

A South African Christian response to the Palestinian Kairos Document:

An Easter 2010 message from South Africa to Palestine

Our dear Palestinian brothers and sisters,

May grace and peace be yours in abundance through knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord (2 Peter 1:2).

Thank you for the document written by you, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the descendants of Jesus Christ and whose ancestors were the first to receive his message. Yours is a proud history of keeping the faith in the Holy Land, and we salute you for doing that despite the most difficult situation into which you have been placed. From our perspective, we can see how you are being pressurized and forced out of your own land, and we urge you to continue to resist that with love, and to continue to show what our Lord Jesus Christ taught us. We are with you in our prayers and other forms of support, and wish to strengthen this support to you. We admire all that you are and that you do. Justice will come to the Holy Land, as it came to us here in the southernmost part of Africa.

We wish now formally to respond to your Kairos Document, so beautifully written and so full of grace, in the form of this letter, signed by South African Christian theologians, both academic and lay. Our Muslim and Jewish sisters and brothers have decided to write separate responses to your Kairos document so as to free us all to speak in words and idioms that we hold dear, and we support each other in our responses. Some have however indicated that they wish to support this letter as well and their names are attached. We will submit this letter – together with your Kairos document - to our churches and other structures and will call on them to discuss it, to endorse it and to act upon it. We can learn many valuable lessons from your Kairos Document and it now comes as a breath of fresh air to us, 25 years after we launched the Kairos Document in South Africa. Where we serve on international church bodies and theological associations, we will also ensure that this important document coming from you will receive the necessary and appropriate attention. Our first President, Nelson Mandela, called Palestine “one of the great moral causes of our time” and also said that “our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians”. We therefore wish to stand in solidarity with your cause.

As we write this message, we are mourning the death of Steve de Gruchy, a signatory of the South African Kairos Document, who has been called home to the “new Jerusalem”.

1. **Apartheid:**

From our own experience of apartheid, we can clearly and without equivocation say that your situation is in essence the same as apartheid and in its practical manifestation even worse than South African apartheid. Why do we say this?

The essence of apartheid:

When we write to you about the essence of apartheid, we mean the denial of the humanity of one human being by another or the idea that there is a superior and an inferior human being. Flowing from this, it then becomes possible to effectively take other people's land and make them stateless because they are regarded as either non-human or as less than human and therefore unimportant for consideration. This is what happened to us and is happening to you and for this reason we cannot find a better way to describe your situation as other than one of apartheid, previously declared as a crime against humanity by the international community.

The practical manifestations of Israeli apartheid:

But we can also say that the practical manifestations of Israeli apartheid are in many ways worse than South African apartheid ever was.

There was never a "security wall" built around Bophuthatswana or any of the other Bantustans. There was never a time when only certain people could drive on certain roads. There was never a serious debate about the right of exiles and refugees to return to South Africa. Therefore, over and above your situation containing the essence of apartheid, it is in many ways worse than apartheid, and we call on the world community to condemn the Israeli occupation as such.

Yours is also, in our view, a typical colonial situation whereby the colonizers claim the lives and land of the colonized. Furthermore, your situation is exacerbated by the West satisfying their guilt for the Holocaust at your expense. We reject this utterly and call on the West and their allies across the world to take responsibility for the situation that they have created.

2. **Declaring the occupation a sin and evil**

It naturally flows from this description of the occupation as apartheid that you are therefore absolutely correct in calling it a sin and evil and something to be repented of. Once the church has called something a sin, it can never be regarded as a mere disagreement or matter of opinion, but as something that is so fundamental that it is a serious impediment to a relationship with God and with others.

For this sin to be committed in the land where Jesus was born, raised, where he ministered, was crucified, rose and ascended, makes it necessary for us to take your situation even more seriously. Jesus must be weeping at the injustice that he sees in Jerusalem and we are convinced that God is already intervening and will continue to intervene to establish his justice in the Holy Land. The Holy Spirit will continue to strengthen you in your faith, hope and love and we therefore also urge you to keep on keeping on, as Archbishop-emeritus Tutu stated in his letter on the occasion of your launch.

3. Christian Zionism

Christian Zionism, the theological justification of the establishment of the State of Israel based on a particular understanding of the Bible and of the Christian faith and its relation to Judaism, can only be described by us as a modern-day heresy. This kind of Christianity rejects all modern scholarship of Biblical interpretation and chooses to make the Christian faith a servant of an evil ideology, similar to what happened with the theological justification of apartheid.

