

THE FORUM

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FOR CONCERNED MEMBERS OF THE OLD APOSTOLIC CHURCH

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AN OPEN LETTER

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'Crossing the River Jordan'

Could 2017 be the year that the 'black' component of the OAC (Old Apostolic Church) household in the Western Cape will eventually cross the River Jordan in their beloved Church by having (for the first time in OAC existence of about a century) one of their own sons anointed as an apostle in the region? All other regions in the country cherish the divine right and facility of being served by 'black' incumbents, except the Western Cape where the longer it takes for that glorious day to arrive, the more it seems to become almost impossible to deny that naked racism and an apartheid mentality are still alive and well in this regard.

Rumour has it that one of the longest serving apostles in the Western Cape will retire this year.

Unlike the filling of similar vacancies in the past, this retirement ought to compel the leadership of the OAC to explain to its members/congregations (and society at large) why a 'black' officer of the Church may not be anointed as an apostle for a sizable constituency in the region who have never ever had the opportunity to be addressed and served by a resident apostle in their own vernacular.

This is a proverbial River Jordan to cross for the OAC in the Western Cape. Another golden opportunity for the Church in the region to come to grips with its apartheid past. Failure to comply, might well signal the advent of a whole new and painful struggle for the Church in the region.

Why 'Black'

Simply because more than two decades into the post-apartheid South Africa, 'black' members/congregations in the Western Cape deserve to be ministered to by a 'black' apostle.

Nothing racial here, just the need to have an apostle that can address and serve them in the vernacular in which they practise their OAC faith – and no longer be subjected to the unmitigated insult of being served by ‘white’ and ‘coloured’ incumbents, who after so many years still display no interest whatsoever in acquiring the facility of being conversant in a ‘black’ language and the related cultural paradigm. It is not just about a black skin, but essentially the human capital that such an incumbent will introduce to the equation - a vital ingredient which has been lacking all along in the DNA of the OAC leadership in the Western Cape.

Alternatively: why is a ‘black’ officer capable and acceptable enough to reach, together with his ‘white’ and ‘coloured’ brothers/colleagues, the hallowed heights of the Fourfold Office in the OAC, but is denied an apostleship? And all this, while all the other regions of the OAC have ‘black’ apostles who have been serving the OAC for many years.

The Western Cape has no moral leg to stand on in this regard. How long must ‘blacks’ in the region still wait for an apostle out of their own ranks? ‘Nothing can stand in the way of an idea whose time has come’, the timeless adage reminds us.

‘Achilles heel’

It is common knowledge that it was official policy of the apartheid regime to relegate blacks in the Western Cape to a third class status as citizens. It is also common knowledge that the OAC leadership during those years slavishly followed the apartheid regime’s policies without question or restraint, and have as yet until 2017 failed or refused to formally declare that apartheid was a heresy and a crime against humanity. Even the Dutch Reformed Churches have since the early 1990’s officially atoned for their complicity and then formally and publicly denounced apartheid, but not the OAC.

The continued absence of a ‘black’ incumbent as an apostle in the Western Cape, therefore, must surely be regarded as the Achilles heel of the OAC, pertaining to the universal fight against racism and discrimination.

Separate worlds

Except for the instances where ‘black’ congregants have since the abolition of the group areas act moved into former ‘white’ neighbourhoods and therefore joined former ‘white’ OAC congregations, the OAC is still primarily a church comprising three finite racial worlds, as in the apartheid days. They live in silos and ‘blacks’ seem to resemble an invisible constituency. It is not so much the physical location that is at issue here, but rather an apartheid-like mindset and mentality that still seem to dictate behavioural patterns with regard to association and (church) governance in general.

And not just a ‘black’ apostle. With ‘black’ members now part of the congregations in former ‘white’ residential areas, comes the challenging prospect of ‘blacks’ knocking on the door to be ordained as officers in various ranks in their new abode. And the obvious question is: are former ‘white’ congregations ready for this phenomenon which also has a language/cultural element embedded in it? Not to mention Sunday School and Youth programmes. Common sense suggests that matters of this nature are best dealt with through a sustained system of open-minded and resolute dialogue, especially where members/congregations occupy a seat at the table with the leadership as equal partners .

However, an irritating 'us and them' disposition currently still seems to predominate and appears to be of no concern to the existing socio-politically conservative, 'white-led' leadership in the region. For, had they been of a more liberal persuasion, this issue would have been studiously dealt with ages ago.

Again, irrefutable proof that the best interests of the OAC are not being served by the current leadership in the region, or for that matter in the whole of the country.

