

# Revisiting the Kairos document after 40 years: A challenge to the churches in South Africa

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It has been 40 years since the publication of the important Kairos document in 1985. Although much has changed in South Africa, many things have also remained the same. Millions of people are still suffering, and this has once again brought the country to the brink of disaster. That is what this article is about. It provides a short overview of the context and key content of the Kairos document, followed by an examination of the various aspects of the current crisis in the country. It then affirms the fact that the Church is an important agent of change before moving to an important meeting that took place between the South African Council of Churches and Cyril Ramaphosa, President of South Africa. This meeting, which took place within the National Dialogue Initiative, serves as an important indicator, that the government also recognises the important role that the Church can play in bringing change to the country. In the last part of the article, the Rustenburg Church conference of 1990 is used as an example for a *Lekgotla* of Christian churches and Christian organisations. The article concludes by emphasising that the best way to celebrate the Kairos document, is for Christians to rise as one to save the country from disaster.

**Contribution:** This article revisits the Kairos document of 1985 as an example of how the churches in South Africa can answer to the current challenges in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Kairos document; poverty; education; corruption; ecology; National Dialogue Initiative; South Africa; *Lekgotla*.

## Introduction

The time has come. The moment of truth has arrived. South Africa has been plunged into a crisis that is shaking the foundations, and there is every indication that the crisis has only just begun and that it will deepen and become even more threatening in the months to come. It is the KAIROS or moment of truth not only for apartheid but also for the Church. (Kairos Southern Africa 2011)

These are the famous words from the first paragraph of the Kairos document. It clearly states that the Church reached a moment of truth in 1985. Although these prophetic words referred to apartheid, the author's thesis is that a new moment of truth has arrived 40 years later. South Africa is once again facing challenges that could push the country over the edge into the proverbial abyss. Poverty, corruption, crime and violence, to name just a few, have pushed the country to the edge of the abyss. Something must be done, and the Church can play a significant role as an agent of change, like it did in 1985.

The purpose of this article is to revisit the Kairos document to indicate how the document can assist the Church in South Africa in addressing the current challenges. To achieve this, the author will utilise the document itself and other literary sources to provide an overview of the document's content and the historical context in which it was written. The focus of the article is not the entire content of the Kairos document itself, but rather the challenge to action in the last part of the document. The author will use this challenge to action to indicate a way forward for the Church in South Africa. In the process, the author will also demonstrate how the Church, as an agent of change, can contribute to solving the current crisis through necessary action.

## Overview of the context of the Kairos document

Forty years have gone by since the publication of the Kairos document. To understand the importance of the document and its impact on the Church and society, it is essential to revisit the context in which the document originated. This context was best described in the prophetic words of the then

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newly elected president of the South African Council of Churches, Dr Beyers Naudé when he said (Report 1985):

I believe that there is general agreement within the rank of the [South African Council of Churches] SACC that apartheid is crumbling and that the clear signs are there of it only being a matter of time before the massive edifice is going to topple and fall. The when and how of this process can be debated, but the fact that it is already beginning to happen, there need not be a discussion.

This statement opens a window through which the context of South Africa in the late 1980s can be viewed. Mabuza quotes Villa-Vicencio who describes the situation in which the Church found itself as follows (Mabuza 2009):

The intensity of the political situation in South Africa has compelled the Kairos theologians to look again into the theological tradition of the church to locate resources with which to meet the challenge of the times. (p. 76)

Times were indeed challenging. South Africa was sliding deeper into chaos because of the policy of the National Party government under the leadership of P.W. Botha, the then State President of South Africa, and the protests of millions of South Africans who sought to bring about political change in the country (Mabuza 2009:76).

