

**Messengers of Hope: Commitment to Justice arises, not out of some political theory, but because we have gazed into the face of Christ and seen there his suffering love for humanity.**

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**Dr. Hlophe Brigalia Bam  
Seth Mokitimi Seminary, Pietermaritzburg  
The Rev Peter John Story Lecture, 2022**

- The President: Dr Rowanne Marie
- Rev. Peter Storey
- Distinguished guests
- Ladies and Gentlemen

## **Introduction**

I am honoured by your invitation to come and give the Prof. Rev. Peter Storey Lecture, an intellectual, a patriot, a pioneer, a leader, an ecumenist, a visionary, a theologian, an ethicist. I also wish to express my appreciation for this tradition of acknowledging people and their contributions during their lifetime. Many others also have contributed to little events, but few have greatness to turn the course of history. Today we also celebrate the years and the significance of the accomplishments for the cause of (freedom, justice and peace). There are many religious leaders who have made significant contributions in their ministry. But today we are giving an account of a creative and successful public intervention by religious individuals and the groups they represented.

I also wish to acknowledge the contributions of Seth Mokitimi. It brings back memories of my time at Lovedale Institution. When 'Bomber' (as we referred to him), from Healdtown was the scheduled preacher, it brought excitement and joy to us students. He was a moral tower, and great preacher in the mould of Billy Graham and Jonathan Edwards. This lecture not only gives me the opportunity to reflect on the life of a great faithful servant of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), but also gives me an opportunity to reflect on his sterling contribution to the growth of the Ecumenical Movement. To the young Church historians among us, the story of the influence of the Methodist leadership on the Ecumenical movement is still to be told. You will notice that the topic of this presentation is taken from his theme address as President of the Connexion in its 1984 conference.

My last collaboration with Peter Storey has been on the newly launched exhibition entitled *'Truth to Power: Desmond Tutu and the Churches in the Struggle Against Apartheid.'* The two of us, with others, were approached to advise on the content and approach of the exhibition which was curated by The Apartheid Museum in partnership with Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation. This exhibition is the first of its kind as it shows how churches became a powerful force in the struggle.

### **Peter the Pastor**

Peter Storey was a son of the Manse. He was born in 1938 at the backwaters of the emerging industrial town of Boksburg but grew up in the multiracial Kilnerton Institution and Cape Town. You will recall that his father's (CK Storey) move to Kilnerton coincided with the election of the Nationalist Party in 1948. His stay there was cut short by the promulgation of the Group Areas Act and the Bantu Education Act. In 1957, he, as President of Conference, stood with the then Archbishop of Cape Town, Geoffrey Clayton, in opposing and engaging in a clerical protest march against the Native Laws Amendment Bill, which had the so-called 'Church Clause'. To the older Storey, apartheid was akin to slavery. I am mentioning this to indicate how in fact Peter Storey's social and theological perspectives on the 'vision of God' for the Church, of a 'Church under the Cross' of Christ, John Wesley's doctrine of Perfect Love, and advocacy for a Black President, (leadership) were ingrained in him early in life.

Following his ordination in 1962, while working in Cape Town, he was also a chaplain to Robben Island, where he ministered to the recently incarcerated Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe, and their colleagues. He was bruised and touched by the pain of his congregation. The Circuit was able to focus on the Inner city ministry. Amongst other initiatives he launched the first Life-Line Centre in South Africa. The Church became a hive of activity with the families who were still living around District Six. When he went up to the Central Church in Johannesburg, he expanded and grew this social outreach ministry. He was also part of several Commissions within the Connexion, one of which was on the Renewal of the Church that led to the decision to ordain women. This decision drew women from the shadows of the Connexion to significant positions within it. It was during his tenure at Central that he became a representative of the

MCSA to the SACC. He was eventually elected the president of the SACC. In his ministry, the world became his pulpit.

