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## 1. Introduction

When apartheid ended in 1994, many assumed that social injustices had come to an end. Many people around the world trumpeted South Africa's democratic transition as a miracle. No one can dispute that life in post-apartheid South Africa is much better than it was during apartheid, however our democracy is blemished by multiple maladies, including unemployment, poverty, inequality, violence against women, homophobia and corruption. While various ecumenical actors have expressed dismay about post-apartheid South Africa's socio-economic, cultural and political ills, the country lacks an ecumenical voice.

Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation (ESSET) owes its existence to its founder's foresight that a post-apartheid South Africa would not automatically address the fundamental social and economic rights of the poor and working people. Its founding was predicated on a need to continue with the struggles for social and economic justice in post-apartheid South Africa. The founders of ESSET were people who strongly felt that political freedom had to be accompanied by social and economic rights of the poor and the marginalised. Liberation theologians and activists namely, Dr. Beyers Naude, Prof. Barney Pityane, Dr. Brigalia Bam, Bishop Seoka, Dr. Wolfram Kistner and other leaders knew that political freedom that was not going to be backed by economic justice would be meaningless to millions of vulnerable people who often do not have access to resources and are far from people of power.[1] As an ecumenical activist organisation, ESSET seeks to combat exclusion and discrimination through initiatives that improve the livelihoods of informal traders, increase the participation of communities in decisions on public goods and local economic development and that raise awareness and mobilise against gender-based violence and homophobia.

In addition, ESSET seeks to mobilise churches, church organisations, and ecumenical activists to support collective actions undertaken by grassroots formations of the poor and vulnerable social groups to combat exclusion and discrimination.

To this end, ESSET held a symposium on South Africa's ecumenical movement in September 2015 to stimulate discussions on the state of the movement.

[1] ESSET (2013) *Welcome to Ecumenical Service fir Socio-Economic Transformation Website*, http//www.esst.org.za/About%20us.html(accesed on 5 October 2014) .

This paper will reflect on the issues raised at the symposium concerning the role of the ecumenical movement in the struggle for democracy and the lack of ecumenical activism against hate crimes and gender-based violence. The objective of this paper is to explore strategies for increasing ecumenical activism in post-apartheid South Africa.

## 2. The role of the ecumenical movement in the struggle for democracy

The ecumenical movement is rooted in Christianity.[2] Generally speaking, ecumenism portrays a picture of working together, of being joined over all kinds of borders in the pursuit to bring about justice, human dignity equality, freedom and human rights. Ecumenism in South Africa took this particular form and the churches became the prophetic voice of the people. The ecumenical movement in South Africa started in 1968, comprising the mainline churches, through the South African Council of Churches (SACC). There had been other ecumenical organisations prior to the founding of the SACC, namely, the General Missionary Conference that was founded in 1904 and the Christian Council of South Africa that was founded in 1936 ( Bam, 1995:44). However, the two ecumenical organisations were mainly of missionary personnel and expatriate church leadership.

Prior to 1994, the South African churches had their mission defined for them, including the struggle to end unjust rule, discriminatory legislation and racial segregation, and they were very strong, active, committed, and stood in solidarity with the excluded and marginalised masses. The mission of the churches was to critically and vitally champion the cause of freedom, justice, democracy and non-racialism. Through their prophetic voice, churches upheld and strengthened one another, and they were also a source of hope for the oppressed majority. The task of the ecumenical movement was to advocate and lobby for social justice and democratic participation. With all the apartheid legislation that had been passed in the sixties, there was a need for a strong, locally based and united voice to speak out in opposition, which was the role played by the SACC (Bam, 1995:44).

The SACC expanded its work at regional level and established 32 Regional Councils of Churches. These were ecumenical initiatives which sought to grow ecumenism and ecumenical partnerships at grassroots level. The regional churches were instrumental in

[2] The goal of ecumenism/ecumenical movement was Christian unity .It is rooted in the prayer of Jesus Christ "that they all may be one" (John 21:20-26) in His farewell discourse. This is understood as the ecumenical mandate. Ecumenism does not include efforts at better understanding and co-operation among different religions (i.e. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism, e.t.c.). In such cases the appropriate would be Interfaith or Interreligious Dialogue.

promoting ecumenism within local churches at congregation and parish levels through the establishment of ministers' fraternal (Bam, 1995:45). Through these structures, the work of the ecumenical movement was promoted and implemented. The SACC, inter-denominational ministers fraternal, Bible Study Groups, and the World Council of Churches (WCC) were the main actors constituting the movement.

The ecumenical movement issued significant theological statements in solidarity with the oppressed masses during the apartheid years, and these statements shaped the missionary focus of the churches that were part of the movement. The Kairos Document and the Rustenburg Declaration are instructive examples.

The Kairos Document was written by a group of black South African theologians and it articulated the church's opposition to the apartheid system. (Amstutz, 1995:11). The objective of the Rustenburg Declaration was to set the stage for the establishment of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the Rustenburg conference, which was held in November 1990 in Rustenburg (Amstutz, 1995:12). Through the SACC, these theological statements received widespread acceptance from members of the ecumenical movement. During the apartheid years, unity in the ecumenical movement derived from the struggle against apartheid. The church became the ecumenical church, united in the gospel around a common cause.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the challenge is to rekindle unity among different ecumenical actors, and, by doing so, to revitalise the ecumenical movement.

