

## *Mediation efforts in turbulent times*

What follows in this article is an attempt to give some account of the involvement of church leaders in seeking to break the cycle of political violence in this Province from the mid-1980s until the first democratic elections of 1994. It is by no means a thorough or exhaustive treatment, but more in the nature of a personal memoir drawing on memories of my own participation in the turbulent events of those times.

The first landmark was the formation in 1987 of the Natal Church Leaders' Group, which after 1994 became the KwaZulu-Natal Church Leaders' Group in keeping with the new name of our Province in the changed political dispensation. This group of leaders, representing primarily the so-called mainline or historic churches, together with a number of important para-church organisations, still exists and fulfils a valuable role in a number of areas of social concern. Its initial focus was entirely the political violence and its terrible implications for the life of this province. In the chair was the Revd Dr Khoza Mgojo, a prominent Methodist leader and at that time President of the Federal Theological Seminary at Imbali, Pietermaritzburg. stalwarts such as Denis Hurley, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Durban, were among our number, together with vibrant ecumenical leaders like Paddy Kearney of Diakonia and Peter Kerchhoff of PACSA (the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness). It was an exciting group to belong to, and we soon discovered bonds of unity in a common cause which in ordinary church life tend to elude us.

Politically in the 1980s, government in Natal operated within the framework of the white political parties, while in the self-governing 'homeland' of KwaZulu, political control was exercised exclusively by Inkatha which was later to become the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). Into this situation emerged the United Democratic Front (UDF), an extra-parliamentary organisation formed in 1983, which was increasingly seen by many as an internal front for the still-banned African National Congress (ANC). Closely linked with the UDF was COSATU, the powerful national federation of trade unions. The clash between Inkatha and the UDF was ironic because both of them were intensely opposed to the reformed Constitution of 1983, which admitted Indian and Coloured representatives to Parliament for the first time, but still excluded the African majority of the South African population. Moreover, in KwaZulu-Natal the black members of each organisation were all Zulu-speakers, which meant that the conflict could not be given an 'inter-tribal' connotation. What did emerge was a struggle for political turf, indeed for the political soul of the people of this Province. The church leadership also developed a growing conviction that a sinister 'third force' was at work, namely a deliberate attempt

by elements in the security establishment, encouraged implicitly or explicitly by government, to foster so-called 'black on black' violence in its own self-interest, which was either to play for time or even to undermine the reform process that was under way. It was into such a minefield that the Natal Church Leaders' Group began to tread with a view to minimising conflict wherever possible and, with that in mind, seeking to mediate between the different parties involved. It was an awesome privilege to be part of such a group.

There were also some denominational initiatives with similar aims to those of the Church Leaders' Group. I well remember being involved in one of these. The Anglican Church's Provincial Synod<sup>1</sup> met in Durban in 1989, and given the situation of political violence which was escalating in Natal, it was inevitable that the Synod would pass a resolution on the subject. The interesting and unusual thing about this particular resolution was that it asked for an Anglican delegation to be sent immediately to negotiate with the Chief Minister of KwaZulu, Mangosothu Buthelezi, who is himself an Anglican. The President of that Synod was Archbishop Desmond Tutu and he consulted, I remember, with Mr Simon Mtimkhulu who was a lay representative at the Synod and happened also to be the Speaker of the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly. Mtimkhulu suggested three bishops who, he presumed, would be acceptable because they were Zulu speakers: Bishops Zambuhle Dlamini, Alfred Mkhize and Sigisbert Ndwandwe. Archbishop Tutu wisely decided to widen the representation by asking me to be part of the group as the Bishop of Natal. So it was that the four of us were given permission to leave the Synod when the Chief Minister indicated that he was willing to meet with us immediately. We left fortified by the prayers and solidarity of the entire Synod.

The meeting in Ulundi with Chief Minister Buthelezi and his cabinet was for me the first of several similar ventures during this period. In many ways it was the most important and the most memorable because of its fruitfulness, something which we discovered was not easy to achieve from our meetings at Ulundi. I am convinced that the nature of our delegation, especially with its three Zulu-speaking bishops, helped to create a dynamic which made for positive results. This was in some ways a sad commentary on the very divided and polarised situation in which we then found ourselves in South Africa as a whole, but it also provided an atmosphere of trust and mutual concern which, I remember, was quite tangible. I felt privileged, once again, to be part of such an initiative and to be conveying by my presence and participation a painful concern which went far wider than the Zulu-speaking constituency which had become engulfed by the violence.