In dealing with a person such as Peter Storey, one must take into cognizance the apartheid context in which he ministered, and the nature of the Church he served. The church that time was gripped with a pervasive attitude of fear to be prophetic as well as the tendency to shun critical self-examination in our context by our churches because of political expediency. Following the protests and massacre of Sharpeville, the state had intensified its repression and passed draconian laws that were to deal with anybody who transgressed the straight and narrow path of the Nationalist Party. The World Council of Churches (WCC) established in 1969 The Programme to Combat Racism (PCR), which was to give humanitarian support to liberation movements world-wide, did not help the cause of the Churches in South Africa. As Villa-Vicencio in his book, **Trapped in Apartheid** says, *'it was a decision to shift the focus of the ecumenical church from protest and benevolence to resistance and support of those engaged in a liberation struggle'*. (Pg. 109) This threw the English speaking Churches into a 'theological frenzy, ethical indecision, theological consternation, and political storm'. There were heated debates in churches, controversial Conference and Synod resolutions and what I would call self-righteous and self-serving ecclesiastical distancing from the WCC, in a futile attempt to curry favour with the government. What was clear is that the churches were not ready and prepared to cross the Rubicon of protest to resistance to the institutionalized oppression of the Apartheid State.

The Methodist church was unequivocal in condemning the decision as reported in the minutes of its ninety-sixth National Conference of the Methodist Church of SA. They further produced a theological statement 'The World Council of Churches and the Methodist Church of SA (1979) They propagated that the WCC should discontinue the grants. Sadly, the statement failed to engage in a theological discussion within itself and the WCC regarding 'sign of solidarity.' The South African church, in its forked tongue response, was seen as defending the repressive violence of the apartheid regime. Unfortunately, the churches did not see this as an opportunity to ask themselves how far the churches' 'architecture of mercy and justice' go and how they could facilitate dialogue with the liberation movements. The latter took the courage of White Businessmen in the late eighties.

The Methodist Church of South Africa were the founding members of the World Council of Churches in 1948. The Methodist Church of South Africa was among many of the member churches that raised very strong objections to the PCR. And it was important for the World Council to pay special attention to the objections raised by the Methodist Church especially from South Africa.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois, in his seminal work, **The Soul of the Black Folks** asserted that:

*The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line,  
- the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and  
Africa and the Islands of the sea.*

This was true for the English speaking established churches in South Africa. For the greater part of the twentieth century, these churches lived comfortably with the reality of racial discrimination and domination within the Church. This found expression in practices such as taken for granted white leadership, unequal pay, condescending attitude towards Black colleagues, etc. Given the church's history and links to colonialism and its presumed superiority of Whiteness, the church in South Africa has always had an ambivalence and shame in naming and demystifying the evil that the church was struggling to overcome. Thus, Trevor Huddleston, a former priest in Sophiatown, could say, '*the church speaks in its sleep.*' (Cf. Eph. 4:1-5)

However, I must add that there were voices and activists on both sides of the colour line who advocated for a different future for the MCSA. If you examine your historical records.

### **Peter the Ecumenist**

The first time I saw Peter Storey was in the bombed ruins of Khotso House, six weeks after my arrival in South Africa. At the crack of dawn, here was this white man demanding access to the ruins. He was the only church leader who was there, trying to establish if there were any victims in the ruins. This invariably led to confrontation with the police who were there. This was the beginning of our long journey of working together. In another instance, the first march in Johannesburg on 'Standing for the Truth,' with the soldiers and police seeking to block the march, church leaders and throngs of people, he began the march with a very passionate prayer, and I wish I had recorded that prayer. After that prayer I realised that here was a man of deep faith, and that God would lead us.

He was bold, resolute, and courageous. Lo and behold, the soldiers and police opened-up and let us through.

