

Obituaries

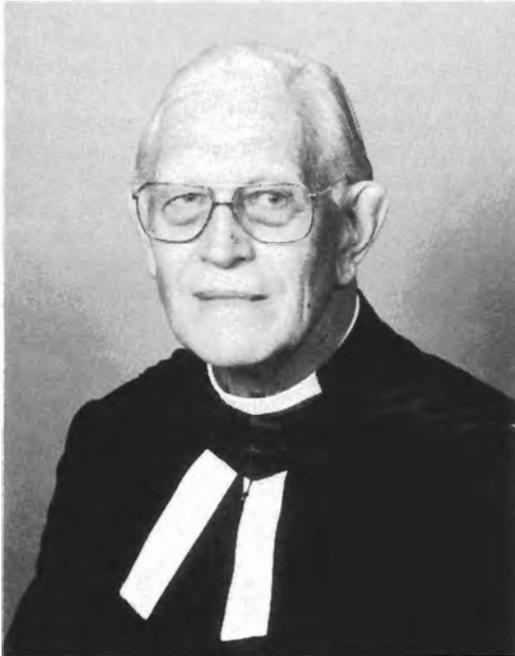
André Rocco de Villiers (1917–1992)

Several years ago Lennox Swift in his column *Civic Viewpoint* wrote:

The Reverend André Rocco de Villiers is a big man with enormous hands — the sort you'd look for on a master craftsman.

He is an outspoken, blunt Presbyterian minister who says what he thinks without worrying too much about the consequences.

That is how I knew him for over 40 years — a big man, a blunt man, a man among men. André de Villiers had the spontaneity and magnanimity of St Peter and yet the gentleness of St Andrew. His loyalty was rock-like. His unshakeable faith in his Lord drew men to him.



Rev. Dr A.R. de Villiers

(Photograph: The author)

As a teenager, I was a member of his hundred-strong Minister's Class which met every Sunday morning at Frere Road Presbyterian Church. He was the sporting padre. He had played first league rugby, soccer and cricket. His ministry was the very antithesis of the 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' approach. His was a robust faith. The call he extended on behalf of his Lord was unequivocal and unremitting. He rejoiced in his calling as an evangelist. His constant invitation was:

Let me commend my Saviour to you . . .

Dr de Villiers was called to the Frere Road Presbyterian Church in January 1944 and occupied that pulpit for almost 27 years. It was as the minister of Frere Road that he was appointed Mayor's chaplain in 1965 to the controversial term of office of Councillor Vernon Shearer. In 1966 he was appointed chaplain to Councillor Margaret Maytom who was the first woman mayor of Durban. Mrs Maytom was a Roman Catholic but that did not deter her from appointing Dr de Villiers as her chaplain. It was also as minister of Frere Road that Dr de Villiers was elected in 1961 to the highest office of his church, namely Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa.

André de Villiers was born on 15 March 1917 and grew up in Cape Town. His father died when he was two years of age and his mother had the difficult task of bringing up three children on her own. André matriculated at Observatory Boys' High in Cape Town at the early age of 15 years. He went to work at the South African Mutual Life Assurance Society for three years and then in 1936 was appointed Assistant Secretary of the YMCA in Cape Town. His consciousness of a call to the ministry became stronger and stronger. He was accepted as a candidate for the ministry by the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa. Training facilities were not available in South Africa and he could not afford to study overseas so he entered the student probationer course under the control of the Presbyterian Church. He was appointed as probationer minister to a small mining community church at Koffiefontein in the Free State where he preached his first sermon on 7 August 1937 and served there for two years.

From Koffiefontein André de Villiers moved to George in June 1939 where he was ordained on 19 August 1941. Last year the General Assembly of the Presbyterian church paid tribute to his fiftieth anniversary as an ordained minister (he had, in fact, been in the full-time ministry for 54 years!), and he and his dear Mary celebrated their golden wedding. It was also from George that he left for Egypt in December 1941 as a chaplain to the South African Defence Force. On his return from 'up North', he served as chaplain to the garrison on Robben Island and the air force base at George.

When the Reverend Mr and Mrs de Villiers arrived at Frere Road in 1944, there was a small congregation of 200 members. When they left, the original church had twice been enlarged, a new church built in 1959, and the congregation numbered 1 150! The Stella Presbyterian Church and the McDonald Memorial Church had been founded from Frere Road and Frere Road had played a significant part in building the church in Merebank for the Indian community.