According to De Gruchy, 'increasing militant mass action which coincided with the escalation of the armed struggle, and the tightening of international sanctions to make the country ungovernable' (De Gruchy 2004:195) played a significant role. In response, Botha declared a State of Emergency, which began on 21 July 1985, and lasted until 1989 (Hofmeyer & Pillay 1994:288). This meant that the state security system was given even more power to oppose all opposition. 'Detention without trial, torture, the murder of political activists, and the escalation of violence in black townships became the day-to-day business of state security agencies' (De Gruchy 2004:196). This led to thousands of people, including many Christians, being detained, tortured and killed. Although the National Initiative for Reconciliation<sup>1</sup> was launched in September 1985, for many young and angry people in the townships, this was not enough. They were calling for radical resistance (De Gruchy 2004:196), which manifested in the founding of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ITC), established in Soweto in 1982 under the leadership of Frank Chikane and Albert Nolan. Chikane was a product of the Black Consciousness Movement and the Soweto uprising, which gave him the ideal credentials for leading the ITC. Nolan was a Catholic theologian who assisted Chikane in gathering theologians from Soweto to formulate a theological response to the burning issues facing the Church, which would become the Kairos document (De Gruchy 2004:197). This meant that the document did not originate from churches or synods, but came from the grassroots of society (Hofmeyer & Pillay 1994:288). The importance of the document is underlined by the fact that soon after the drafting of the document was completed, it

1. It was launched in Pietermaritzburg by African Enterprise where 400 church leaders from different churches convened to address the growing conflict in the country.

gathered signatures of support from all over the country, even before the document was made public in September 1985.

## The content of the Kairos document

The content of the Kairos document is well known. A brief overview of the different theologies identified in the document will therefore suffice. After stating that a moment of truth has arrived, the document discusses three trends of theology that developed in the country, namely *State Theology*, *Church Theology* and *Prophetic Theology* (Kairos document 1985). *State Theology* was described as 'the semireligious ideology of the then apartheid state, and which was practised by the Afrikaans speaking churches who supported the government policy of apartheid' (Kairos document 1985). *Church theology* was specifically noticed among the English-speaking churches. These churches spoke of reconciliation, justice and non-violence, but without a critical analysis of the socio-political conditions. Although they generally condemned apartheid, they never took the next step to actively protest the apartheid state. *Prophetic theology* was 'based on a critical analysis of the concrete historical situation, and it concluded that the apartheid regime was illegal and unreformable and had to be replaced' (Kairos document 1985). Although it can be argued that this did happen in 1994, when the first democratic election took place in South Africa, formally bringing an end to the apartheid era, the question may be asked whether the document has indeed any relevance for the churches in South Africa 40 years later. To answer this question, I would like to focus on the last chapter of the document, 'Challenge to Action', and the *Conclusion* of the document. The reason for this is found in the *Preface* and in the *Conclusion* of the document, which reads as follows (Kairos Southern Africa 2011):

There is nothing final about this document. Our hope is that it will continue to stimulate discussion, debate, reflection, and prayer, but, above all, that it will lead to action. We invite all committed Christians to take this matter further, to do more research, to develop the themes we have presented here, or to criticise the mandatory turn to the Bible, as we have tried to do, with the question raised by the crisis of our times.

How the challenge of our times has changed after 40 years will be discussed later, but what is important is to understand how the churches acted as agents of change during a very dark time in the history of South Africa. This becomes evident upon reading the last part of the document, namely, the 'Challenge to Action' (Kairos document 1985). The point of departure for the challenge to action is a call to all churches to 'be united in faith and action with those who are oppressed' (Kairos Southern Africa 2011). It then proceeds by stating that this unity and reconciliation within the Church itself are found in God and Jesus Christ, who urges the Church to side with those who are suffering and oppressed (Kairos Southern Africa 2011). This unity should translate into concrete and effective action. Five examples are then described in the document. They are:

- Participation in the struggle: All Christians are called to participate in the struggle for liberation. 'The church

must move beyond a mere “ambulance ministry” to a ministry of involvement and participation’.

- Transformation of church activities: All church activities such as Sunday services, communion services, baptisms, Sunday school and funerals must be reshaped to be fully consistent with a prophetic faith related to the Kairos document that God is offering.
- Special campaigns: Church in her congregations needs special programmes, projects and campaigns which are aligned with the special needs of the struggle for liberation in South Africa.
- Civil disobedience: The church should not only pray for a change in government, but it should also mobilise its members in every congregation to work for a plan for a change of government in South Africa.
- Moral guidance: It is an important part of the calling of the Church to help people to understand their rights and their duties (Kairos Southern Africa 2011).