Peter Storey was among those within the Connexion, who advocated, early on, for the Church to place equality issues of clergy in the Connexion at the top of the agenda. He was of the view that the need for such action was long overdue. The church could not continue to espouse equality and family values more as a slogan than fundamental virtues. The intervention of the ecumenical movement would provide the Church to speak with one voice about the challenges and common dream for South Africa. Problems such as government misrule, discrimination, poor nutrition, inadequate provision of health care and housing, poverty, and ineffectual schools, the church could not ignore. The church, through its faithfulness to its mission, should command national attention. The church had to put its resources where its mouth was. For him the church must be unequivocal in expressing its understanding of the problems that faced society. It was not enough just to criticise the Nationalist leadership for a callous attitude, when on our part we ignored these problems. His response was embodied in ministries in the various circuits he served. He embraced a restlessness against the deprivation of many South Africans, especially its African majority.

In the mid-seventies onwards, South Africa was increasingly getting isolated, politically, diplomatically, militarily, culturally, and economically from the rest of the world. Rhodesia was under increased pressure from insurgents and Portuguese colonies, Mozambique, and Angola, got independence, and political activism within South Africa was becoming uncontrollable. This forced the South African Government to adopt a defence policy to counteract what they called the 'total onslaught'. The government developed a defence policy captured in the 1977 White Paper on Defence, which called on the "marshalling of all resources of all state resources to combat revolutionary warfare". This meant the role of the security forces had to be foregrounded and the military architecture reconfigured, with the force size dramatically increased. It also meant all medically fit White male 18 year olds were eligible for National Service of 24 months, and voluntary conscription for White females. This resulted in the militarization and increasing polarisation of the country. The gradual increase of 'body bags' coming from the 'border wars' and the intensifying violence that led to the killing of the 'innocents' within the country, raised serious moral questions of the military policy of the state, giving rise to international condemnation and resistance to military conscription. This resistance coalesced

around organisations such as the Conscientious Support Group and the End Conscription Campaign. Peter Storey, as a father of an eligible son, and a Christian of conscience, got drawn into this conundrum. He called upon the church to be a *'fearless witness to the truth'* and solidarity expressed in the *'pain of togetherness'*. He muted mutiny on the part of the conscripts. He penned **Hope for South Africa** in which he articulated a different vision for a new united South Africa. His Presidential visits to different circuits exposed him to the raw *'rage of despairing people'*. Again and again, he called the church to a different kind of faithfulness, to undertake a process of continued discernment and discovery, and that they should be purveyors of hope in the land of despair.

The writing of history of any nation, arts, artists, music, architecture, etc., its contours get embodied in the heroic actions of individuals and events. This is what Pericles meant when he said, *"If Athens shall appear great, consider then that her glories were purchased by valiant men, and by men who learned their duty."* And I think this is what Paul is talking about in Galatians 6 verse 17 when he said, *"Let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the scars of Jesus."* In the early eighties, there were a constellation of events, such as the intensification of the border wars, political convulsions in the townships, state of emergencies, the increased visibility and exposure of the SACC, international sanctions, and isolation of South Africa that culminated in the establishment of the Eloff Commission by the government. The government was ready to unleash on the SACC and the churches its plethora of draconian laws such as the Unlawful Organisations Act of 1960 and the Fundraising Act of 1977. This was a watershed event for the church at two levels. The Church had to unequivocally articulate its self-understanding of its Being. They also had to make a case for its material religious practice against the accusation of being the handmaiden of *'communists and terrorists'*. They pointed out the danger and futility of the Government's pursued political policies. The submission of Peter Storey on behalf of Church Leaders and Desmond Tutu on behalf of the SACC to the Commission, must be required reading for all theological students in South Africa. The articulation of the Church's moral imperative to stand with Jesus who gave his life for humanity, why the church cared so much for humanity as a demonstration of God's ultimate goodness, and why the actions of existential injustice of government precipitated a situation of *status confessionis* for the Church, and the necessity of international solidarity of churches to fight against this scourge, stand alongside Martin Luther's 95 Theses or Wesley's Twelve Sermons. The work of the Churches through the SACC was to give practical

effects to our mission and bring about societal change. And that this faith response has personal, political, social, and public dimensions.