André de Villiers was in great demand as a preacher, public speaker and broadcaster in radio and television. He was invited by churches to conduct evangelical campaigns all over the country and beyond. The demands became so great that his congregation eventually restricted him to one campaign annually! He invited innumerable theologians to occupy his pulpit, for

example Dr J. Edwin Orr, the Oxford revivalist scholar, and the Welsh evangelist, the Rev. Ivor Powell. André de Villiers was invited to preach from famous pulpits in various parts of the world. In Glasgow he was invited to preach at St Mungo's cathedral; in Edinburgh he preached in the historic Kirk of Greyfriars. He preached in the Rev. Dr Leslie Weatherhead's pulpit at the City Temple in London which has been described as 'the Cathedral of non-conformity'. Among many other preaching appointments was his invitation to preach at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, which had been the church of the minister and chaplain to the US Senate, Dr Peter Marshall of *A man called Peter* fame.

One of the significant aspects of André de Villiers's ministry was the part he played in the ecumenical movement. At a time when Roman Catholics and other denominations hardly associated with one another, he addressed the congregation at Emmanuel Catholic Cathedral at the Requiem Mass for Father Pat Holland. In December 1963 he was instrumental in organising a unique 'Demonstration of Christian Unity' which was held in the Durban city hall and attended by over 3 000 people and 91 members of the clergy of all races and all denominations. This was an extremely controversial event at the time. However, it was such a success that it was followed in April 1964 by a second 'Service of Christian Unity'.

André de Villiers was awarded various bursaries and scholarships to study abroad, for example, the Fulbright Scholarship and the Natal Education Department Overseas Study Bursary. His visits to the USA and Britain gave him the opportunity 'to observe and confer' and a period of study at Princeton Theological Seminary. He was able to advance his study of ecumenism while he was a guest of the Commission on Ecumenical Relations of the United Presbyterian Church in the US. It was on this visit that he was invited to preach the Baccalaureate sermon at the graduation ceremony of Ursinus College in Pennsylvania and the degree of Doctor of Divinity (*honoris causa*) was conferred upon him.

His ministry extended far beyond the church. He visited the Holy Land over 20 times and always found an enthusiastic band of pilgrims to accompany him. In 1970 he was appointed Principal Subject Adviser for Religious Education in the Natal Education Department where he worked until 1982. His new parish included all the Natal Education Department schools in the whole of the Natal and KwaZulu region, including private schools. He did a great deal to promote Biblical Studies as an examination subject, contributing greatly to drafting new syllabi on the interdepartmental committee of the Joint Matriculation Board. A textbook was not available so he hurriedly wrote one entitled, *That you may believe*. It was not only read by prospective examinees. It became something of a bestseller and went through 27 editions!

Dr de Villiers wrote a large number of books and pamphlets. I feel that I can take a little credit for being instrumental in the writing of his last book, *Endless victory*. After his retirement he held the post of Chaplain at St Charles School for several years and he continued to preach regularly in various churches on a Sunday, but he needed some work of his own. I suggested that he publish his sermons. This did not appeal to him at first, but last year he decided to publish his sermons and writings on the Easter message. He dedicated his book to Raymond Slater who retired as Headmaster of Hilton College and had been André's treasurer at the Frere Road Presbyterian Church and a life-long friend. When Raymond Slater discovered that he had cancer and his life expectancy would be limited, someone said to him: 'This experience will be the test of

your faith.' Raymond Slater replied: 'I hope it will be the proof of my faith.'

On my return home from André de Villiers's funeral on Tuesday 21 April 1992, I found a letter from him and a copy of his newly published book, *Endless victory*, in my postbox. On the flyleaf he had written: 'Now I know in part; then shall I know fully . . .' (1 Cor. 13:12). He had gone into hospital for surgery for an aortic aneurysm and died on Thursday 16 April 1992, the day before Good Friday.

André de Villiers married Mary Duthie on 1 July 1941. Her quiet strength of personality provided the loving support and sometimes unobtrusive restraining influence needed in his life and ministry. Mary created the family which he was so proud of.

On Dr de Villiers's retirement from the Natal Education Department in 1982, the Director of Education, Mr Solly Levinsohn, wrote to him paying tribute to his great contribution to his work in this Province. Mr Levinsohn wrote:

Your excellent human relations have served to draw people of very different backgrounds together. You have been equally popular among Protestants and Catholics, Jews and Gentiles, English and Afrikaans-speaking communities. You have been blessed with something of the quality exemplified by the Master, 'to draw all men unto you'.

Perhaps what André de Villiers taught most effectively through his life and preaching was the Grace of God. How often over the years, have I heard his sermons burst to a climax in the words:

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling.

ANDRÉ L. LE ROUX