Rainbow nation

Like all other mainstream churches in the country, the OAC community is in essence a rainbow nation, resplendent with all the different skin colours, tongues and cultures. And like all the other mainstream churches, the OAC leadership should demonstrably play its part in harnessing this multi-cultural force to optimize its obvious potential. The challenge for them in the Western Cape is to consciously and deliberately have Xhosa take its place as a third language in the church discourse, so as to not only accommodate 'black' members in 'mixed' neighbourhoods, but also sensitize 'white' and coloureds' to this new cultural paradigm in the region. And what better way to promote and enhance such an initiative than by having a 'black' apostle to add the required dimension?

The arrival of a 'black' apostle should undoubtedly propel the OAC in the Western Cape to new and greater heights. His mere presence in the region ought to be the wake-up call that is needed for a province that has had a very 'easy' ride until now. The older 'non-white' OAC generation in the Western Cape bears witness of the glory days when the first 'non-white' apostle in the Western Cape, the late Apostle Robert Lombard, used to passionately and admirably serve both 'Coloured and Black' communities, here as well as in the Eastern Cape. The joint sessions and social gatherings of 'black and coloured' congregations under him were always the highlights of every year. 'Black' congregants rapturously eulogized him as "Ingonyama" (the Lion of 'Judah') and for his entire constituency he was the embodiment of their hopes and aspirations for a harmonious and prosperous future OAC, free from racial prejudice and discrimination. However, this dream was cut short by the schism of 1972, and his departure from the OAC.

Although the OAC in the Western Cape has since 1972 made great strides materially, it has in fact retrogressed as far as establishing a truly and functional rainbow church community. A 'black' incumbent as apostle (the first ever for the region) ought to go a long way to correcting historical imbalances and help set the OAC on a new course of reconciliation and prosperity.

Hamstrung

It appears that institutional growth and development in the OAC in the Western Cape will always be hamstrung by the palpable racial divide that seems to define the image of the Church. Although 'non-whites' are in the majority, regrettably, the OAC officially still seems to have a 'white' official face.

No malice intended, but it needs to be restated that the current leadership of the OAC in the region, have yet to embark on a conscious and deliberate programme to harness a progressive non-racial and multi-cultural OAC community in the Western Cape. After years of racial separation under apartheid and exacerbated by neglect since 1994, a new brand of leadership becomes imperative. The presence of a 'black' apostle has to be part of such a process of renewal and reform.

A change of tone and emphasis is desperately required in the discourse at executive level in the Western Cape, which in turn ought to cascade down to all other levels throughout the church in the region. And this is where a 'black' incumbent will hopefully help to effect the necessary change.

Culture

Its multi-cultural potential by far presents the best opportunities for interracial cooperation, harmony and the ultimate attainment of a more racially tolerant OAC. Espousing the same religious faith and doctrine, the three racial groups have a lot to learn from each other. They have yet to be perceived as a united non-racial religious force in the region. The entrance of a 'black' apostle in the Western Cape should in no small measure add to such a movement.

Politically and economically, the Western Cape is a formidable region in the country. A truly united OAC in the Western Cape, therefore, equally has the same potential to play a leading role in transforming the OAC into the spiritual powerhouse it is expected to be in this world of today.

'Whites and Coloureds' in the OAC of the Western Cape also have need of sitting at the feet of a 'black' apostle and be led by him, a dimension in their spiritual realm they have never been exposed to. It would be a new dawn for the Church in the region.

Rivers Jordan

Apostles of the OAC have a pioneering role to fulfill in our time. Currently, their credibility is at stake, primarily due to apparent inaction or incompetence. Words and pious teachings alone, will no longer suffice. Perhaps the time has arrived for members/congregations to take a closer look at the legacies of retiring apostles, especially in view of the lucrative salaries and perks they had been entitled to during their time in office.

The 'black' community of the OAC in the Western Cape have long ago established themselves as a significant constituency in the region, which makes the appointment of a 'black' apostle indispensable. The years of neglect in this regard since 1972, is therefore a sad testimony to the brand of leadership during this period.

Until such time as the hopes and dreams by 'black' members/congregations in the Western Cape of experiencing the ordination of a 'black' apostle in their lifetime are fulfilled, this will be a River Jordan for them to cross in their beloved OAC. And the longer the current leadership procrastinate in this regard, the wider and deeper the river will become for 'black' members/congregations of the region.

For the leadership, it will also be a River Jordan to cross – to distinguish between right and wrong and then proceed to be seen to doing the right thing.

Yours faithfully,

W Blouws

Chair: The FORUM