The outcome of our intervention at Ulundi was agreement by Chief Buthelezi to the creation of talks between five representatives of each of Inkatha and the UDF/COSATU. We returned to the Synod in Durban jubilant over this outcome which we rightly considered to be a significant breakthrough in the quest for negotiation and peace. Contact was immediately made with the Natal leadership of both the UDF and COSATU, and the response was positive. The office of the Anglican Diocese of Natal in Durban was made available as a discreet and neutral venue for the five-a-side talks, and I well remember the first meeting when we tried to put everyone at their ease over a welcoming cup of tea! A truly awesome moment followed when the two sides invited me, as a local church leader and the host for the occasion, to preside over their first tentative discussions.



*Provincial Synod delegates who led the Anglican peace initiative in Natal.  
(Left to right: The Rt Revd M.S. Ndwandwe, The Rt Revd A.A. Mkhize, The Rt Revd M. Nuttall  
and The Rt Revd J.Z.B. Dlamini.)*

What emerged remarkably quickly as a consensus was the need to mount a conference for all the key political players. It was a 'given' that this would include the African National Congress, which, because of the fact that it was still at that time a banned organisation, would require that the conference take place in London or in Sweden, where the President of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, was receiving medical treatment after suffering a stroke. The envisaged conference was abortive, initially because of an unexpected decision by Chief Minister Buthelezi to withdraw his team from the talks. The same delegation of bishops was asked by the Natal Church Leaders' Group to retrace their steps to Ulundi to discover the reason for the withdrawal and to attempt at all costs to re-establish the talks. The tense gravity of that meeting was palpable. It became clear that, unbeknown to us or to the five-a-side talks, Chief Minister Buthelezi had written to Oliver Tambo to test the waters with regard to a meeting between them. The reply he had received had been less than friendly, and this put a serious question-mark for him over the validity or value of the five-a-side talks, which from the point of view of the participants were making remarkable progress. We found ourselves facing the ominous prospect of a deadlock after the euphoria a few months earlier. One struggles to find a compromise in such a situation; this becomes an essential, and sapping, part of a mediation process.

Near the end of our meeting we made a plea to the Chief Minister that he would at least consider the continuation of two-a-side talks. I remember him turning to the two members of his cabinet who had led Inkatha's group of five, namely Dr Oscar Dhlomo and Dr Frank Mdlalose. Both indicated their willingness to continue, and so it was that

agreement was secured for a compromise that would keep the process going. The UDF and COSATU also agreed to persevere in this reduced fashion, and they appointed Dr Diliza Mji and Mr Alec Erwin to be their two representatives. Little of a practical nature was achieved by this group, and events at a national level, initiated by President F.W. de Klerk in February 1990, began to overtake our efforts at mediation. Yet I think it would be legitimate to say that our initiative of 1989 sowed some important seeds, first by enabling some key political players to meet and begin a process of 'finding' one another, and secondly by implementing, albeit in embryonic form, the vital principle of working towards a negotiated political future for this country. I find it intriguing that from 1994 to the present, Alec Erwin and Mangosothu Buthelezi have served as colleagues in the South African cabinet, though still belonging to different political parties, while Frank Mdlalose became the first Premier in KwaZulu-Natal and presided over a provincial cabinet which included both IFP and ANC members. Oscar Dhlomo in his turn decided quite soon after our initiative to leave the party political scene and set up an Institute for Multi-Party Democracy which aimed at fostering in other contexts the very things which we too had been encouraging. Did our efforts in 1989 perhaps provide a stimulus for and a foretaste of these remarkable developments?

During our 1989 discussions with Chief Minister Buthelezi and his cabinet he generously made available to us a remarkable hand-written letter which he had received from Nelson Mandela in prison. The letter respectfully and affectionately used Buthelezi's clan name by addressing him as 'Dear Shenge'. It was signed 'Madiba'. The essential purpose of the letter was to express deep disquiet about the political violence which was increasingly taking hold over KwaZulu-Natal and to express the hope that a way towards peace could be found. The Chief Minister replied to the letter in similar vein.