The *Call to action* concludes by stating that: ‘the Church of Jesus Christ is not called to be a bastion of caution and moderation. It has a message of the cross that inspires to make sacrifices for justice and liberation. It conveys a message of hope that challenges all Christians to awaken and act with hope and confidence’ (Kairos Southern Africa 2011). The Church is called to preach the message of the cross not only in sermons and statements, but also through actions, programmes, campaigns and divine services (Kairos Southern Africa 2011).

The importance of these words is confirmed by De Gruchy (2004) when he writes:

The Kairos document made an impact far beyond the borders of South Africa. Indeed, it soon became one of the theological documents of the ecumenical church in the late twentieth century. (p. 198)

Although the document was not perfect and was criticised by important theologians such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was unhappy about how Church theology and reconciliation were, in his terms, caricatured and criticised (Solomons 2020:4), it called on the DNA of the Church as an agent of change to confront the crisis in South Africa. Pillay confirms this by saying that throughout the ages (Pillay 2017):

[T]he church has been involved in the life of humankind, in making of nationhood, building of culture, structuring of society with its functions and institutions and in shaping the form and quality of political systems. (p. 1)

He continues by stating that the church from its inception ‘has always had a concept of transformation and change in its mission and ministry’ (Pillay 2017:1). Referring specifically to the Kairos document, he makes the critical remark that the document (Pillay 2017):

[A]sserted that the Bible does not separate the human person from the world, in which he or she lives; it does not separate the individual from the social, or one’s private life from one’s public life. God redeems the whole person as part of God’s whole

creation. Hence, a truly biblical spirituality would penetrate every aspect of human existence and would exclude nothing from God’s redemptive will. (p. 10)

If this point of view is to be taken seriously, the Church is called to be part of radical social transformation – also in the current South African crisis.

That the Kairos document played an essential part in bringing an end to apartheid cannot be denied, mainly because it was not just another witness to the wrongs of apartheid and the evil that came from it, but because it challenged the Church to act. Turning the pages of history forward to South Africa in 2025, it is this contribution of the Kairos document that should serve as an important example to the Church as an agent of change in contemporary South Africa. To understand this statement, I will briefly focus on some of the most pressing issues in South Africa that challenge the Church to act.

## The current South African context

South Africa is broken. It is impossible to discuss all the reasons for this statement in detail, and it falls outside the focus of this article to do so. To understand the brokenness and the vital role that the *Challenge to Action* in the Kairos document can play in prompting the Church to act in contemporary South Africa, I will provide a brief overview of some of the most significant indicators of the country’s situation.

### Poverty

One of the most significant indicators of the country’s brokenness is the pervasive poverty. Millions of people in South Africa live in poverty and struggle with food insecurity. In a recent report by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA 2025), ‘Food Security in South Africa in 2019, 2022 and 2023: Evidence from the General Household Survey’, the scale of the issue is highlighted. In 2023, approximately 19.7%, which amounts to roughly 3.7 million households, faced moderate to severe food insecurity, while 1.5 million endured severe hunger. With economic pressures and rising food prices, ensuring food security remains a key challenge for the country (Stats SA 2025:24). The situation worsens with further statistics indicating that millions of South Africans rely on social grants as their primary means of survival. What is important is that the proportion of grant-reliant households experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity increased from 20.2% in 2019 to 21.8% in 2022 reaching 26.6% in 2023 (Stats SA 2025:25). These statistics are confirmed by the World Bank that states in its report that approximately 55.5% (30.3 million people) of the population in South Africa is living in poverty at the national upper poverty line (~ZAR 992), while a total of 13.8 million people (25%) are experiencing food poverty (World Bank 2025).

### Corruption

A second important indicator is the widespread corruption that is prevalent in the country. While millions are suffering



extreme poverty, it is corruption that bleeds the country dry. Mubangizzi describes the situation correctly when he writes (Mubangizi 2025):

South Africans are sick and tired of corruption. They are angry, frustrated, and despondent. And they have every reason to be. South Africa has many problems: crime, unemployment, poverty, gender-based violence, inequality, low economic growth, and now, in common with many other countries, COVID-19. The list goes on and on. What makes corruption the biggest threat among all these is that it cuts across all of them and impacts on their gravity in different ways.

