

Happy Anniversary, OAC!!!

A centennial is bearing down inexorably on the OAC. The question is, when will it be – 2015 or 2027? Who will decide? Head Office, unilaterally as usual? Or will the leadership seize this event as the moment to introduce a new culture of taking members/congregations on board as formal shareholders/partners in the decision-making process?

To be, or not to be.....that is the question, the famous line from the great classic reads. However, what doth the OAC sayeth?

Unique opportunity

In the year 2014, in an age of democratic rule in the civilized world, this is hardly an issue where a church authority can unilaterally decide on how such an auspicious occasion should be approached and celebrated. For the OAC, where no culture of formal broad-based dialogue and consultation between Head Office and members/congregations exists, the prospect of **centenary** celebrations could be a unique moment to take the church into the modern era of human rights and freedom of expression.

Whereas the relevant experts in the OAC are currently in the throes of finalizing the first **history** book on the life and times of the OAC, it is imperative that some of the issues entailed (and views expressed) in this paper be taken into consideration and interrogated for public consumption.

Finalizing the date for the centennial is no easy exercise, because it requires acute soul searching and **landmark decision-making** as far as the image and history of the OAC are concerned. That is why it may be regarded as a unique opportunity for the leadership to take the administration of the Church to a new level, which would help provide the enabling environment necessary to introduce constitutional reform and administrative transformation.

Vexing question

The vexing question is: was the Church founded in **1915 or 1927**? In 1915, its founder, Apostle Carl George Klibbe, refused to accept his removal from office by the authorities of the New Apostolic Church and proceeded with his ministry under the name, the New Apostolic Church (Africa). Following endless legal wrangling with his former church, the Witwatersrand Supreme Court ruling of 16 December 1926 designated his church as The Old Apostolic Church of Africa, with him as head and 1927 being the year of establishment. With 2015 about eleven months away, this is an issue the OAC need to clarify for itself (and soon).

If 1915 carries the day, then it will also be the centennial of the **Klibbe Principle** (the FORUM's terminology for lack of a better name) in terms of which Apostle Klibbe maintained that under the particular circumstances of 1915 he could not be removed from the office of Apostle, thereby enabling him to continue his ministry which nearly a hundred years later has blossomed into the mighty OAC of today. The Klibbe Principle may therefore be regarded as the genesis of the OAC, the same principle which after the schism of 1972 gave rise to the birth of the Reformed Old Apostolic Church (ROAC). But, also a principle the leadership of the OAC now seem to be living in **denial** of

whenever confronted by the issue of the controversial removal of officers whose situation may be comparable to that of the Apostle Klibbe.

And if it is to be **1927**, then there is almost an eternity until 2027 for the OAC to get itself in shape for a gala occasion.

Dialogue

If 1915 emerges as the epoch of note, then the leadership of the OAC (in its present administrative form) will be faced with a major **credibility** problem as far as meaningful dialogue in the Church is concerned. If done the current way, members/congregations will have to unconditionally abide by directives from Head Office - no consultation, no joint decision-making, no ownership of the programme and no tolerance for opposing views or dissent.

All the more reason why constitutional reform and administrative transformation should be a priority for the leadership of the Church. It will become increasingly more difficult for the leadership to continue ignoring and excluding members/congregations from the formal processes in their own church. Successful centenary celebrations for a church the size and magnitude of the OAC, must essentially entail **national, regional and local** events where congregations have to be incorporated into meaningful consultation and decision-making processes. The very decision to observe a centennial cannot be a sole Head Office resolution. It has to be the result of broad-based consultation between leadership and members/congregations.

The traditional absence of a culture of meaningful dialogue at all levels in the OAC is a debilitating factor that has in many cases led to dysfunctional congregations. There is no credible platform or capacity for the formal discussion of issues, which in turn makes for **ill-equipped** congregations.

History project

The publication of an official history book is **long overdue**. Therefore, the efforts of the relevant commission in this regard are to be welcomed and supported. With **intellectual honesty** as a guiding principle, the book should be an excellent gift, resource material or coffee table publication.