We have come to realize that opposing Christian Zionism is one of the greatest challenges for the Christian faith. The worldwide Jewish community is no more than 15 million people and many of them do not support the Zionist project, but there are about 50 million Christian Zionists, mainly in the USA, who distort and use the Christian faith to vigorously support and mobilize political and economic support for the State of Israel and we as Christians therefore need to take responsibility for this.

Together with you, we reject Christian Zionism and all other forms of Christian theology that provide justification for the Occupation as illegitimate and in our conscience and faith declare it to be a heresy.

4. The humanity of the enemy:

Throughout your Kairos document, we detect how you also long for those who are responsible for the occupation to regain their God-given humanity. We commend you for this since this seed can be the foundation for a new future for all the peoples of your region. While we think that this is a political problem that has to be solved politically, we encourage you to continue to build friendships across the many barriers in your society. We are particularly encouraged by the friendships that have developed between those in Israel and those in Palestine who are both committed to peace and justice.

5. Standing in the shoes of the Israelis:

You know much better than we do what it is that motivates the Israelis to do what they are doing. You also know much better than we do that which they fear, and that which prevents them to love. St Paul reminds us firstly in 1 Corinthians 13

that “love is patient”. Those of us who interacted with some white South Africans during the 1980s and earlier, know how much patience is required to exorcise fear from the minds of those who are fearful. We pray that God will continue to grant you that extra portion of love and grace to continue these dialogues so that greater understanding can result.

Having said that, we are of course reminded by St Paul that love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Regardless therefore of our empathy for their past, current and future pain, it does not minimize our strong opposition to and relentless resistance of what the Israelis are doing. It certainly does not justify their unjust actions either. May you continue to find the grace through the power of God’s Holy Spirit to seek, find, and proclaim truth and love both to those who suffer and to those who are in power and who use that power to oppress and exploit.

6. The role of the South African Jewish community:

We rejoice that there are many South African Jews who have stood up against the occupation and who have declared that the atrocities committed by the State of Israel are not in their name. We rejoice also that members of our legal fraternity have contributed positively to the debate in Israel and Palestine (John Dugard, Judge Seraj Desai et al). In particular we think of the work of Judge Goldstone, whose report serves as a reminder that there are certain generally accepted standards within the international and human community that apply to all and which cannot be flouted without severe censure. In fact, if we only selectively censure those who ignore these standards, then we weaken the possibility of censure in other situations that require it.

We are particularly concerned about the existence of a “South Africa Forest” in the Galilee, built on the destroyed Palestinian Village of Luby. We reject this naming and will ask our government to request that this be withdrawn since our new democratic state does not identify with such a forest, built in the name of a false kind of environmentalism and at the expense of the rights and humanity of Palestinians.

In addition we are aware that money from here is processed through the Jewish National Fund and that monies donated to that fund are tax deductible here. This is not only an affront to you but is also an affront to us here in South Africa. We lose out on tax and also money is externalized for reasons that are an affront to our nation’s history and constitution. We will find ways to ensure that the operations of this fund be monitored and we will work hard to have the tax-exempt status of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) reversed.

7. Repentance:

We wish to repent for our lack of solidarity with you. This is a sin that we repent with regards to your situation, and also with regards to other situations. While we were celebrating our freedom in South Africa, at least a million of our Rwandan brothers and sisters were being killed, and yet we remained silent even about that situation.

We now commit ourselves to embark on a clear process to develop a spirituality and praxis of solidarity. We call on you and others to assist us and walk with us on this journey as well.

8. Non-violent resistance:

We support your call for the isolation of the Apartheid State of Israel. To this end we will do all we can to monitor the relations between South Africa and Israel, and to deepen the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement as a way to put maximum non-violent pressure on Israel to lift the boot of oppression from the neck of the Palestinians. Change will come from above and from below, and we urge you to continue all forms of non-violent actions against the State of Israel and against the Occupation.

9. How your Kairos Document challenges our faith:

Having read and reflected upon your Kairos Document, we thank you for challenging our understanding of faith, hope and love. There is much that we can learn from you.

The themes of election, promise, Promised Land, New Jerusalem and many other theological themes and how we engage with these is a wake-up call to many of us in South Africa who have – often unconsciously - adopted certain positions on all of these in our churches. One of our people, who served as an Ecumenical Accompanier, returned to South Africa and said that he does not know how to read the Bible anymore, in the light of what he saw and experienced. This is a challenge for us, and we ask you to help us to understand these themes more deeply so that our faith can be refreshed and strengthened.

Practical things we wish to see implemented in the Churches in South Africa:

1. We wish to see deeper Bible Study about the themes mentioned in your Kairos Document and in this letter.
2. We want the Churches to all consider what a spirituality and praxis of solidarity in situations of injustice outside of our country might look like, and to work towards implementing such a spirituality in all our congregations.