The 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), released by the anti-corruption organisation Transparency International (TI), underscores the significance of this challenge. The apparent stagnation of South Africa's anti-corruption efforts, with a score of 41, the same as last year, means that the country remains stubbornly below the global average of 43, having dropped by three points since 2019 (Corruption Watch 2025).

### Violent crime

A third indicator of South Africa's miserable situation is violent crime. The numbers on assault with grievous bodily harm (GBH), which in most cases refers to rape, confirm the seriousness of the situation. In 2022–2023, 19 418 reported cases of common assault and assault with GBH crimes were committed against children, making up about 45.0% of all reported crimes against children in the named period. Rape was the most reported crime against children, accounting for 38.3% of all cases involving minors. Although the number of incidents has decreased, it remains a significant concern because of its traumatic impact on young victims (Stats SA 2024:1). The second quarter crime statistics of 2024 reveal the terrible acts of violence against women and children in the country. While violent crimes have decreased overall between July and September 2024, crimes against women and children continued to increase. While 315 children were murdered, 1944 were assaulted with intent to cause GBH. In the same period, 957 women were murdered, while 14 366 women were assaulted with intent to cause GBH, of which 4989 were casualties of domestic violence. Of the 10 191 rapes reported, 43% (795) women were the victims of their domestic partners (Crime stats 2024). While the above-stated statistics are only a matter of numbers, these women have become part of the tragic reality of women's lives in a broken country.

### Poor education

The fourth indicator is poor education. Sibanda clearly states that: 'Our education system is broken, and nobody seems to fix it' (Sibanda 2023). This is confirmed by a report of Amnesty International stating: 'The South African education system, characterised by crumbling infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms and relatively poor educational outcomes, is perpetuating inequality and as a result failing too many of its children, with the poor hardest hit' (Amnesty International 2020). According to the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE), an independent policy research and advocacy organisation (CDE Report 2023):

South Africa is the single biggest learning underperformer relative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita among low- and middle-income countries. What this means is that the country gets extremely poor education outcomes despite the high levels of public expenditure. (p. 1)

This statement is supported by highlighting some of the following problems. More than three-quarters of Grade 4 learners cannot read and understand what they are reading, nearly half of all schools are 'cognitive wastelands, teachers are well-paid, but teaching is poor and COVID-19 had a devastating effect on the already poor performing system' (CDE report 2023). The report concludes with the following alarming statement:

Something is deeply wrong with our education system. We must act urgently to rectify this. We cannot solve this complex, multi-layered challenge simply by throwing more money at it. To give our learners the education they deserve and need, we will have to undertake system-wide reforms that shift the entire system into a higher gear. This shift requires a series of coordinated, interlocking efforts to change structures and organisations, standards and norms of accountability, and human capital within the system.

### A growing environmental crisis

The fifth indicator is the environmental crisis in which the country is drowning, according to an expert report commissioned by the Centre for Environmental Rights (CER), titled *Climate Change Implications for SA's Youth*. King (2021:6) the report identifies freshwater, food security, fire, infrastructure, emotional well-being and climate-induced migration as some of the most critical environmental concerns. What is more important, is the fact that his research emphasises that today's youth, and all future generations, are faced with the virtually certain probability of severe harms from a range of increasingly severe impacts caused by climate change (King 2021:130). King (2021) concludes his report with the following alarming paragraph:

Within a decade, we will very likely be looking back on today's extreme events as mild. Daily lives will be vastly more difficult, quality of life and economic opportunities greatly diminished, and many will suffer premature death from any of extreme weather events, heat-stress, exacerbated diseases outbreaks and/or violent social upheaval and conflicts, as well as stress-induced suicide. Inter-generational inequity will rapidly increase without a transformational change in energy policy now, based on no new fossil fuel investments, and rapid phase out of all existing fossil fuel use. (p. 16)

Combine this warning with the fact that South Africa is the 12th largest gas polluter in the world (Igamba 2023). South Africa is also ranked fourth among 10 countries in Africa with the highest number of deaths linked to air pollution (Igamba 2023). These statistics become even more shocking when considering that a report released by United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in 2024 states that 3365 children under 5 years died because of air pollution in 2021, while 34 000 deaths were linked to air

pollution-related causes across all ages in South Africa during 2021 (UNICEF 2024).