The historical landscape of the OAC since 1915 is pockmarked by several **fundamental** developments which need to be properly accommodated in a historical overview. Major developments (court cases, schisms, paradigm shifts in doctrine, etc), the details of which were never discussed/shared with members/congregations, but which often resulted in radical policy and brand changes for the Church. A classic example is the major schism of 1972 which was never formally or properly explained to members/congregations and which to this day remain an issue over which divergent views are still a lethal **divisive** force among older and younger generations of OAC members. Many **“white” congregants** have never heard of the schism of 1972 and therefore cannot (or refuse to) believe it ever happened. Part of this ignorance should be attributed to the fact that it was still the heyday of **apartheid**, when they were securely isolated (and insulated) from their “non-white” brethren. And the “white” OAC leadership of the day acted as willing partners of the government of the day, by slavishly supporting and implementing apartheid to the letter within the OAC.

There were **other schisms** prior to 1972, but did not affect the OAC remarkably. Dissident factions packed up and left the Church to start up new apostolic formations. The reason why the schism of

1972 looms so large is because it had a **profound effect** on the image, doctrine and administration of the OAC. After 1972, the OAC started changing fundamentally, while the ROAC has remained traditionally Old Apostolic until today. Essentially, the OAC has shifted to the left on the spectrum of apostolic churches, allowing the ROAC to occupy the **traditional OAC space**. However, there is nothing wrong with change but OAC officers are often at pains to explain and insist that it is still the same church of Klibbe and that nothing has changed. What a lie, what a subterfuge!!!

These are some of the **salient** issues and developments that a history book has to deal with responsibly. Too much about the history of the Church has been left to speculation and conjecture, resulting in wide-spread ignorance among members (and officers) about the **real history** of their Church. The last thing a waning OAC needs is a **propaganda** instrument in the form of a half-baked history book, because it is bound to cause even more damage, especially in the hands of an ill-equipped corps of church officers.

Reflection

The upcoming centennial also presents an ideal opportunity for **serious reflection** on the status quo in the OAC. Whereas the OAC apparently started out in 1915 as a cash-strapped entity keen on surviving economically and succeeding primarily in its apostolic mission, a hundred years later it appears to resemble a hard-nosed **financial powerhouse** and real estate giant festooned in OAC attire, at the expense of its renowned spiritual prowess. An “empire” where members/congregations are constitutionally excluded from having a meaningful say over the affairs of their own church. An “empire” run by unelected (and not theologically trained) salaried officers/officials, who appear to be accountable only unto themselves and write out their own pay cheques. No requisite oversight body to **safeguard** the management of church funds and assets (public funds).

The OAC of 2014 is in many respects not the same church of 1972 and before. OAC members need to come to terms with this **phenomenon** which is fuelled and aggravated by the absence of a pervasive meaningful dialogue in the church. Spiritually, the OAC of 2014 is also **a far cry** from the powerhouse the OAC of 1972 (and before) used to be, with no discernible prospect of any dramatic improvement in this regard for the foreseeable future. Judging by the **relevant statistics**, the OAC of today finds itself on a slippery slope – negative growth, loss of membership and dwindling tithes.

The **divide** between the pre and post-1972 perceptions of the OAC (and the ministry of the Apostle Doctrine) is a cancer that has to be excised from the body of the Church. The contemplated history book should therefore contribute towards eradicating ignorance and **empowering** members and officers with a sound knowledge base in respect of their church. Half-hearted, and often clumsy, attempts at confidence building and re-energizing members/congregations via carefully crafted morale boosting Conference teachings/themes and spirited rallying calls alone (in TOP DOWN fashion), will not suffice. Members/congregations should be brought on board as **equal partners** in initiatives to revive the character and spirit of the OAC of old.

Schism 1972

This schism, a **defining moment** in the history of post-1972 OAC, has yet to be formally explained to both members/congregations and most officers. Head Office, at the time, casually treated it as just

another day at the office, while families, congregations and longstanding friendships in the Western and Eastern Cape (Coloured and Black areas) were **acrimoniously** split (and not of their own doing) right down the middle. “White” members/congregations were not affected and had been kept in the dark about this painful, soul-wrenching experience. Head Office remained cold and aloof towards this **tragedy** that killed off a vital part of the soul of the church founded by the Apostle Klibbe. No empathy, little concern for soul salvation, no forgiving, no remorse. Therefore, if the nature of the respective last days on earth of the two **principal apostles** on both sides of the divide of 1972 is anything to go by, then we need to look no further for answers regarding this dark era in the history of our Church.