This was an epic fight not just for the survival of the SACC, but also an articulation of a theological position between transcendence and immanence. They argued that as much as the church should avoid being perceived as an additional pressure group, their ministry raised the fundamental questions of whether theological propositions could be translated into political choices. And these are perennial questions that have occupied the Church over time in its apostolic and catholic mission. They emerged victorious but emotionally scarred.

### **Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)**

“A journey through the past and present - into the future of South Africa” Piet Meiring

The TRC was established in 1996. Peter Storey and I were part of the team that was appointed and served as members of the panel of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Storey became involved in this very difficult process. He and Paul Verryn were chief witnesses in the hearing of the death of Stompie Moeketsi. He was a teenage United Democratic Front activist from Parys in South Africa who was kidnapped on 29 December 1988 by members of Winnie Mandela’s bodyguards, together with three other boys.

The Truth Commission was the beginning of a process that would take many years and many generations. We as churches failed this nation by not involving ourselves and we showed very little interest and commitment. The churches can still get engaged in issues of reconciliation, justice and healing.

### **In Search of a church that Cares.**

#### **Morally Complex Environment**

We live in a morally complex world. It is beset with complexities and paradoxes. The certainties of the past are put under duress by development of modernity that gives rise to a different set of theological questions and moral challenges. In that sense both society and theological discourse changes and grows, creating a high level of uncertainty about traditional ways of knowing and doing theology and giving rise to what we have referred to as hermeneutics of suspicion, social

sin, structural evil, and social justice. Despite that state of flux, we cannot simply diarise our Christian virtues. God is calling us to be active participants in the creation of a different future. Our eschatological hope beckons us and our task is to sustain moral regeneration.

Our witness is about our response to this complexity, particularly as they inform and shape the ethical imperatives of being the church in the South African context. The challenge before us is how we lead moral lives amid such moral complexity and ambiguity. This complexity calls upon us to grow ‘into moral adulthood’. Unfortunately, this goes beyond mere platitudes in a sermon. Hot-button issues of the contemporary world demand more than that. This involves having sufficient grasp or appreciation of the moral issues at hand, and at the same time know our moral framework that would enable us to grapple with the issues so that we do not outsource our responsibility to assert moral choices or subjugate the bible to ideological interests or naively respond to newspaper headlines. We need to always guard against making quick decisions based on insufficient information as that might lead to misjudgement. For example, what is the moral difference in ‘vitalism – the prolonging of human life, and euthanasia? In our world, parameters between right and wrong are no longer clear-cut. If you don’t agree, just read the Zondo Commission Reports, and listen to some of the responses. As one ecumenist said, *‘get the story straight before you get the story out.’*

Adding to that complexity is the cultural diversity of our congregations, with diverse experiences of pain, suffering, failure, and sin. And that calls for the church, as a sanctuary of conscience, to have credible discernment, discipleship, and evangelism. People come to Church with a genuine desire to find God and to fashion their lives accordingly. After all, the church is a font of ethical behaviour.

### **Righteous Indignation.**

Every society in the world has a demarcation that divides its people into the haves and have nots; rich and poor; manifested in access to services that impact on their livelihoods: health, education, access to jobs and life affirming opportunities. In a recent study South Africa was designated as the worst unequal society. Globalisation has accentuated these gaps, thus embedding the experience of marginality for many people. To understand the communities we

minister to, we must appreciate the experience of those at the centre and those who have been pushed to the septic fringes of society. Awareness of this reality raises the question about what guides our moral imagination? What it means to be a church in such a situation. A Message to the People of South Africa 1968 makes the following observation: "We believe that this doctrine of separation is a false faith, a novel gospel: it inevitably is in conflict with the gospel of Jesus Christ, which offers salvation." (P.214) The church has a propensity to be seduced by trappings of power, and pander to the workings of the empire. Materialism of the world becomes too good to resist. We tend to be uncomfortable with the social periphery. Our cosiness with the empire invariably blunts our prophetic courage. Fidelity to the message of the God of Justice, who talks about the dignity of the widow, the orphan, and the poor, gets flatfooted. Can we say, without fear of contradiction, that we are a church that also ministers to the socially marginalised?

