

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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'For whom the bell tolls'

"Ask not for whom the bell tolls", the 17th century Englishman John Donne wrote. "it tolls for thee". In the year 2017, the leadership of the OAC (Old Apostolic Church) appears to be oblivious to the chimes of a similar sounding bell. Or, perhaps not? However, as a culture of democratic governance inexorably manifests itself in South African society, the chimes of the bell in the OAC steeple rather increasingly seem to resemble the death knell for a church leadership (regime) that appears to be doggedly refusing to bring about the sorely needed transformation of the administration of the OAC. Shouldn't we perhaps also look at the possible 'capture of church resources'?

'They still don't get it.....they simply just don't'.....seems to be a common thread these days in the colloquial discourse among a sizable constituency within the rank and file membership (and many serving officers) of the OAC, when opining about the disposition of a seemingly obdurate leadership, as well as the current state (and future) of their beloved church, as a result thereof.

Alarm bell

There could hardly have been a more compelling peal (or wake-up call) by the bell in the OAC tower than the latest edict from 'on high' (apostolate/Head Office) regarding the paradigm shift in the status of the Youth in the OAC. The new cut-off age for Youth is 35 years. The term 'young adults' is bound to become the latest buzzword in the OAC lexicon.

Why compelling? Simply, because it highlights once again the pressing need for administrative reform to enable members/congregations to have a formal say/control over the administration of their Church. In 2017, it is unconscionable to have a clique of unelected, lay preachers continuing to run an authoritarian and myopic church outfit sustained by public funds. And the costly price to pay

by the OAC for this malaise, is the apparent loss of the renowned spiritual prowess, which traditionally distinguished it from other churches. Outsiders, unsurprisingly nowadays, often ask: 'what happened to the OAC we once knew'?

Alarming? Because the proposed new youth structure is a complex concept that requires broad-based, thorough and almost endless interrogation before it can be effectively unpacked and implemented throughout a church such as the OAC. Simply put, for it to succeed it would also require a healthy dollop of expert input. Listening to ill-equipped (junior officers) priests trying to explain it to congregations during the terse regular general announcements session before a divine service, is reason enough for an entity such as The Forum to ring the alarm bell once again.

Rubicon for the OAC?

Could the proposed re-formatting of the youth structure be the proverbial final straw to break the camel's back, as far as compelling the OAC leadership to abandon their outdated and diabolical policy of deliberately excluding members/congregations from the administrative processes of their own church? Common sense dictates that Head Office and its host of administratively ill-equipped shepherds (officers) cannot go it alone with the introduction and successful running of the proposed new youth structure.

Could this development shape up to be the Rubicon for the forces of change in the OAC? If not, then at least it might mark the beginning of the end of ruthless and, therefore, repugnant authoritarian administrative rule by a leadership that is demonstrably not serving the best interests of the Church.

If Head Office is serious about the new youth structure, they will for the first time in OAC history have to consult with (and rely on) congregations to flesh out this new concept. And for the first time it will be forcibly brought home to them (Head Office) that the hackneyed approach of "fit one, fit all" is unworkable and counter-productive at best. They will also learn that what is feasible in Durbanville or Sea Point, is not suitable for Blikkiesdorp, or Athlone, or Mfuleni. And for that matter also Avondal, Bothasig, or Parowvallei. The OAC is a proverbial broad church – black, coloureds, white, rich, severely socio-economically challenged, educated, poorly literate, liberal, conservative, etc.

Youth leadership

Fortunately, the OAC have all the required expertise readily available within the ranks of its members/congregations. OAC leaders often seem to forget that the majority of the OAC youth (many of them the children of officers) have been exposed to the venerated echelons of higher learning and therefore qualified enough to make the new movement succeed.

The much-needed discourse about the proposed reforms, calls for the sharpest minds at all levels and regions to steer the process. It won't be a 100-metre dash. Instead, it will be more like a walkathon where there is room for the multitudes to studiously and methodically pore over how best they can shape and spawn the new structure.

And, some free advice for the progenitors (Apostolate) of the new youth concept: youth structures are usually best run when left to the youth to take charge of their own destiny. In this case, there is something positive to be said for elevating the age to 35 years. The time is long overdue for the

OAC leadership to wake up to the fact that the OAC is tailor-made to have its Youth and Sunday School structures function as autonomous entities comprising local, regional and national dimensions. From there on they can reach out to counterparts in other churches and international bodies. After all, this is what institutional growth and development essentially entail.