When the late Apostle Lombard and some of his senior officers were surprisingly removed from office in 1972, a **court order** was simultaneously obtained by Head Office to bar them from entering any of their former church premises to communicate with members/congregations, to explain the situation to them. And neither did Head Office see the need to formally brief members/congregations about these developments. In fact, the issue was effectively dead and buried, leaving members (and most officers) **groping** for answers even until today. Rumour was rife. Instead, the former areas of responsibility (Western and Eastern Cape) of the Apostle Lombard were redefined (carved up), followed by an unprecedented proliferation in the number of new church officers across the spectrum. It was the application of the age-old political tool of **‘divide and rule’** when the leadership of this formidable, **burgeoning** “non-white” bloc was apparently perceived as a threat to “white” minority rule in the old Cape Province. The fact that the Western Cape has never ever had a **“black” apostle** appears to be part of this mentality – one of the most blatant acts of racial discrimination (and a cynical control measure) still perpetrated in this region. “Black” members/congregations are being subjected to the tyranny of “coloured” and “white” apostles who do not show the slightest interest in learning Xhosa in order to address congregants in their own vernacular. If “blacks” are good enough to be Elders and Overseers (and apostles in other provinces), then they are more than qualified to be apostles in the Western Cape. While effecting the new geographic demarcation after the removal of the Apostle Lombard, it seemed as if new allegiances could be mustered in exchange for a position as officer in the new dispensation - a development that saw quality overnight being **sacrificed** for quantity, an affliction the OAC of today is still reeling under after all these years. This episode seems to have all the ingredients of a classic Greek tragedy or Shakespearean drama. Better still, it ranks with the best of Old Testament stories about power struggles in the various kingdoms of Israel.

It is **heartbreaking** to listen these days to the plight of aged “non-white” OAC members who were affected by this schism. One faithful grand old mother recently retorted: *“I am still mad at Apostle Lombard and his Overseers for not explaining to us why they left the Church, but I have forgiven them because they are answerable for it to their Creator. However, I shall remain steadfast in whatever they taught me, I shall not waiver or be side-tracked by other teachings. Our current leaders are quick to tamper with things that should not be changed, but loath to change that which should be changed”*. What she **did not know** was that Head Office made it virtually impossible for those leaders to communicate with their followers. Many families have been **tornd apart** by the schism, wounds that are still aching and bleeding to this day. In fact, there was hardly a family that was not affected by this tragedy. These dear members (**“goue voetspore”**) seem to be the victims of a sinister and callous ploy by Head Office to keep them ignorant.

Although the retrogressive administrative reforms that set in after 1972 can be explained away in a sense, it is the radical departures from the **apostle doctrine** in the OAC during this time that is a cause for major concern. As indicated earlier, members who joined the church after 1972 (especially the late 1980's) do not share the same perception of the doctrine as those who hail from the pre-1972 era. Is there perhaps a strategy behind all this by letting the "old-timers" (pre-1972) die a natural death and then close the books on their "**outdated**" concepts of the apostle doctrine? The dilemma for the OAC is that there is no room, or platform, for unfettered discourse about these issues. There is an eerie feeling that the secretiveness is part of the oppressive apparatus employed to keep the current system in place.

The question that **screams** for an answer is: had the various fundamental changes in doctrine and certain rituals been effected because the OAC had been **wrong** about it all these years? And if not, then why the changes? These are questions that often pop up in the discourse during **serious** bread-breaking sessions, as well as in testimony sessions with persons outside of the Church. A big **disappointment** in this regard is that no straight or intelligible answer can be extracted from church officers in this regard. It is even more disappointing to discover that a sizable majority of (even senior) officers do not have a **clue** about what is at issue here.

Why talk?

As pointed out so many times before, the current system that prohibits freedom of expression and meaningful participation by members/congregations in the formal administrative processes in the OAC is **not sustainable**. And, therefore, not in the best interest of the Church.

OAC members/congregations need to be liberated in order to take **ownership** of their Church. They are shareholders who are entitled to have a meaningful say over the management of the funds and well-being of the OAC. There is no substitute for a realignment of the balance of powers between Head Office and the congregations to put the Church on a more sustainable path of growth and development.