This exchange of a moving correspondence seemed to augur well for a meeting between the two leaders when Mandela was released from prison in February 1990. In fact such a meeting did not occur until January 1991 in Durban. The escalating political conflict and violence, not only in KwaZulu-Natal but also in the then Transvaal, became so intense that a natural and friendly contact between the two political leaders in the spirit of their earlier correspondence somehow became unthinkable. When people are dying on both sides of a political conflict, this kind of impasse is understandable even if, in the interest of an ultimate peace, it is undesirable. We were informed that the two leaders were in fairly regular telephonic contact, usually on Mandela's initiative, but a meeting or a joint rally seemed to elude them. There was talk between them in April 1990 of a joint public rally at Taylor's Halt outside Pietermaritzburg. This was very soon after the Seven Day War in the Edendale Valley, and since Taylor's Halt was essentially an Inkatha stronghold, the ANC leadership in the Pietermaritzburg area were quick to advise Nelson Mandela not to risk attending the proposed rally. I remember being part of a long day's shuttle diplomacy at that time, under the auspices of the Natal Church Leaders' Group, which involved meeting with Chief Buthelezi and his colleagues in the morning in Ulundi and with Mr Mandela and his colleagues late that afternoon in Pietermaritzburg. We had hoped to bring the two leaders together, but this hope proved to be abortive because of the very deep tensions that were running between the two organisations at the time.

A church-sponsored meeting between Mandela and Buthelezi eventually came about in 1993 as a result of a quite extraordinary set of circumstances. Quite naturally, given

the enormity of the conflict and its dire implications for the political future of this country, national church leaders had become involved with us in KwaZulu-Natal in the quest for peace. Two of these were Stanley Mogoba, the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church, and Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop. Bishop Mogoba was in fact also a valued member, when he was available, of the Natal Church Leaders' Group because his home and office were in this Province. Archbishop Tutu was based in Cape Town. He and I were by now in very close contact because I had been elected in 1989 by the Anglican bishops in Southern Africa to be Dean of the Province, which meant 'next senior to the archbishop' and enabled me to coin the phrase 'number two to Tutu', a phrase which the Archbishop delighted to use, with his characteristic glee, when describing my role.

Over the weekend of 5–6 June 1993 Archbishop Tutu was in Pietermaritzburg for two important events. The first was the consecration on the Saturday in the Cathedral of the Holy Nativity of Peter Harker to be the new Bishop of Zululand. The second was the unveiling on the Sunday of the notable statue of Mahatma Gandhi in Church Street. It so happened that Chief Buthelezi was to be present at the first of these events and Nelson Mandela at the second. Desmond Tutu was not going to allow these two opportunities for contact with the two leaders to slip by. During the giving of the 'Peace' at the consecration service he went straight to Mangosothu Buthelezi to greet him with the gift of peace, and having received the same gift in return, asked him if he would be willing to come to a meeting with Mandela if he were able to broker it. Buthelezi replied in the affirmative. Next day Tutu took a similar bold initiative with Mandela. I remember the event well because he asked me to be part of it with him. After the impressive unveiling of the Gandhi statue, he deftly steered Mandela into a corner of the room at the City Hall where lunch was being served, told him of Buthelezi's agreement to meet and asked if he would agree as well. The answer was as straightforward as that of Buthelezi the day before: he readily agreed. It was a profound moment behind which lay the hopes and aspirations of many, not least the church leadership in Natal and, I want to believe, the desire in the hearts of Shenge and Madiba as well. Breakthroughs in a political impasse can sometimes come in the simplest and most unexpected ways, especially when they are accompanied by a warm human touch.

Archbishop Tutu was poised at that time to go overseas for some commitments, and so it was arranged that, in consultation with Bishop Mogoba, I would take responsibility for finalising the date and an agreed venue and any other details with the two political leaders. Such things are never an easy exercise, and the best of intentions can sometimes come unstuck on apparently trivial details. Fortunately this did not happen in this instance, and Desmond Tutu arrived back in time to preside jointly with Stanley Mogoba over a nine-hour meeting on 23 June at the Lutheran Conference Centre in Kempton Park. It was a difficult meeting, but it was nonetheless of decisive importance in the unfolding events of that time. I remember how we arranged for the two leaders, who had written those two remarkable letters to each other in 1989, to have lunch together, completely on their own, without the sometimes intrusive presence of political colleagues. What Mandela and Buthelezi talked about over lunch we shall probably never know; indeed, we have no right to know. My own sense is that that brief hour was probably of more value for peace and reconstruction in the land than the rest of the day put together.

