suicides linked to the HIV/AIDS infection, abuse and killing of children in some instances by their relatives. Rape even of small children by people who believe they can be cured from HIV/AIDS when they sleep with virgins or small children. Last month when a husband failed to kill his wife he turned his gun on his four year old daughter and later on himself.

Disregard of human life has spawned a 'culture of violence' that permeates all facets of human life as evident in increasing heartbreaks, injuries, brutal attacks and deaths which have become part of daily life. How do we expect to build a nation/world of peace if the women remain silent and remain with those who beat, abuse and dominate them, robbing them of the very life that God has given each one of us? Our challenge as the Church is to seek to support women and children, rather than counsel them back into those situations.

The Church must continue to speak out against violence. The 'culture of violence' prevailing in our communities has convinced the Church to analyze the situation deeper in realizing that it is not enough to reach out to the victims without addressing the case of the perpetrators of violence. Counselling to perpetrators is important in order to facilitate the process of soul-searching leading to repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation between the victim and the perpetrator.

On the 12th of December 2000, two colleagues and I were robbed at gunpoint on a street in Johannesburg, South Africa. The experience left me with horrible fears of being in Johannesburg and I

dreaded every trip I had to take from Namibia to South Africa. A year later I had an opportunity to spend eight days in retreat at the same convent where the robbery took place. Through prayer and meditation I was able to forgive the robbers and even had an opportunity to walk the same street twice on my own without fear. These days I do not think about the incident, I have reconciled with the situation.

As it was realized by the delegates at the WCC 8th Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, 1998, violence is very common and a familiar phenomenon in all societies in the world. It requires concerted efforts for us to work together even if it means that we work beyond the walls of the Church to overcome violence and build peace. Today we are praising God for the positive developments and for peace that is prevailing in our neighbouring country, Angola. For many years the Namibian people have tried to support the process of peace building in Angola.

Angolan civilians and soldiers were treated in Namibian hospitals during the war.

Up to 2001 the war in Angola had spilled over into Namibia where many lives have been lost through killings and landmines. A consultation with the Angolan and Namibian churches took place in Windhoek in 2000. In 2001 the WCC General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Konrad Raiser, visited Southern Africa to express solidarity with us in the region that we devastated by HIV/AIDS and violence. As it was impossible for him to visit Angola, the Angolan Churches were invited to meet him in Namibia.

5.4 Land Reform

The land question in Namibia is a challenge because it is still an unresolved issue. The experience in Zimbabwe has been very difficult, but a very good lesson to us. Namibians are working very hard to avoid a similar situation. Injustice in the issue of land continues, where the land is in the hands of a few commercial farmers and the farm workers are still facing harsh conditions on the farms. Since farm workers do not have ownership over the land, they are evicted summarily. Also when farms are sold the sellers leave the workers to the new owners, after government has to take over and resettle the people or give them alternative housing. There have been cases where farm labourers have been chased away from farms and ended up on the streets without any benefits. Most of the farm workers have been born on these farms.

The Government of the Republic of Namibia has come up with policies and guidelines to help resolve the matter amicably. One of the government policies is the willing seller, willing buyer concept where the government buys land from landowners at market prices to resettle the landless people in the country. The resettlement program is a responsibility of all Namibians. It is a challenge for both government and church. The amount of resources required to train the new commercial farmers cannot be provided by government alone – support from friendly nations is needed.

The CCN is working with the member churches to address issues between the commercial farmers and their workers. The situation is complex because there is still some commercial farmers who have not transcended to accept their workers as partners on the land, therefore the issue is highly politicized. Trade Unions in the country have also worked hard in mobilizing and building awareness on land reform. There is also clear evidence of the few commercial farmers who try hard to improve the conditions of their workers and have accepted black people as their sisters and brothers in Christ.

These commercial farmers have also applied the minimum wage requirement of paying their workers at least N\$400.00 per month. There is still a long way to go, but Namibia remains hopeful in resolving this critical question of land.

5.5 Reconciliation

Transformation Namibia: Heal our Land

The Government of the Republic of Namibia has introduced the Policy of National Reconciliation immediately after independence. The policy has been working as there is still peace prevailing in the country. It has however become necessary for Namibians to work on improving national reconciliation in the country as there are still challenges of relationships among blacks and whites, the Breaking of the Wall of Silence group that is seeking reconciliation between themselves and SWAPO and the Caprivi crisis of the United Democratic Front who would like to secede from Namibia. The Churches have tried to seek for a solution to some of these challenges, but it has been very difficult.

CCN has been part of the transformation process with the aim of leading Namibians towards a meaningful reconciliation process. Efforts were made to celebrate the Workers Day (1st of May) by the three pillars of our society: the Church, the Business Sector and Unions, and the Government. One of the highlights was supposed to be a possible apology from the white community to the black community because of the apartheid system of South Africa which was imposed on Namibia and the effects of it. The day ended up being celebrated separately because of the politics surrounding reconciliation in Namibia. Hard lessons were learned during the process. Reconciliation is very difficult. There are many scars which are reminding black people of the past. More time needs to be spent in preparing ground, platform and building bridges where reconciliation can be constructed. The understanding among black people and whites is very different. A better way needs to be found for the Church to continue reconciling God's people in Namibia.

The Church in Namibia is excited about serving God and his people in this challenging time in our history. We hope to be able to make a difference in God's mission today. We are very grateful to our sisters and brothers in Canada, especially in the Presbyterian Church, for remembering us and our situation. We hope that the Lord will continue to bind us together in his love. We wish you all God's care and blessings.