

Recognising God's Moment

A Pastoral Statement to the Public from Churches in Manicaland

Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and build up the common life. Do not destroy the work of God... (Romans chapter 14 verses 19-20)

All of life is lived in God's presence. Not only our personal lives but also the public institutions and systems we create are open to God's use and subject to God's judgment. We therefore have a duty to ensure that politics, like other human systems, is guided by moral values. It is for this reason that as Churches in Manicaland we make this statement to the people of our province at this moment in the political development of our nation. As we have done many times over the past 13 years, Churches in Manicaland speaks as a forum of church leaders that is not aligned to any particular political interest group or party. We speak from a prayerful study of God's Word for us in our time and from the core principles of our Christian faith.

As Zimbabwe approaches a national election under a new constitution, we are reminded of an incident recorded in the Bible. One day Jesus came over the crest of the hill overlooking Jerusalem and seeing the turmoil and confusion there he was moved to tears. *"If you had only known on this great day the way that leads to peace,"* he said to the people of Jerusalem. He then warned of great destruction to come, *"because you did not recognize God's moment when it came"* (Luke chapter 19 verses 42-44). As Zimbabweans we dare not fail to recognise God's moment of opportunity that leads to peace.

There are many questions in people's minds about issues that Zimbabweans had expected would be resolved before this stage in our political process. However, there are some points of clarity on which we can be confident. The first is that the sovereignty of our nation rests solely in our recognition of the sovereignty of God over all creation. We have acknowledged this truth in our new Constitution: *"We the people of Zimbabwe... acknowledging the supremacy of Almighty God, in whose hands our future lies..."* (Preamble). The good news for us is that God's world was created to be a united and inter-active whole. Zimbabweans have many different political identities and these have created artificial divisions between us. The truth is that our partisan, geographical, historical, ethnic, religious and other identities do not ultimately define who we are. We find our true identity as children of God, all equally recipients of God's gifts that define what it means to be human and what it means to be a community. Again, the Constitution we have recently adopted gives recognition to these gifts: *"We the people of Zimbabwe, united in our diversity by our common desire for freedom, justice and equality..."* (Preamble) Divergent perspectives will arise from our different experiences of life and personal and group interests will sometimes give us apparently opposing agendas, but we must never give up the faith and commitment to our fundamental oneness. Any brokenness between us is an offense against God, it is not in God's plan for Zimbabwe. A broken and hostile community is a sick community that needs to be healed. Our most important agenda for this time in the history of our nation is to seek that healing: without it our future is bleak.

The second point on which we can be sure is that God places before us the opportune moment for peace. We have reached a moment of solemn choice in the history of our nation. Far more important than any political party we may choose to support is the way of life we choose, and this includes our political life. The way in which we conduct ourselves over the next few months will determine whether we plunge into chaos, or emerge from a long painful history as a solid community. The forthcoming elections are focusing our minds on political parties and their various interests and claims. But for all the time and effort that has been drained away from national development and into partisan competition, the truth is that our salvation does not lie in political parties. Parties are important spaces for debating and refining national vision and interests, but they are only beneficial to us if they serve

our highest common values. If political parties deteriorate to a point where they are merely battlegrounds for individuals seeking power, if people in positions of political responsibility eat the seeds that have been sown for the good of the nation in their quest for power, the hopes and values of the liberation struggle for which so many sacrificed themselves are eroded. More seriously, our children and grandchildren find themselves dug into a pit from which they will have great difficulty finding their way. The life of a political party must never be held in higher esteem than the life of our citizens. We are deeply concerned to hear many Zimbabweans say “politics is poison” because they have experienced nothing but destruction for themselves and for future generations in the way Zimbabwe’s partisan struggles have penetrated all aspects of life and torn the nation apart. Is this the highest standard Zimbabweans are capable of achieving in our political life? Of course not! Zimbabweans are recognised the world over for being politically and economically astute. Furthermore, most Zimbabweans appear to believe in the transforming power of God. Let us conduct ourselves according to our true nature and calling.

Over the past two years our Government of National Unity (GNU) has appealed to the public for a commitment to peace. We commend this call as an outcome of the Global Political Agreement (GPA) signed by the GNU principles on September 15th, 2008 in which they declared themselves “determine to build a society free of violence, fear, intimidation, hatred, patronage, corruption...” (*Preamble*). They agreed that “all political parties, other organisations and their leaders shall commit themselves to do everything to stop and prevent all forms of political violence” (*Article 18.5 d*) and also agreed “to take all measures necessary to ensure that the structures and institutions they control are not engaged in the perpetration of violence” (*Article 18.5 e*). The GPA indicated new attitudes and possibilities and gave a breathing space to the Zimbabwean people who had grown weary of political wrangling and its life-draining effects. The binding oath taken in September 2008 stands in judgment of all decisions taken around the forthcoming election. Having confirmed what is possible, we cannot afford to turn back and pretend that what was once agreed to is impossible. We must build forward.

We recognise the GNU call for public peace as only a first step. It has not in itself given us peace. We do not know of any peace without justice. From the Word of God to the Prophet Jeremiah we understand that where there is greed for power, unjust gain and corruption, the wound of the people is treated lightly and the word “peace” itself has no meaning (*Jeremiah 6: 13-14*). There are individuals, systems and structures in our nation that believe they benefit more from violence than from reconciliation and deep-seated peacebuilding will require an open and bold analysis of why this is so. The churches, together with all citizens of Zimbabwe, will be looking to the next elected government to give serious support to the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission authorized by our new constitution to “ensure post-conflict justice, healing and reconciliation” (*Para 252a*). But we cannot afford to wait until the Commission is launched before we begin to put into practice the principles of justice, healing and reconciliation. Peace building is an urgent matter and failing to grasp the present moment of opportunity, as Jesus said, may well led to disaster.