Administrative reform

In 2017, there can be no morally justifiable reason for the OAC leadership to continue keeping their members/congregations in the dark about the nuts and bolts of the administration of their own church. As royally salaried officers, they are certainly not serving the best interests of their employer, the members/congregations of the OAC.

As alluded to in earlier Forum papers, OAC members (and most officers) rank among the most ignorant of all church communities in the world as far as the administration of their own church affairs is concerned. It is a direct result of official OAC Head Office policy of deliberately (constitutionally) excluding members/congregations from the administration of their own church. Except for the fortunate few who emanated from other denominations or pursued higher learning, born OAC folks are consequently sadly lacking in common church organizational skills – meetings, conferences, presentations, debates, protocol/etiquette, etc. What an indictment!!!

Administrative reform, therefore, has to start with the broad-based crafting of a new constitution for the OAC, which has to be ratified at a national conference where all the congregations are duly and directly represented – a congress of the people. Followed by the devolution of power to congregational level so as to enable members to take charge of OWN affairs. Formal delegations from congregations would constitute the regional and national bodies to take care of GENERAL affairs. And for a change (and good governance), Head Office officials would be subjected to the will of the people/OAC (congregations, province and national congresses). At present, the proverbial tail (Head Office officials) seems to be wagging the dog (the Church).

Congregations, the core entities of the OAC, need to be equipped with the necessary local structures to accommodate the administration of OWN affairs. Thereby, the hands of the clergy would be freed up to optimally attend to their obligations in the spiritual domain.

Capture of church resources?

Ever louder rings the bell for an end to the continued lack of transparency and accountability as far as the management and security of church resources are concerned. After all, the OAC is a public institution and not a private club or business venture. Or, is it? Lamentably, OAC members/congregations have been reduced to the status of hapless spectators to the administration of their own church.

Incidentally, the OAC leadership have yet to level with members/congregations (the church) regarding the serious allegations of fraud and maladministration, which over the past twelve years have dragged the OAC into the law courts of the land, as well as across the pages of newspapers. While the whole world had a peek into 'OAC Head Office politics', loyal and 'gullible' members/congregations, have yet to be dignified with a formal debrief by Head Office on the state of affairs in their own church.

Failure, or refusal, by top management to bring members/congregations on board in this regard, may be construed as a deliberate strategy to sweep the specific incidents under the proverbial carpet. And as long as their disposition and actions in this regard are cushioned by the current OAC constitution, the call for administrative reform in the OAC will become ever more crucial and morally incumbent. Buzzwords such as CORRUPTION or 'radical transformation' might also sooner than later start manifesting themselves in the discourse about change in the administration of the OAC.

To refresh the public memory:

- The alleged controversial sale of church houses by Head Office officials to themselves at below market value. Although having been the subject of formal judicial process, the matter has yet to be dealt with by the Church (members/congregations) and not solely by salaried officials/officers, who ought to recuse themselves from officiating during such proceedings. The OAC was the big loser, as paid officers benefitted at the expense of the Church. At issue here is the security of church assets, as well as serving the best interests of their employer (the Church)
- Embezzlement of church funds by a junior official, which could not be detected by the responsible Head Office executive officials. They were alerted by the bank about the questionable transfer of church funds into the junior official's personal account, which went on for about fifteen months. Although settled in court, the issue has yet to be cleared up with the Church (members/congregations), especially the security and level of sophistication of the OAC financial system and structures. This embarrassing development amounts to no less than a vote of no-confidence in the management at Head Office. Punishment was only meted out to the errant junior official, but what about retribution for an apparent lax accounting regime, as well as a formal apology by the Apostolate to the Church in general?

Members/congregations (the Church) have also yet to be formally apprised of the findings and outcome of the Commission of Inquiry appointed by the Apostolate to investigate the aforementioned developments in the Western Cape region. The appointment of the Apostolate Sub-Committee was only effected following the deposition of a formal grievance letter in this regard by a concerned member (lawyer) of the Church. Relevant documentation regarding the abovementioned two court cases are open to public scrutiny.

- With members/congregations formally excluded from the administrative processes of the OAC, the issue of probity as far as procurement and the awarding of tenders and building contracts are concerned becomes imperative - the controversial sale of church real estate without going on public tender, for example. With a top management (in terms of the current OAC constitution) only accountable unto themselves, members/congregations have ample reason to be suspicious of Head Office conduct in this regard. Who has the final say? And, who guards the guard? Rumour and conjecture can hardly be a basis for building and sustaining trust between the leadership and the Church at large.