It is clear from the above-mentioned statistics that South Africa has arrived at a new Kairos moment. More than 30 years after the first democratic election, the rainbow nation is in serious trouble and on the brink of disaster. It may be questioned if the Church can do something about it. To answer the question, I want to refer to only two of the indicators as examples.

The first is the Church's call towards poverty. In a previous article, I emphasised that it is this struggle to survive that should challenge the Church to action (Van der Merwe 2022:2). While government should play an important role, the Church is one of the organisations through which active citizenry can respond to the war against poverty. What is more, the challenge to act on poverty is fundamentally part of the churches' calling as is being stated in the Belhar confession part 4 (Van der Merwe 2022):

We believe that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among men; that in a world full of injustice and enmity he is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that he calls his church to follow him in this; that he brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry. (p. 2)

This point of view was already put forward at the important Carnegie 3 Conference on poverty in South Africa which took place in 2013. In his opening address, the then Minister of Finance, Mr Trevor Manuel, referred to the challenges of poverty in society when he said (Manuel 2013):

'Whilst government should never be allowed to devolve its responsibility, active citizenry can never outsource their responsibility to address poverty to government.'

Regarding the state of education, Mouton, Louw, and Strydom (2013) state that one of the significant problems is that, in many cases, communities are failing to take ownership of schools. Communities should take responsibility for creating safe spaces regarding discipline and safety, enabling education to flourish. They emphasise that the school is a mirror image of the community within which it is situated. Learners reflect on their experiences in communities at school. This makes the role of parents and community involvement a crucial part of the education process (Mouton, Louw & Strydom 2013:26). It is here that the Church can also make a significant difference.

Can the Church do something about the country's brokenness? Yes, it can, but then it must realise that the country has arrived at a new Kairos moment and that, like in 1985, the Church needs to act.

## A new Kairos moment

The recognition of the fact that something serious must be done, and that the churches in the country are essential role players is confirmed by a meeting that took place on

11 April 2025 between the President of South Africa, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, members of his cabinet and delegates from the South African Council of Churches (SACC) at the Union Buildings in Pretoria (The Presidency 2025). In his word of welcome, President Ramaphosa said that the SACC is a cherished institution in the country, which, over many decades, has made an invaluable contribution to peace, unity, development and transformation.

He continued by saying that the Church has been a source of hope, guidance and inspiration not only to members of the Christian faith but to all South Africans (The Presidency 2025). In his address to the meeting, Bishop Sithembele Sipuka, President of the SACC referred to the National Dialogue Initiative when he said (The Presidency 2025):

[T]hat the SACC support the National Dialogue Initiative<sup>2</sup> but emphasised that for it to have legitimacy, the process must be protected from being hijacked by political, economic, and societal elites.

He continued by saying that the initiative must be inclusive, incorporating all sectors of society; that declining values and moral conduct in the country must be confronted; and that dehumanisation caused by poverty and inequality must be addressed. Sipuka also emphasised that (The Presidency 2025):

Like many South Africans, we as church leaders and congregants are deeply concerned by the political gamesmanship within the Government of National Unity (GNU), when urgent national challenges – especially those affecting the poor and vulnerable – demand serious and united attention.

Dr Nioma Venter, Second Vice President of the SACC, stressed that it is part of the calling of the Church to hold government accountable for the corruption in the country. She continued by saying that a large part of the population identifies themselves as 'Christian' and that the government cannot ignore the combined voice of the churches (Louw 2025). In his response, President Ramaphosa reiterated: 'We appreciate the willingness and determination of the SACC to work with government, with other faith formations and with other sectors of society to address these concerns' (The Presidency 2025).

In an official declaration made by the SACC on 12 April 2025, some important markers for the way forward become evident:

- The fact that the meeting was initiated by the SACC to 'discuss matters of national concern' (Venter 2025) indicates that the SACC realises the crisis in which the country finds itself.
- The meeting was requested as part of the SACC's commitment to the well-being of South Africa and their collective concern for the state of the nation.

