

ALLAN BOESAK

In Calvin's steps

Dr Allan Boesak, the 36-year-old black leader from the Cape Flats, is the youngest spiritual leader of the world's Reformed Christian Church since its founder John Calvin. As the new president of the 70m member World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Warc), he told the *FM* this week about the crisis he predicts his election will cause in the white Dutch Reformed Church, his plans to bring about church unification and his plans to expand Warc influence.

FM: What do you think is the significance of the suspension of the two white Dutch Reformed churches?

Boesak: The suspension is the culmination of a very long process. The question of racism and South Africa was first raised at the Warc conference in Jerusalem in 1928 when it was decided that racism was incompatible with Christianity. This was repeated at subsequent conferences. At the Nairobi conference in 1970 it was stated that any church that accepts racial segregation for its own life and in society cannot be regarded as a member of the body of Christ, which is strong stuff. That was a very clear warning to the South African churches to rethink their position.

They refused, and so the Ottawa decision signifies the end of the patience of the Warc. It also signifies that apartheid and any kind of racism is seen as being indefensible in terms of the gospel. It is seen as un-Christian. It was clear that there will be no compromise on this particular issue. As the white NGK and NHC are the only members of the Warc who are willing to defend apartheid they are totally isolated and out of step with the ecumenical world. They are on a dead-end road. Their suspension signifies that the churches of the world are now much more willing to listen to the voices of those who are victims of oppressive systems.

Will the suspension of the white DRCs and your election as president of the Warc have any impetus on events in this country?

Yes. I say this because my election has given black people in this country so much new hope. They are saying that it signifies to them that our cause is being recognised by an ever-growing body of churches, and in a sense they feel their cause has been elevated and the situation here will be taken more seriously by this church body.

This is bound to have all kinds of psychological influences. There will be an impact on the way people here will see the struggle

now. It will no longer just be our own little issue. I think it will have a similar psychological impact on blacks as the Mugabe victory had. It has also forced the white Dutch Reformed Churches into a position where they will have to decide where they are going.

A modernised version of apartheid is no longer on the agenda. The point at issue now is that apartheid and the defence of apartheid is indefensible. That is the new basis of discussion. It will also strengthen the hands of the so-called dissidents within the white DRCs. It will bring the crisis within the DRC dramatically to the fore. The synod this month will have to clearly say whether we are willing to begin a process of fundamental change or whether we are going to pull the laager tight around ourselves.

Church and crisis

The direction of the white DRC is determined by the ups and downs of Afrikaner politics. If there is a crisis in Afrikaner politics then there is a crisis in the Afrikaner church. If there is a crisis in the Broederbond there is a crisis in the church. There is an intimate relationship between the volk and the church and the State and the organisations created by the State. As a result we are facing a crossroads to which the white DRCs feel they have been pushed too soon. I don't think they are ready for this choice but they have to be. We know how much the government still depends on moral and theological justification.

There was a time when I thought that that was pure romanticism, that everyone knew that the game for the Afrikaner was about economic and political power. However, if you analyse the Prime Minister's speeches during the last two or three years you will see that he often sounds more like an Evangelist than a politician quoting the Bible left, right and centre, emphasising all the time that we are a Christian nation and appealing to the underlying religiosity that has shaped and moulded Afrikaner nationalism.

Now that world to which the Afrikaner was closest in terms of ecumenical relations has told him that this will no longer wash. It is bound to bring a crisis of conscience and confusion within the Afrikaner community. It will cause a fundamental self-examination. As a result, there will be a horrific clash between those who say they no longer have to care what the outside

world thinks or not, and those who do.

Dr Koot Vorster once said: "The world is wrong and we are right," and quoted three biblical texts in support of this statement. There is a longing in Afrikanerdom for that sort of unflinching, sure and certain leadership. On the other hand, there is a creeping uncertainty in the hearts of many. These are the people who think a bit more, the younger people, the people who ask questions and ask: "Can we be right when those who are closest to us say we are wrong?" Remember, the Warc is not the World Council of Churches.

I think this clash will have a fundamental influence on the political situation. Dr Treurnicht tries to personify the old, very sure, confident and religious Afrikaner who says: "God is on our side." That kind of thinking will be challenged from within the DRC, certainly from within our circles with the knowledge that we have the backing of this powerful world body.

Will your appointment lead to the unification of the three black churches?

There is a closeness now that we have never had before. My goal will now be to strive and work not only for the unification of the three black DRCs but to work for the unification of all churches within the Reform/Presbyterian family.

