

**To President Cyril Ramaphosa —  
A Message of the South African Council of Churches  
Religious Sector Consultation, September 2, 2020  
Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana, SACC General Secretary**

Mr President, thank you for the invitation to come and share our views with the President at this time. We meet during a week of much pain and tension on the eve of the burial of Nathaniel Julies, an innocent teenager of Eldorado Park with Down syndrome; senselessly gunned down last week today, with the official bullets of the State. His family and community are shattered by the incident, and the alleged efforts to cover up through the tempering with the crime scene, and the reported inhuman treatment of Nathaniel's body.

The South African Council of Churches has previously raised a protest over the tendency of some in the security forces to treat the people like the enemy. The killing of a young boy with Down syndrome disability is a vivid illustration of the unthinking skop en donner mindset that still prevails. Violence against the people by agencies that are constitutionally established for protection cannot and should not be tolerated.

In our visit to Eldorado Park we learned that Nathaniel is not the first victim, and a number of other cases have surfaced. We urge the President to cause that the people be invited to a process of giving full reports of their complaints; details given of lost cases. Who knows, they may yet be prosecutable still. That, we believe, together with addressing the loss of public confidence in the Eldorado Park Police Station, would create a sense of cleansing and opportunity for a new start. There is room for new hope, as we echo St Paul with the pastors of Eldos:

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” 2 Corinthians 4:8-10 NRSV

With the pastors of that community we met with the Station Commander, Brigadier Van Wyk, and witnessed the prompt attention by IPID, but we question the time that it took for reports to reach IPID, and for the command chain to be informed. It took the direct intervention of Minister Cele for the family to have proper treatment and access to appropriate services, and for this we echo their gratitude. We join the churches of Eldos in calling for adherence to the transparent process that Minister Cele has promised. This is a painful week of Black Lives Matter in South Africa Mr President.

That notwithstanding Sir, the South African Council of Churches welcomes the opportunity to meet with the President of the Republic as part of the community of religious leaders of our country. We met the President in March, at the advent of COVID-19. It has been a long five months that has taken an incalculable toll on the nation in terms of human lives and the economy, with millions of livelihoods lost, and

some never to be recovered. We must hope and pray Mr President, that now that we meet again, it must be that we are at the tail end of the nightmare.

But for many homes, the morning will not bring the end of a bad dream for, COVID will have taken away not one but two or more people from the family. The religious servants of the people are wrestling with a new phenomenon of children who are suddenly left to fend for themselves after COVID-19 has cut down the parental trees of their comfort. This in the lockdown environment where there's little allowance to safely comfort them. It has been, and continues to be a most trying time for the people.

For the churches it has been painful that we have been unable to adequately manifest the love of God to the distressed; that we have been unable to minister to the sick, and those who've had to die a painful and lonely death. Some among us, with the special charisms, gifts of the healing ministry, would have wished to pray for the miracle of healing for the specific persons they might have felt called to heal. All this has not been possible in these circumstances. We have endured the closed doors of our churches, and for some just a sleeve open with 50 lonesome worshippers, against the regular congregations of thousands.

There is no question Mr President that the lockdown restrictions have saved many lives through the denial of the travel capacity of the virus through infection. The new normal of wearing masks, social distancing with no handshakes, hand washing and sanitising have now become a part of our way of human solidarity, of loving one another.

Now that we are at Alert Level Two, and have brought this new hygienic way of being with us, we believe the time has come for churches to experience this new culture in congregations that are sized through the available space, rather than a ceiling of 50 worshippers. We are here to request that Government should allow churches to go beyond 50, provided that the number is not more than half the number of square metres of the meeting place. We suggest that the principle of half the floor space, with strict adherence to the existing Covid-19 protocols and regulations should be adequate. Some may make the case that if the church is a large 6000 sitter auditorium with lots of extra movement space, they can even 70% capacity and still keep healthy distancing. Government can decide how to accommodate those circumstances. But we request a change from the number ceiling to a percentage principle.

A suggestion has been made that in fact, Government has done enough to impress upon the nation the serious importance of preventing infection; and that it is now a matter of the people to change their social behaviour accordingly. In that spirit, they suggest that the matter of how to worship safely should be left to the leaders of congregations, and not be a matter of regulation. The counter argument to that is that the State will still have to live with the consequences of poor judgement even by one congregation, as it has happened a second time in South Korea.

Some have made snide remarks about churches wanting to open for money. First we should be clear that churches do not exist for money, they exist for the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the ministry of the grace of God on the people of God for their present living and eternal life. But if we are talking about the church economy, we must recognise that the churches in this country provide no less than a million jobs, and that's conservative. That combined with all the faith traditions, gives you a sense of how big the religious economy is, and what the impact is on livelihoods when it grinds to a halt such as it has had to for five months.

At this Level Two, we request a different regime, where congregations can worship Covidly safe in numbers that are informed by their floor space. Those that worship in the open such as the Nazareth Baptist Church, abakwaShembe, would have an even greater leeway to spread out and maintain social distancing.

We would be remiss Mr President, to come before you and not express the shock, outrage and disbelief of the nation at the unthinkable schemes in the dark, to siphon money designed for relief from the onslaught of COVID-19. These diabolical and dastardly acts of callous greed must be punished most severely! This is not theft, the Executive Director of the World Health Organisation has aptly termed this, our international shame, nothing but murder. At the very least, we ask the justice system to treat it as culpable homicide. Where greed results in the death of patients, nurses and doctors, and mowing down families, it is more than commercial crime, this is homicide.

The churches bemoan the gross decline of ethical values in our society — in business and in the halls of government. We call for a revival of positive public values for an ethical society. This we wish to have as a commitment by each of our religious traditions within our spiritual environment, with the support of the formative institutions of education which, regrettably, no longer provide for the religious education that can help shape ethical values. So, we live in the space of “anything goes”, as long as it lines my pockets! Even religion is not spared as rogue outlandish practices obtain in the name of religion to make money.

We welcome the opening up of information on the tendering companies so that those that did the dirty business can be exposed. We should go further and identify the directors and shareholders that benefit from these crimes. This trend of corruption that is beginning to define our country, has been growing over time, with little evidence of consequences as we have not seen a rush of culprits into orange overalls behind bars, even with the Zondo Commission exposé. The special Covid courts must be for all corruption matters, to speed up processes. We are tired of waiting; as Archbishop Makgoba has put it, sidikiwe Mr President, to say we are fed up is more than an understatement. The SACC has declared this Heritage Month of September, the month of activism against corruption. We say #CorruptionisNotourHeritage! Sidikiwe! Rekgonegile!

Thank you Mr President!