The OAC should also get to the point where we start talking about who we really are and what we represent in the year 2014, because we have to acknowledge that fundamentally we are no longer the same Church of the pre-1972 era. We seem to have reached the stage where testimony no longer matches our deeds and spiritual prowess. Compared to the **good old days**, the OAC of today's "bark is worse than its bite". Are we still surprised why sealing figures are so paltry these days? Two thousand years ago, Jesus and His apostles would have taken full responsibility for such a calamity and not hounded their followers by subjecting them to unsolicited "guilt trips".

Churches, by their very nature, are **talk shops**. Wherever people congregate, there are issues that need to be discussed. It boggles the mind that OAC members/congregations in 2014 are still resolutely held **captive** by an archaic/medieval system kept in place by a clergy that seems hell-bent on monopolizing the cash register and locking out members/congregations from the **boardroom**. They need to be reminded that it is often almost impossible to listen to their preaching these days, because the cash register is ringing too loud. Running a successful (OAC) financial empire is a 24/7 occupation, leaving hardly any room for other activities such as truthfully dispensing the gospel of Christ. So, what are members/congregations really faced with in the OAC? Senior clergy caught up in this roller coaster ride and an administrative system which is not sustainable.

1915 A.D.

All things considered, it looks like 1915 was the year of the birth of the OAC. The Witwatersrand Supreme Court ruling of 16 December 1926 merely confirmed the birth and ratified the existence of the Old Apostolic Church of Africa, as well as the status of its head, the late Apostle Klibbe.

Amazing how **history** seems to repeat itself. When the OAC controversially removed the Apostle Lombard from office (just like Klibbe) in 1972, he founded the Non-White Old Apostolic Church. Not content with the name of the new formation (just as during the aftermath of 1915), the OAC won a **court battle** to have the name changed to the Reformed Old Apostolic Church a few years later (as happened in 1926). For the ROAC, 1972 is regarded as the year of its founding. So, it looks like the leadership of the OAC will have to start preparing for the advent of a year of centenary celebrations in less than a year from now.

There can hardly be a more auspicious, yet poignant, moment for the release of a history book of the OAC than during the commemoration of its first centennial. However, such a book **cannot** be the panacea for all the missing pieces of the information puzzle of the OAC. At best, it could be the **forerunner** for a host of other supporting literary works aimed at putting the life and times of the OAC during its first century of existence into proper perspective. In addition to introducing a culture of meaningful dialogue in the Church, this should also be the cue for **interested members** to commit to paper their various experiences as fellow pilgrims on this fascinating life-journey in the OAC.

What about tomorrow?

Centenary celebrations inevitably put onto centre stage the challenge to have a **hard look** at what had transpired over the last 100 years. It also calls for the courage and commitment to look ahead, especially with a view not to repeat the mistakes of the past. The absence, at this stage, of a formal **historical footprint** of the OAC after nearly a hundred years of existence is a **sad testimony** to the calibre of leadership and the management system the Church has been (and still is) endowed with. For all the financial resources the OAC has at its disposal, public libraries, modern data centres, as well as a dynamic formal cultural infrastructure, should have been an integral part of the mandate of the range of lavish head office complexes the church maintain. Sadly also, not a single congregation, after a hundred years of OAC existence, can sport a local church office with all the paraphernalia akin to **parish needs** in this modern age. OWN affairs (congregation) are own affairs and GENERAL affairs (Head Office) are general affairs, and never the twain should share the same hymnal. Until such time as the OAC leadership opens up to this truism, OAC congregations will continue to wallow in the **backwaters** of church administration.

As usual, The FORUM shall **continue** the discourse and will enhance the use of its website as a **repository** for relevant documents and other resource material considered essential to constituting a solid OAC knowledge base for members/congregations who are currently excluded from the administrative processes of their own church. However, this statement should **not be construed** as a challenge to the work of the Commission tasked with the production of the official history book. The FORUM is not in the business of writing history books; it remains committed to help fostering a **culture** of meaningful dialogue and full participation by members/congregations in all formal processes in the administration of the Church. It is committed to working towards constitutional

reform and administrative transformation that will establish and nurture a culture of democratic governance, with clean administration, transparency and accountability as its hallmark.

Happy anniversary!!!

And, as the OAC still has to gather its thoughts around what to do and how to commemorate its first centennial, The FORUM wishes to pre-empt this initiative by acclaiming: *“Happy Anniversary, OAC!!! Best wishes for the future. May you soon regain your erstwhile spiritual prowess and then go from strength to strength on your apostolic mission in this world”.*

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