Whereas the CAPTURE of resources/structures is the narrative of the day which propels the opponents of tyranny worldwide, there is no way the OAC leadership can hope to escape its gravitational pull. Fact is that the OAC is the custodian of public funds and therefore its leadership cannot be allowed to continue running its administration like an exclusive club. Consequently, the

cash register of the OAC should be kept at a respectable distance from the reach of its spiritual leaders. A more democratic approach is what is required to start the process of administrative reform in the Church.

Knowledge base

And while the bell keeps on tolling and the people (the OAC) struggling to make sense of what is really happening in the ivory towers of their church, The Forum deems it imperative to put in the public domain available documentation in an attempt to enhance the knowledge base of members/congregations (and most officers) regarding salient issues which tend to surface from time to time in OAC circles.

The current system of formally excluding members/congregations, is open to abuse and neglect. It has a corrosive impact on the image of the OAC and must ultimately account for the apparent inability of the Church to succeed in its outward evangelical mission. It is an open secret that OAC congregations fail to attract new members in significant numbers and that ever declining totals at sealing services these days should be cause for major concern among those who still have the best interests of the OAC and The Almighty at heart. Have the OAC and her apostles lost the plot?

Challenge

The most daunting challenge facing the OAC is that its current management/administration model is not sustainable and is surely running out of oxygen or time. It may be asserted that the OAC is stagnating, if not retrogressing. More alarming is the fact that its leadership appears to be averse to any change or discourse in this regard. They are, therefore, not serving the best interests of the Church. And what should be even more apparent to the leadership is the fact that the push for change is going to gain momentum with each passing year.

Equally distressing, is the perpetration of the 'big lie' by the leadership that as far as dogma/doctrine and liturgy are concerned, the OAC of today is still the same church of 50 years ago. It is not. Honest reflection will reveal that (since the late 1970's) fundamental changes have been instituted and implemented as if by sleight of hand, without eliciting a murmur or hint of restraint by members/congregations who are formally excluded from administrative processes anyway. This is also the period associated with the drastic decline in the renowned spiritual prowess of the once mighty OAC. Therefore, the haunting hitherto unanswered question for the OAC remains: have the said changes been the result of man-made designs, or divine intervention? However, the jury is still out on this one and must consequently account for much of the anguish the OAC and her apostles seem to have these days to hold onto the little that is left of the spiritual force it used to be. Therefore, it could be argued that somehow the letter and spirit of the Gloria Patri ring hollow in the OAC of today.

OAC in court

As much as OAC parlance assiduously seeks to position the church and its activities as not being part of this world, it is belied by an indelible paper trail that chronicles a slew of run-ins by the Church in legal combat in the courts of law. In fact, the OAC is no stranger to the courts of law. It was a December 1926 ruling by a Witwatersrand Supreme Court judge that nominally gave birth to the OAC, following its break-away from the New Apostolic Church.

The apparent refusal by the current leadership to effect a peaceful and amicable transformation of the administration of the Church, can only serve to ignite a robust debate and opposition action where the entrails of Head Office might inter alia again have to be displayed in public. To their own detriment, the current ageing leadership is undoubtedly swimming against the tide of a surging younger generation of potential leaders who do not share their orientation of an authoritarian, apartheid-induced management style and philosophy.

Golden opportunity

If Head Office is still looking for an entry point into the process of administrative reform without losing face, then the proposed changes to the structure for the Youth presents a golden opportunity par excellence.

What better chance is there for the leadership than the present to seize this moment and step out of the proverbial crease like a confident cricketer to knock a rampant bowler for a classic boundary. The required consultative process will undoubtedly lay the foundation for the kind of dialogue that would later be required for the restructuring of the OAC's administrative architecture. Talk about a win-win situation?

The end result would be far more than a revamped youth structure, but also a truly transformed OAC administration that ought to put the Church on an all-time high - so long predicted and awaited by many dear ones who have since predeceased us.

Gospel bell

And so, all over the land, a bell keeps on tolling. For the proponents of change in the OAC, there can be no sweeter refrain than: 'Keep on chiming, sweet chiming bell'.

To the more astute observers of matters OAC, it should be patently clear that the beginning of the end for the outdated management model of the Church is fast disappearing in their rear view mirror and that the tolling bell is actually heralding the dawn of a new day for the OAC – clean, open and truly democratic governance.

For those among us who are still keeping the faith and always endeavour to do the right thing, the tolling bell need not be there to signal only an end, but could instead be the gospel bell that rings out from that shining city on the hill.

Yours faithfully,

W Blouws

Chair: The FORUM