

'Stuck in the middle' and scared

As South Africa moves rapidly towards a new dispensation, a Klein Karoo community fears being passed by in the rush. ANYA GERRYTS and ALBERT VAN JAARSVELD spent time in a *dorp* that is struggling to come to terms with the political changes.



VERSATILE: A church on Sundays, a school during the week.

THE election juggernaut, already looming large in urban areas and in the media, casts only a small shadow in the Klein Karoo settlement of Amalienstein. Seemingly forgotten by political parties, the 5 000 residents of this old missionary station are sceptical of governments and ignorant and apathetic about the April election.

As local primary school teacher Adolf Hartman puts it: "How will a new government change our life-style as the old one hardly knows we exist?"

Between Calitzdorp and Ladismith by road, Amalienstein lies in one of the curves of the Swartberg range, made up of three little settlements strung out along the river which runs through the valley - Amalienstein, Droevlei and Zoar. Some call all three Amalienstein and some Zoar, take your pick. But it was as Zoar that it was founded at the beginning of the 19th century by Lutheran missionaries, as the blue Celtic crosses on the walls of the graveyard and the old church testify.

Typically of the Klein Karoo, there are three churches in Amalienstein - the Lutheran church, an NG Sendingkerk, which doubles as a primary school by day, and an Anglican church. Most of the inhabitants are Lutheran and most work as labourers on farms that ring the district.

They have an enviable community spirit and identity, growing vegetables on a communal patch and taking pride in the community capacity - developed in the vacuum of government neglect - for sorting out



problems such as disturbances of the peace or petty crime. There are two institutions for achieving this: community meetings and Maria Kiewiet, the oldest person in Amalienstein, who is referred to and deferred to as "Moedertjie" by everyone.

It is this self-sufficiency that Amalienstein fears losing under a new dispensation. People of the settlement also fear they may lose their houses, dilapidated though they are, under a new government. On the other



NOTEWORTHY: One of the death bells of Amalienstein.

hand, they hope the future will bring a subsidy for the local school.

Most striking about Amalienstein, perhaps, is a widespread ignorance about the election. For example, most people don't know that voters need an ID book or a voter's certificate, and many don't possess such documents.

A related problem that worries Adolf

Stuck in the middle

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Hartman, who sometimes seems to be the only sober person in the settlement, is alcoholism. This is aggravated enormously by the *dop* system whereby farm labourers receive part of their wages in the form of a daily ration of alcohol. Many of the people are so dependent on this "ration" that they worry more about losing their alcohol supply than about the possibility of losing their houses.

People in Amalienstein – all of whom are coloured – worry about being "stuck in the middle". "The white government looked after the white people," they say. "Won't a black government do just the same for blacks?"

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Another difficulty is the behaviour of one of the white farmers in the Ladismith district. He employs about 500 of the Amalienstein community as labourers and is notorious, even among other white farmers, for ill-treatment of his workers.

Now, according to community reports, he is threatening to refuse to give workers the day off on election day unless they vote for his party.

But people in Amalienstein hasten to add that not all employers in the district behave in this way. The farmer in question is disapproved of and other farmers have promised to transport their workers – and other workers – to the polling booth on election day.

Noteworthy along the road linking Amalienstein, Droevlei and Zoar are a series of "death bells" which are tolled vigorously when someone in the settlement dies. It is a haunting sound and one the people fear may sound for their whole community.

They fear loss; they hope for an easier future. They value their independence and for this reason want to know more about regional government. They plead for voter education – not party propaganda, not empty promises, "just some straightforward facts".

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'Truth sets a nation free'

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"If we want real healing to take place in this nation, we have to know the truth," says Boraine. "It is the truth that sets a nation free – it doesn't bind it."

It is understandable, he says, that many people are desperate to move forward and avoid dwelling on the past, but this may work against the achievement of reconciliation. Even if there has been a change of heart among some of those responsible for the wrongs of the past, this is not enough. Those wrongs remain an issue that needs to be dealt with in a formal process.

Such a process should involve, at the least, establishing and acknowledging the truth.

"Those who say we shouldn't rake up the past should tell that to the victims of apartheid. We have to listen to those who suffered," he observes.

In order to understand why there is so much anger and bitterness in the black community – and to enable those who have suffered to regain a sense of dignity – South Africans need to hear the truth about what took place in the country over the past four decades.

For the victims, in particular, there is a vital difference between amnesty and amnesia, between knowledge and acknowledgement, says Boraine.

He emphasises that revenge is not the objective of calls for a process of addressing the injustices of the past, and challenges anyone who doubts this to talk to the victims of apartheid. "You'll hear it is not revenge they want, but the truth."

He believes that acknowledging the truth is the first step in a process of healing. Seeking justice and effecting restitution would have to follow.

Boraine has recently embarked on a programme aimed at influencing national policy on justice and reconciliation, and will devote himself to it full-time on his retirement from Idasa. Long experience in both the political and theological spheres – he served as a minister for many years, becoming president of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa – gives him a unique set of skills for the task.

Boraine hopes to see the appointment of a



VICTIM: Albie Sachs of the ANC, injured by a car bomb in Maputo.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which he believes should be independent, impartial and judicial. While the ANC is on record as supporting such a body, the preference of the governing National Party still seems to be for drawing a veil over the past.

The programme, which is designed as a participative process, began publicly with a conference in Somerset West at the end of February. Entitled "Justice in Transition: Dealing with the Past", the conference enabled a wide range of South Africans – human rights activists, legal academics, representatives from non-governmental organisations and members of the Cabinet – to hear first-hand from people like Albie Sachs and Nyami Goniwe about the suffering inflicted by the apartheid order.

Delegates listened to prominent figures from Eastern Europe and South America who spoke on how the issues of truth and reconciliation, amnesty, prosecution and restitution were dealt with when new democratic governments were put in place in their countries. Also present were representatives from Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Namibia.

One of the major aims of the conference – which will be reported in more detail in the