2.The Initiative of a National dialogue in the country was announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa during his State of the Nation Address on 06 February 2025 (SA Government 2025). Ramaphosa said: 'I call on all South Africans, united in our diversity, to come together in the National Dialogue to define a vision for our country for the next 30 years. The National Dialogue must be a place where everyone has a voice. It must be a place to find solutions that make a real difference in people's lives' (SA Government 2025).

- 'The SACC was encouraged by President Ramaphosa's acknowledgement of the role and contribution of the SACC in the history of South Africa as an invaluable contributor to peace and unity, as well as its continued relevance in the present'.
- Various SACC church leaders tabled the following critical societal matters before the president: the proposed National dialogue, the ongoing war on crime, the fight to end corruption in South Africa, the need for more concerted and deliberate attention to the issue of National Healing and Reconciliation, leveraging the South Africa's Presidency of the G20 to address the needs of the most vulnerable, the working relationship between churches and various government departments such as the Department of Home Affairs, South Africa's international relations, particularly in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, and the upcoming World Council of Churches (WCC) Central Committee, which South Africa has the honour to host.
- There was a deep call from the Church leaders to confront the woundedness of South Africa's people and address the resurgence of racism, sexism, tribalism and xenophobia, among other issues, which pose a serious threat to our common future.

It is clear from the foregoing text that the SACC, as the official representative of the churches in South Africa, recognises the crisis in the country. We have arrived at a new Kairos moment. The question is: What now? Too often in the past, various stakeholders, including churches, have spoken, made declarations and developed programmes, but nothing changed at the grassroots level in communities. Words did not become deeds. That is what leaders in the current situation in South Africa must take to heart from the 1985 Kairos document. It concluded with a challenge to act, and action was taken. Ministers and pastors began preaching on the matters at hand, conferences were held, days of prayer were observed, mass meetings and protest marches took place, and a call for international sanctions against the apartheid government was made (De Gruchy 2004:199). The question is, where to start?

## A Church *Lekgotla*<sup>3</sup> as part of the National dialogue

The National Dialogue Initiative announced by President Ramaphosa during his state of the nation address, and which was mentioned by the President of the SACC, creates the perfect starting point for a national *Lekgotla* for churches and Christian organisations. Let us consider that 85.3% of the population in South Africa identifies themselves as Christian (Statista 2024). It means, in plain numbers, that more than 51 million people out of the total population of just over 60 million are affiliated with Christianity in some way. This is confirmed by Forster when he writes (Forster 2025):

One simply needs to drive through any South African cities or towns to see the diversity of 'Christianities' on display. They range from cathedrals to storefront 'miracle centres', to African indigenous communities worshipping in nature.

<sup>3</sup>*Lekgotla* is a Tswana word which means a 'conference' or 'business meeting' (See Collins dictionary).

The influence that this group of people can have on the country, if motivated and coordinated, is mind-blowing. That is why a *Lekgotla* is so important. It will also not be the first time such a meeting takes place, and it can have a massive impact on the role of the Church in South Africa in moving forward.

## The blueprint: Rustenburg 1990

The blueprint for a *Lekgotla* can be found in the important Rustenburg conference, which took place from 05 to 09 November 1990 (Van der Merwe 2021:2). The conference was attended by 230 delegates from 80 different churches and 40 Christian organisations, making it representative of Christians in South Africa. This is confirmed by the declaration that was made after the conference which stated (Rustenburg Conference & National Conference of Churches in South Africa 1990):

Coming from diverse Christian traditions, histories, political persuasions and cultural backgrounds, we engaged midst joy and pain, love and suspicion, in a process of soul searching and wrestling with the theological and socio-political complexities of our country. (p. 1)

Just like the Kairos document, 5 years earlier, the conference declaration challenged the Church to action.