3. We want to deepen our theological reflection as a basis for practical actions in solidarity with Palestinians, initiate actions on behalf of the cause of Palestinians and to find ways to support your actions in solidarity and co-operation with you.

10. Links between South Africa and Israel:

We are becoming aware of some sinister links between South Africa and Israel, and are particularly embarrassed by some that seem to have been negotiated by a former priest. We will be investigating this in the following months and will intervene where possible so that the State of Israel – because of its apartheid policies – are treated in the same way that we asked for the South African apartheid state to be treated. We cannot understand how our government seems to have lost its moral compass with regard to its overt and covert relations with the state of Israel, despite the fact that that state was essentially part of our oppression.

11. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission needed for the Holy Land?

Because of our experience in South Africa, we had to find a way to break decisively with the past and even though our TRC process cannot be described as perfect, it can be described as one of the most successful processes of societal healing and the creation of a common history and uncovering of as much truth as possible. We therefore offer this experience to you, and ask that you begin to consider what process of healing would be needed in the Holy Land once a political solution has been reached.

While raising this possibility with you, we also have learnt lessons that this powerful tool could be distorted in order to impose limitations on its effect. For example, we are still reflecting on why the churches were so silent when reconciliation was appropriated by politicians for certain political and economic ends, the Gospel used to serve a certain purpose and how our political discourse afterwards insisted to speak of the reconciliation process as purely a process of political accommodation. In fact, now, 15 years later, it is becoming clear to us that it indeed was a process of political accommodation, but accommodation of the elites, not the desires for justice and human dignity of all our people.

These reflections we also need to share with you, in anticipation of your liberation.

12. The temptations of aligning too closely with those in political office:

Whilst we celebrate our freedom and our achievements since 1994, we have learnt some hard lessons in South Africa, and one of it is the demobilization –

whether it is intentional or not - of civil society. This may not happen in your context, but it is important that we warn you about that danger. Economic and other factors may lead many of you to consider political office and while we do not think it is wrong for theologians and clergy to take up political office, there are many dangers in this, the chief ones being the need to sometimes compromise that which you feel strongest about. We therefore ask that you debate this matter thoroughly before a political solution is found so that those who decide to serve society either through political office or the civil service understands what the challenges are, and that you remain vigilant about the need for a strong civil society.

13. Building a society where all religions are respected

We admire your call for the respect of all religions and your rejection of a religious state. We realize that this is a bold and brave stand in your context, but it is also the position that we have adopted in South Africa. There are universal values on which the state can be built, where all religions can be respected. This must not be subject to the “tyranny of the majority” but ought to be adopted as a firm and unchanging principle, whether the end of the political negotiations produces a one or two state solution.

We are in a process of learning more and more what it means to build, sustain and protect the sanctity of our foundational values against the internal erosion thereof, usually in pursuit of power but claiming to be in the name of democracy, and we will also be willing to share some of these reflections with you.

14. Invitation:

Later this year, we will find ways to celebrate appropriately the 25th Anniversary of the South African Kairos document and we invite as many of you as possible to join us in order to share your journey with us. We will engage with friends in the international community to help fund this invitation.

15. Blessings:

We will continue to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and we ask that you continue to pray for South Africa and also for the rest of Africa. May the blessing of the God who requires unconditional love, justice with mercy, who brings reconciliation, peace and an abundance of hope, be with you now and for ever.

Signatories thus far:

1. Rev Edwin Arrison
2. Dr Stiaan vd Merwe
3. Prof Allan Boesak

4. Ms Elna Boesak
5. Terry Crawford-Browne
6. Rev John Frye
7. Dr Clint le Bruyns
8. Ms Dudu Masango
9. Rev Michael Oliphant
10. The Most Revd Dr. Thabo Cecil Makgoba, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa
11. Fr Larry Kauffman
12. Fr Luke Pato
13. Ms Joyce Mokoena
14. Bishop Dr. N.P Phaswana (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa)
15. Rev. Trevor Sibande (Lutheran)
16. Rev. France Mkhathshwa (Lutheran)
17. Rev. Mautji Pataki
18. Hermina Damons (Former Local Coordinator of EAPPI)
19. Gosiamo Choabi (EA)
20. Puleng Mkhathshwa
21. Motlagomang Oliphant (EA)
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35. Zuleika Moola
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48. Mohammed Mia
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53. Prof Farid Esack
54. Rev Dr Dawid Kuyler
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56. Rev Desmond Lesejane (ELCSA)
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58. Rev Janet Trisk
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