### 2.1 The ecumenical movement in post-apartheid South Africa

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, a number of churches that were not part of the ecumenical movement during the apartheid years became part of the movement. However, while more churches are part of the movement, the spirit of unity that characterised relations among ecumenical actors is lacking. Ecumenical actors have been unable to speak with one voice against gender-based violence, homophobia, xenophobia, and other forms of social injustice. Churches are largely silent on issues of gender-based violence and homophobia.

The Constitution of South Africa prohibits discrimination based on race, gender and sexual orientation. Women's rights and LGBTI issues are not taken serious by many people. The church does not have an inclusive vocabulary to address gender-based violence and LGBTI issues. It raises questions about the role played by the church in the struggle for social justice.

In order for the church to be an agent of change, it needs to become immersed in the struggles of the oppressed. Moreover, the church should play progressive role in the socialisation of children through sermons and bible studies. Relations in most churches are patriarchally structured, precipitating the marginalisation of women and the LGBTI community in the church. A conducive environment needs to be created in churches to discuss forms of discrimination against women and the LGBTI community.

Since the advent of South Africa's democracy, the ecumenical has been lacking the unity in action that characterised the movement during the struggle against apartheid.

Mvume Dandala, the former president of the SACC, in his presidential address during the SACC conference in 2001 said:

> It is proper and right that it is stated that the legacy of apartheid continues to haunt the South African nation, This legacy has manifested itself in a myriad of ways, including landlessness and massive impoverishment of the majority of our people and accumulation of property and wealth by beneficiaries of the past regimes, and the tendency among emerging leaders to emulate these (SACC Report, 2001:2).

Furthermore, Dandala stated that the church does not see the government as an enemy and that this should be no be construed as blind loyalty, because our loyalty is to the One [God] who called us into being, as the church and to his mission in the world (SACC Report, 2001:2). These words echo the sentiments expressed by many church leaders and theologians after democracy. They mirror the reality confronting many church leaders and theologians who are struggling to define their role in the new dispensation.

In many respects, the struggle continues, not against the legacy of apartheid. Accordingly, we still have a common point of reference. However, there has been a growing lack of ecumenical enthusiasm and a growing spirit of "denominationalism" over the past 21 years. Those who were most involved and committed to the agenda of the ecumenical movement during apartheid time seem to be exhausted. The separation between "ecclesiastical issues" and "ethical concerns" has precipitated a decline in ecumenical commitment, since 1994. As indicated above, unity in the ecumenical movement was found in collective action and theological and confessional issues could not divide the movement.

However, while there was considerable co-operation among ecumenical actors before 1994, very few engaged in theological discussions and education. The current lack of understanding of ecumenical history and theology in the church is thus not surprising. Just because church

leaders acted collectively against the apartheid regime does not mean that a strong theological foundation is currently in place. As a matter of fact, denominational differences have been undermining unity among church leaders in post-apartheid South Africa,

**3. Strategies for increasing ecumenical activism in social justice struggles**

Ecumenical actors, especially the church should become more vocal, especially on issues of discrimination, exclusion and exploitation. The relationship between the church and the state has always been problematic in the course of Christian history. During the apartheid era, it was always necessary for the ecumenical church to be prophetically critical and to reject its legitimacy. It was also necessary to express solidarity with the liberation movement in the struggle against apartheid. Some expect the ecumenical church to support the democratic state by promoting initiative undertaken by government to bring about social transformation. However, the church should not abandon its prophetic voice. While the church should support any positive initiative undertaken by government to improve the socio-economic condition of the poor masses in our country, it should be critical of malfeasance in government as well as of practices and policies that violate the socio-economic rights of the poor. The prophetic struggle against injustice must continue, standing for the truth never end. The church should thus provide critical support to the democratic state.

Moreover, the church should provide critical solidarity to the oppressed. That is, it should remain on the side of the oppressed by standing in solidarity with the struggles waged by grassroots formation for social justice, human dignity and liberation. The church has to be actively involved in the process to redress legacies of colonialism and apartheid. However the church must also display the courage to speak out against practices and tendencies in society that violate the human rights of some members of society. There is a spirit of intolerance towards people who differ from "us''.

Finally, if the church is to fulfil its prophetic role, it has to put its own house in order. Church leaders have failed to speak out and address manifestations of sexism, homophobia and racial discrimination in the church. In addition, very little is being done to expose unethical and corrupt behaviour by ecumenical actors. All of these are in contradiction to what it means to be an ecumenical church. In becoming the ecumenical church, we actually contribute directly to overcoming the divisions which separate people and therefore to the reconciliation which our society needs.

## 4. Conclusion

Ecumenical activism for social justice requires unity among different ecumenical actors. Moreover, churches must create inclusive spaces for on-going critical reflection and debate on different socio-economic political and cultural ills blemishing our democracy. A sectored approach could be one way of dealing with this challenge. Issues such as community health, the environment, education and affordable housing are essential for to the daily needs and interest of poor people.