There were other major peace initiatives, such as the Peace Summit at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg in September 1991, in which church leadership was intimately involved. This summit was a direct prelude to the first CODESA, the one being a search for peace, the other a search for justice, each inextricably tied to the other. Interestingly, the Peace Summit was jointly sponsored and chaired by business and church leaders, and virtually every political party and organisation was present at it. I remember watching the process with a mixture of anxiety and wonder as the political leaders jockeyed for positions and eventually committed themselves, one after the other, to a carefully drafted Peace Code. We did our best to hold them accountable to this code in the years that followed.

It needs to be said that church leaders had only limited success in conflict mediation and the promotion of peace in the run-up to the first democratic elections in 1994. Ultimately the politicians themselves had to achieve the ends we were looking for through their own commitment to the negotiation process. CODESA in this respect played an absolutely crucial role. A vital flaw in that process, however, was the decision by Inkatha to absent itself after the first early stages. It became increasingly likely that Inkatha would be unwilling to take part in the elections of 1994, and this prospect looked disastrous for the coming of peace to KwaZulu-Natal. Deaths from acts of political violence were increasing, not decreasing, with the approaching elections. Indeed, in the very month of the elections (April 1994) the number of deaths was an ominous 333. It seemed as if all our efforts at peacemaking during the previous years were proving fruitless in the end.

The final breakthrough came in another extraordinary combination of circumstances. The mediation efforts of Dr Henry Kissinger of the United States and Lord Carrington of Great Britain – both experienced in attempting to resolve tricky political situations – had failed in early April, and it looked as if we were on the brink of a major escalation of conflict, especially in KwaZulu-Natal. Meanwhile, as a result of an initiative by the para-church agency African Enterprise, a relatively unknown person named Washington Okumu, a private diplomatic figure from Kenya and a devout Christian, had come in his personal capacity to see if he could help. When the other mediators left the country disillusioned, he stayed and proceeded to hammer out a document which became the basis for a last-minute agreement between the IFP, the NP and the ANC.

African Enterprise, in partnership with many Natal church leaders, had also decided upon a Prayer Rally at King's Park, Durban for Sunday 17 April, just ten days before the elections. The political leaders were invited to be present, and it was at that very rally that Mangosothu Buthelezi, Jacob Zuma and Danie Schutte discussed the Okumu document in a VIP facility and agreed that it could be accepted. Their colleagues were brought on board, and within two days the agreement was publicly announced and signed in Pretoria by President de Klerk, Nelson Mandela and Mangosothu Buthelezi in the presence of Washington Okumu.

This had been the strangest of developments. An outsider with unknown credentials happened to be the final instrument of breakthrough. A vital factor, in my opinion, was that he was a fellow-African whose diplomatic work was done in an African idiom. Another was the fact that, because of a friendly contact some years before, he had the confidence of Chief Buthelezi. F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela, for their part, were commendably open to a negotiated compromise right to the end of the process. Judge

Kriegler, who chaired the Independent Electoral Commission, was also amazingly open to printing and distributing millions of amended ballot papers less than ten days before the election date, with the IFP now included among the parties to be voted for. Thus the nation managed to step back from an abyss which had looked dark and ugly.

I was at that Prayer Rally in Durban, together with 30 000 others. It was not everybody's style in its robustness and noisiness. Some seem to have come to be entertained! There can be little doubt, nonetheless, that the rally left its mark; that the political threesome managing to find a consensus, there and then, around the Okumu document was certainly an intriguing phenomenon! There was also at that time another quieter, more hidden spiritual influence at work. At the Cathedral of the Holy Nativity in Pietermaritzburg it had been agreed to keep an unbroken vigil of prayer for fifty days and nights from Easter to Pentecost, with the election on 27 April conveniently falling right in the middle. Who can measure the effect of this? Even the secular media did not hesitate, in the mystery and wonder of these unfolding events, to describe the 1994 election and its outcome as a miracle. However it is described, there can be no doubt that it held the whole world in thrall.

MICHAEL NUTTALL

#### NOTES

1. 'Provincial' here does not refer to the province of KwaZulu-Natal, but to the whole Anglican church in South Africa, i.e. the Church of the Province of South Africa.