

SACBC INITIAL RESPONSE TO THE KAIROS DOCUMENT

(NOVEMBER 1985)

On September 25 a paper entitled The Kairos Document was made public. One hundred and eleven peoples signed it claiming that they took joint responsibility for it “not as a final statement of the truth, but as the direction in which God is leading us in this moment of our history”. The people who signed were concerned Christians, a few among them being theologians in the traditional sense of the term. Others have signed since the date of publication.

The document claims to be “an attempt by concerned Christians in South Africa to reflect on the situation of death in our country, a critique of the current theological models” (that is, Christian ways of thinking) “that determine the type of activities the Church engages in to try to resolve the problems in the country” and “an attempt to develop out of this perplexing situation, an alternative biblical and theological model” (that is new Christian thinking inspired by the Bible) “that will in turn lead to forms of activity that will make a real difference to the future of our country”.

Because of this the document is described as a “Challenge to the Church”. It expresses the hope that “it will stimulate discussion, debate, reflection and prayer, but above all that it will lead to action”. There can be no doubt about the stirring up of discussion, debate and reflection. Please God, prayer and Christian action will also follow.

We (the Catholic Bishops’ Conference) welcome the call to such endeavour. We find it in keeping with the trend of our pastoral orientation, noticeable particularly in our *Call to Conscience* of 1972, our *Declaration of Commitment* of 1977, the *Findings of the Pastoral Consultation* of 1980 and the *Pastoral Planning Working Paper* of 1984.

In welcoming the call and the challenge we wish to respond also to the fraternal invitation to be critical. There are shortcomings in the Kairos Document, due in large measure we are sure, to the fact that it was written in haste in the white heat of township unrest. In making this initial response, which we hope to follow up with a deeper and more thorough reflection, we include comment on some of these shortcomings.

For instance, in regard to ‘church theology’ (meaning the way church leaders have spoken about the South African situation) there are sweeping generalisations that, in any future revision must be subjected to careful examination and qualification. Passages to which this applies include the following:

Section 3.1 of chapter 3 on *Reconciliation* states that church theology takes “reconciliation” as the key to problem resolution. “It talks about the need for reconciliation between white and black or between all South Africans”. “Church Theology” often describes the Christian stance in the following way: “We must be fair. We must listen to both sides of the story. If the two sides can only meet to talk and negotiate they will sort their differences and misunderstandings, and the conflict will be resolved”.

Section 3.3 of chapter 3 on *Non-violence* contends that non-violence is made by “church theology” into “an absolute principle that applies to anything anyone calls violence without regard to who is issuing it, which side they are on or what purpose they may have in mind”. “Church theology” is also accused of falling into the trap of accepting the state’s use of words according to which state oppression is not counted as violence whereas the forceful resistance of people against state oppression is designated as violence. “If one calls for non-violence in such circumstances one appears to be criticising the resistance of people while justifying or at least overlooking the violence of the police and the state”. In this passage on non-violence the document also reprimands Christian leaders for tacitly supporting the growing militarization of the South African state by appointing chaplains to its armed forces and by allowing the conscription of young white males. It asks the question: “Is it because the activities of the armed forces and the police are counted as defensive?” It does not ask the question: “Is it because those persons who refuse to serve in the armed forces can be put in prison for six years or, if they are religious pacifists, can be required to give six years alternative national service?”

Section 3.4 of chapter 3 on *The Fundamental Problem* maintains that our theology is defective because we have not developed a social analysis and have relied on a “spirituality that has tended to be an other-worldly affair that has very little if anything at all to do with the affairs of this world”. It is a novel experience these days to be accused of a spirituality not concerned about the affairs of the world. We are usually accused of the opposite.

We have to accept that section 3.2 of chapter 3 on *Justice* raises a very important point. It goes a little far in blaming church leaders generally for appealing to the state and the white community for justice which is not justice at all since it is the “justice of reform, that is to say, a justice that is determined by the oppressor, by the white community and that is offered to the people as a kind of concession”. Nevertheless we have to admit that we have relied too much on appeals to the white community, obviously not seeing clearly what role the black community should play in its own liberation, not seeing either that a very special kind of Christian education is required for the pursuit of justice and liberation.

That this context, of what should be said by the church leaders to oppressed people and what sort of Christian education should be fostered, has its special difficulties is evident from the Kairos Document itself, with special regard to chapters 4 and 5.

Perhaps these chapters were written by different authors and in the rush of final editing were not brought into adequate relationship, one with the other. Perhaps they illustrate the difficulty that anyone experiences in speaking in a Christian context to those involved in a liberation struggle.

Chapter 4: *Towards a Prophetic Theology* calls upon Christians for 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” in what is described as “our situation of civil war or revolution”. It invokes the Bible to support the use of physical force against oppression, examines Christian attitudes to tyranny and concludes that the

South African government falls under definition of tyranny and becomes “an enemy of all the people. A tyrant. A totalitarian regime. A reign of terror”.

This urgent call to the church to promote social change by force ends with a message of hope in which there is a disarming slide from hope for the fulfilment of the Kingdom, in which “all tears will be wiped away” (Rev. 7:17; 21:4) and “the lamb will lie down with the lion” (Isaiah 11:6) to hope for political liberation.

However, “the road to that hope is going to be very hard and very painful. The conflict and the struggle will have to intensify in the months and years ahead because there is no other way to remove the injustice and oppression. But God is with us. We can only learn to become the instruments of His peace even unto death. We must participate in the cross of Christ if we are to have the hope of participating in His resurrection”.

When we return to chapter 5, *Challenge to Action*. The call to the use of physical force gives way to a challenge to transform church activities, to conduct special campaigns, “not only to press for a change of government, but to mobilise members in every parish to think and work and plan for a change of government in South Africa”. We are also urged to practise civil disobedience and never to collaborate with tyranny. Quite clearly, participation in such a programme requires a good deal of special preparation.

A revision of the document will require an effort to give deeper consideration to these two chapters and to relate them more carefully to each other.

In spite of the shortcomings to which we have referred we recognise the essential message of the Kairos document as urging us to address ourselves more forcefully and clearly to the black population of South Africa, to spell out the justice of the cause in the struggle for liberation and to indicate how we see that struggle in the light of the Gospel, to indicate too that we are in solidarity with the oppressed while bringing to all the people of our country a vision of how justice can be achieved in a spirit of love and, through justice, reconciliation – in short, a vision of Christian hope.

The problem facing us is that of passing from prophetic statements of this kind to the communication, education and training necessary for their fulfilment. In a further reflection on what they have begun we are sure that the Kairos theologians will give a good deal of attention to this problem. We look forward to close collaboration with them in the task.

The Kairos document comes at an appropriate time in the crisis through which we are passing, an appropriate time too for the Catholic Church in South Africa as we work on the formulation of our pastoral plan and as the project of Christians for Justice and Peace in which we are involved with other churches, begins to take shape.