Thirty years after the conference, I wrote an article published in 2021 titled *The Rustenburg Church Conference of 1990: A Call to the Churches in South Africa after 30 Years*, in which I stated that the declaration was of specific importance regarding the challenges in South Africa. How women were mistreated, reconciliation, the land issue, poor education and poverty were specially named (Van der Merwe 2021:5). I also suggested that, 30 years down the road it was time for a new *Lekgotla*, a gathering of leaders convened on the initiative of the churches in South Africa where a plan could be designed which could lead to defining action on grassroots level. This is not out of reach for the Church in South Africa, if we consider the conclusion that Pillay (2017) reached in his article, 'The Church as Transformation and Change Agent' (Pillay 2017):

Today, more than ever, given the increasing poverty, violence, and injustices in the world, the Christian church is called upon to embrace, engage, and continue with its task of being an agent for transformation and change. It has to fulfil the gospel imperative of making the world a better place for all to live with justice, peace, and harmony. (p. 8)

## Theological foundation for a new *Lekgotla*

It is not only the current context of South Africa and the fact that the Church is an agent of change that should drive a new *Lekgotla*. For the churches, it should always be theology, and for that, we can also turn to the Kairos document.

Chapter four of the Kairos document starts with the following paragraph, which is just applicable to the current



crisis 40 years later: 'Our present KAIROS calls for a response from Christians that is biblical, spiritual, pastoral and, above all, prophetic. It is not enough in these circumstances to repeat generalised Christian principles. We need a bold and incisive response that is prophetic because it speaks to the particular circumstances of this crisis, a response that does not give the impression of sitting on the fence but is clearly and unambiguously taking a stand' (Kairos Southern Africa 2011). Although the document then addresses the specific challenges regarding apartheid, it specifically refers to the Bible's message of hope, which is at the heart of the gospel. It states:

At the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the very centre of all true prophecy is a message of hope. Nothing could be more relevant and more necessary at this moment of crisis in South Africa than the Christian message of hope.

It then defines hope as the coming of God's kingdom, as was taught by Jesus himself. This notion is further explained by stating:

We believe that God is at work in our world turning hopeless and evil situations to good so that his 'Kingdom may come' and his 'Will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

This is our faith and our hope, which needs to be confirmed, maintained and strengthened. It needs to be spread. People need to hear again and again that God is with them (Kairos document 1985). It is this understanding of hope from the Kairos document in the current crisis within the framework of the National Dialogue Initiative that should be the vital driver for a Church *Lekgotla*.

## Possible outcomes of a *Lekgotla*

If a *Lekgotla* can succeed in mobilising only a fraction of the 51 million people who call themselves Christian in this country, the outcome will be massive. The following can be essential points on the agenda of a *Lekgotla*:

- Recognition that the Church is called to be an agent of change. This is not an add-on or a nice-to-have; it is part of the Church's DNA.
- Time for engagement with each other – get to know each other. Churches and Christian organisations are working in silos next to each other without knowing each other. A *Lekgotla* should be a 'safe space' where different denominations and organisations can decide to form partnerships to bring about change in South Africa.
- A *Lekgotla* can be an essential platform for sharing and promoting existing programmes and action plans. To name only one or two examples: The Local Ecumenical Area Network programme (LEAN) from the SACC, Thursdays in black (Programme on violence against women), the early child development programme from the Dutch Reformed Church (Little Seeds).
- Leadership groups can be appointed to develop new programmes that will address the most urgent problems in the country. Churches, Christian organisations, academics from universities and the government can be challenged to work together.

- A committee of church leaders can be appointed to plan and organise a united Christian front through gatherings, marches and days of prayer. This is how the change was implemented through the action plan outlined in the Kairos document starting in 1985.

## Conclusion

In the year in which we look back and celebrate 40 years since the publication of the Kairos document, South Africa is once again on the brink of disaster. While the challenge in 1985 was to protest and ultimately end apartheid, the challenge 40 years later seems even greater. It is time for the people of South Africa to rise again and bring about change in the country. This challenge is not optional for the 51 million Christians in South Africa. Bringing about positive change in society is part of the church's identity. This fact is also recognised by the current president of the country. It is now for the churches to accept their calling within the National Dialogue Initiative and act. A *Lekgotla* is the starting point. It will be the ultimate celebration of the Kairos document of 1985. Following the blueprint of the Rustenburg conference of 1990, it will be the ultimate celebration of the Kairos document of 1985.

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### Data availability

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder or agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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