The way for this has now been cleared. We are at present negotiating and talking to each other about unification. The white DRC said no to this in 1978 because church integration would lead to social integration and then political integration and then the end of Afrikanerdom. That is still their official thinking. The white DRC knows that church union is the only real decision we can take with any integrity. Therefore, if they do not want to come with us we will have to go it alone. But our door will remain open and if they want to join us they will be most heartily welcome. We cannot wait until the white DRC is ready because I don't think it will ever be.

How far have your unification talks gone?

Negotiations with the Indian Reformed Church in Africa are well underway. However, negotiations with the African Dutch Reformed Church in Africa have not progressed as smoothly because of the much stronger white stranglehold on that church, both financially and in thinking. It troubles me greatly.

The African DRC was the first to take a stand on apartheid, which they did in 1975. But somehow the white DRC got to them.

Financial Mail

Sept. 3, 1982

Subsequently their moderator, an African, went on record saying that, as a black man, he was 100% satisfied and happy in SA, which is mind-blowing. Nobody says that, not even white people on behalf of blacks. This shows how dependent that church is on white thinking.

How will unification affect the black churches' financial dependence on the white mother church?

The question of financial dependence on the white church will come up long before unity is achieved. In fact, it will come up now. If my church accepts and endorses the decisions of the Warc, which I believe it will, at its four-yearly synod this month, it will fundamentally change our relationship with the white DRC.

We will be saying that the justification of apartheid is heresy. We cannot say apartheid is heretical and at the same time act as though nothing has happened and continue to take their money. In that sense we have been pushed to the crossroads long before we are ready for it.

I feel strongly that we must cut our financial ties with the white DRC and tell them to keep their money. We must be honest with ourselves and realise that these people have the money because of the political and economic system in this country that they themselves are maintaining. It is an artificial dependency which if justice were done would not be necessary. I think we ought to be honest and tell them that we must also practice what we preach. We must no longer accept the white church money. Instead, we must trust in God.

We will then have to have a change of lifestyle, a change of ministry, and a change of structures in our church. It will be hard but necessary. It will be an incredible challenge. I do not know how my church feels about this but if I have my way this is the road we will take.

Do you see the churches outside the country providing you with financial assistance?

Because of our dependency a sudden cut will bring about a crisis and I am therefore confident that an appeal to outside churches will not go unheeded. But we must be careful not to replace one form of dependency with another. I would therefore see us appealing for a one-time kind of assistance to give us enough time to re-adjust.

Do you have links with the dissidents in the white DRC?

In a sense we have. They are careful not

to link themselves with us because they are afraid that their people will say that they have been influenced by the radical elements in the black churches. For instance, the open letter by the 123 was an initiative quite apart from what we are trying to do. **Is there any possibility of these people joining you in a unification?**

If they do not it will put the lie to what they have been saying. It would mean that they still regard the ethnic ties in their ethnic church as more important than the biblical consecrations one would have to take in terms of the thinking of the church.

As the head of the Broederkring, the alliance between black and white DRC members, how do you see its future in terms of unification?

When we have a united non-racial reformed church in this country, with a leadership that reflects the main thrust of the feelings of our people, that can take a prophetic role and leadership in terms of the political situation, then I feel that the Broederkring will have reached its goal and will cease to exist.

How do you intend using your position as the head of an organisation with 70m members with regard to this country?

I have not had the time to fully think this one out. However, one of the reasons I was elected was to give a clear sign to the

world and SA, in particular. In order to be that sign it seems to me that I should use this position to the best of my ability to help influence events in this country. Not only must I be a sign of hope to black people, I must also help to mobilise the churches in every way to resist the present system and to begin shaping something of a projection of what SA society ought to be. **How do you see the Warc under your leadership?**

I feel the Warc should have a higher profile throughout the world. It must be seen to be engaged in the struggles against poverty and discrimination. It must be for justice and for human liberation. The Warc must not be afraid to take a stand on issues whether they be in Taiwan, Korea, SA or wherever.

How would you relate this to the South African situation? For example, would you support industrial protest action?

I would support, and the churches should support, all forms of peaceful action. Industrial action in the sense of a strike is a peaceful means through which the workers make known their wishes and try to strengthen their position. If they decide that negotiations with management have not come to anything and this is the only way open to them I will support them provided they have a just cause.



Boesak ... 'I must be a sign of hope'