In the first chapter of Nehemiah, we read about some people who brought news about the desolation, destruction of Jerusalem and the abuse and affliction of its population. Many of us tend to fast forward to read about how he went about building the city. Verse 4 tells us that he was bruised by the pain of Jerusalem and its people, despite his relatively privileged position in the court of the king. He did not only feel righteous indignation, but he also consecrated himself and his sorrows; gave his sorrows to God; and personally initiated relief efforts to take to Jerusalem; and lastly, he dirtied his hands in rebuilding the walls of the city. The Church cannot remain indifferent to the plight of others. Sympathy is not enough. How does the eschatological hope of the Kingdom of God get expressed in our day to day ministry? How do we work for justice of God in our time? As Allan Boesak puts it, 'we need to have holy rage'.

This is what the ecumenical movement accomplished with the churches. We mobilised resources internationally and locally and distributed these among communities around the country. This brought relief to many people who would otherwise die of hunger. It energised churches to journey with their people. It spread wide the ecclesiastical map of influence and care in South Africa. The ministry of presence by the church was felt everywhere. This was because it bridged the different understandings of the church (ecclesiological), informed by different theological traditions, historical contexts, as well as practical considerations. More importantly, it brought together clergy of various denominations in the work of ministry, bringing into sharp focus the vision of catholicity, and learning the virtue of consultation in the process. Haberman

called this Communicative ethics. Our understanding of faith was complementary and mutually corrective. It facilitated transcending barriers, building solidarity, and fellowship. (Of course, sometimes these relationships were messy, confused, and complex.) This was not a super church, but a united work of ministry to destitute communities. It went beyond just being a personal call from God, to touching the lives of others. It was faith working through love. In so doing, as Avery Dulles puts it, *'it was also a present participation in the work that God is doing – in the task of bringing forth justice to the nations.'* It is God of the bible who demands justice. Through the Ecumenical movement, the church embodied Messianic solidarity with the oppressed amid hopelessness. Those days it might indeed have been the only hope hoped for. I believe this saved the Churches from propensity of privatisation of religion and abdication of political responsibility.

The second thing is that the ecumenical movement pushed the frontiers of theological thinking. Without the ideas from theologians, north and south, injection of ideas from young theologians, we would not have had SPROCAS, the Kairos Document, the across the board acceptance of the ordination of women and the emergence of contextual theology. These tended to evoke spirited and recriminatory debates in ecclesiastical circles. I was the first lay woman General Secretary. I recognize with admiration the increased number of ordained women in the Methodist Church. The Ecumenical movement provided a platform for the exchange of theological ideas, access to fresh and new theological thinking and scholarship in a safe environment, away from ecclesiastical oversight.

After 1994, the ecumenical movement began to unravel. Individual denominations sought to sit on the right and left of the African National Congress Kingdom. This undermined the cohesion of the ecumenical movement. We are still to recover from that.

Covid-19 has proved an enemy beyond our strength. Reports in the past two years indicate a steady rise in domestic violence. Many of the victims are women. As you might have heard, broken people create broken marriages, broken families, and scarred communities. The issue of GBV is something that we cannot just deal with on a basis of responding to news headlines. I can venture to say, we interface and interact with both victims and perpetrators daily. We should know that the problem is multi-layered, nuanced and institutionally embedded and rooted in socio-cultural norms. In some cases,

subtle and covert. And as such, we must address it at various levels. It is about anyone who would seek to control, demean and/or exploit another person in a repeated and systematic way. It involves issues of hegemonic and toxic masculinity, patriarchy, regarding women as possessed objects and sexual objects.

As many of us know, violence against women has spiked to epidemic proportions. Numbers of women who are raped are high. Girl-child, old women are more vulnerable. All this happens in an environment in which victims are afraid to speak against their abusers, violence is normalised, perpetrators evade responsibility for their actions and the clergy overlook the signs of depression in their congregants. Our communities are scattered with people who are permanently and emotionally scarred, spiritually broken, many throwing themselves onto the jaws of permanent despair and perennial anxiety. There is a palpable brokenness in our families and society. People live in painful and destructive ways.

Are we so self-obsessed as a church that everything and everybody is measured by their usefulness to our bottom-line, both in terms of numbers and money? Religious communities lose their voice when it comes to dealing with issues outside the four walls of the church building. Compassion and empathy are in short supply. As a community of moral wisdom, we are called upon to act courageously confront those who engage in sinful acts. (Galatians 6:1-2 and Mathew 18: 15-22).

Ours is a fight of monumental proportions. It will not take an event on women's day to win it. It is a task for societal moral re-formation, a recommitment to a new social contract in which we fight for equal regard for all, in which the dignity and respect of all are affirmed and violence of any kind is scorned. As a Church we could do the following:

- Prevent the creation of socio-cultural and religious obstacles and incentives that facilitates and makes abuse tolerable.
- Preach against it and provide safe platforms (e.g., the Women's Manyano) to talk about it.
- Centres of counselling and healing.
- Sanction known perpetrators.

## Conclusion

At the end of the day, the challenge before us is how we can sustain our challenge to the 'new South Africa' with holiness. It is about upholding the otherness of God and at the same time embodying his immanent presence among us. We need to find ways of getting out of the present trap of brokenness to wholeness. And the answer we may find in Peter Storey's and Desmond Tutu's submissions to the Eloff Commission. In the words of Robert Kennedy, "*So, the road toward equality of freedom is not easy, and great cost and danger march alongside all of us.*" (Day of affirmation address). For such a time as this we have been called. Discipleship costs and Grace is not cheap.

How does the church become prophetic in its own time? We must be vehicles through which the presence of the divine invades the here and now. Both our Christian values and the context should inform and drive our choices that we make. Storey's ministry raised the perennial question of who speaks for the church: its synods, gathered congregations or dispersed witnessing individual Christians? His ministry left a legacy for the church to be compassionate, to have empathy, humility for discernment, goodness, and courage. He embodied a capacity to enter another person's pain and injury; to make another persons' trouble our own. He embodied a spirituality that says commitment to the teaching of the gospel is not just for personal enrichment. It includes the transformation of unjust social structures. In the words of Eric Clayton, "*It is for the good of those we encounter, those who suffer, struggle or are hurting.*" He believed that in a shared commitment by churches, equality and a caring society would be achieved. That means as a church and its members, we should embody servanthood-spirituality.

The idiom, 'cometh the hour, cometh the man', could be an apt description of Peter John Storey. It is in that context that the church should not tire in being moral warriors. The church is facing challenges of modern society and I am reminded of the question raised by Konrad Raiser,

*"Is there a positive role for religion in the human future?"*

He continues by writing,

*“The expectations that economic leaders and politicians have of religions and their leaders as guardians of the moral and ethical traditions of humanity, and of their ability to mediate in the current situations of conflict, requires religions, and not least Christian churches, to engage in critical self-reflection about their action in the public space.”*

The resurrected Jesus says meet him in Galilee. Let us keep the sacred flame of hope in our hearts and ministry. Let us abide in his love so we may live his love for others.

Finally, I would like to share with you the message from the World Council of Churches. The WCC sends a message to member churches on ‘Horizon of Hope.’ “For a world that seems mirrored in difficulties and so often discouraged we stand unbowed to offer hope for a better future and a better world. Let us illuminate the horizon of hope for all but with action.”

As we look back with gratitude on ministry of Peter John Storey, I am reminded of the words of Karl Rahner:

*“In the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable, we eventually learn that here, in this life, all symphonies remain unfinished.”*

The resurrected Jesus says meet him in Galilee. Let us keep the sacred flame of hope in our hearts and ministry. Let us abide in his love so we may live his love for others.