Whoever we elect to leadership at all levels in 2013 will take on responsibility for a nation of people who are really struggling to stay on their feet. The signs of suffering we see prevailing throughout the country are evident in our own province of Manicaland, even though we are one of the most naturally blessed regions in the country. We are deeply concerned that there are growing numbers of Zimbabwean children who are not in school. This is unacceptable in our Zimbabwe. We are deeply concerned that among us there are many sick people who cannot afford medical care. This should never happen in Zimbabwe. We are deeply concerned that increasingly the elderly, both in urban and rural settings, find themselves without means of survival. This should not be happening in Zimbabwe. We are deeply concerned about the growing number of our youth who cannot earn a decent living, who cannot afford to marry, who are forced into unhealthy occupations or into migration in order to support

themselves and their families. This is a shameful thing in our Zimbabwe. We are deeply concerned when we hear our people opt for civic poverty by giving up their right to vote because they fear elections. This undermines the future of Zimbabwe. We are deeply concerned when politicians disrespect the people's intelligence and right of choice by applying fear-inducing tactics to enforce loyalty. This is not true Zimbabwean leadership. We are deeply concerned when we see not only increased levels of poverty and suffering for many, but also increased levels of wealth and greed for a few. This is not a profile of Zimbabwe that anyone can be proud of. We expect all our leaders elected in 2013 to prioritise these concerns, whatever their political party platforms. Crying "Peace, peace" will have no effect unless we join our efforts and do all that we can to right these wrongs.

With this in mind we appeal to each of our public officials and political party leaders who are presently forging the nation's future, from local to provincial and national levels, to do the following. Anything less than this will not give us the momentum required to pull ourselves out of our difficult past.

- Seek the will of God for your life and work. Recognise the precious moment in which you serve your nation. You have been granted special responsibility for this moment and you carry the duty to build a peaceful nation in full view of the sovereign people of Zimbabwe, but most importantly in the sovereign presence of God.
- Be a person of moral courage. Do not allow the momentary interests of a few individuals to undermine our peaceful national development.
- Use every opportunity to translate your public pledge to peace into practice in your private and public life. Stand true to the public agreements to which you have committed. Prove your sincerity by the decisions you make.
- Love and respect your people so much that you are willing to sacrifice your personal ambitions for the good of the community. That is what it means to be a true leader.
- Dedicate yourself to the difficult work of rooting out all forms of corruption in order to uplift the standards of living of the poorest members of our communities.
- Know that you are answerable to your people for the trust they place in you. Open yourself to critical dialogue with them. Perform all your tasks with the faces of your people in your mind.
- Place the welfare of the nation's future generations above momentary gain and invest in them the best you have to offer. Development for all is the reason you have been granted the opportunity to lead.
- Devote your life to national healing, whatever your area of responsibility. Be willing to show the way by your own example through the complex but essential process of reconciling Zimbabwe's people.
- If you have responsibility in a political party, ensure that these essential leadership characteristics guide your selection and grooming of candidates for public office. If you are a candidate in the forthcoming election, measure yourself against these standards and prepare yourself for honest and respectable service to the people.
- To all political parties: Sign up to and strictly abide by the Zimbabwe Political Parties Code of Conduct and allow citizens of all parties to closely monitor your compliance.
- Respect and protect the non-partisan roles of traditional leaders and clergy throughout the election campaign and at all times in the political life of the nation.

Turning this nation around will require a far greater effort than we have exerted up to now. The character of our nation depends not only on the quality of its leadership, but also on the collective character of its citizens. Each one of us influences the environment in which we operate and therefore each one of us must be aware of our importance as a contributor to just peace. Whether you are a news editor or in the security sector, a church leader or a farmer, a domestic worker or a student or a construction worker, whether you spend your days in a government office or in the streets, whether

you are retired or a Zimbabwean in the diaspora, we appeal to all our fellow citizens to recognise God's moment of opportunity for peace and to do the following.

- Seek the will of God for your life.
- Whatever your religion, draw from it the best teachings and principles that will build up the common good.
- Choose your own role in this important moment for establishing just peace. Act wisely.
- Protect the truth. Choose your words carefully. Do not be used to spread division.
- Look out for each other's welfare and be willing to make sacrifices. Build community spirit.
- Endeavour each day to bring an improvement to your home, your place of work, your social relationships. Approach your work not just as a means of personal gain, but as a way of building up the nation.
- Set ethical standards for your behaviour that will create a new environment. Be honest and fair.
- If you have committed wrong against anyone, genuinely seek forgiveness. If you need assistance in your journey towards reconciliation, as churches we are committed to help.
- If someone has wronged you, seek to genuinely forgive. If you need assistance in your journey towards reconciliation, as churches we are committed to help
- Listen to our mothers and sisters who have wisdom and experience to offer in social cohesion building. Promote opportunities for women and young people to offer leadership in building justice, peace and reconciliation.

People of Manicaland are traditionally creative and hard working, characteristics that anchor our spiritual and cultural well-being. Our dense population and our diversity could easily create conflict, but we are peace-loving and we have a generous spirit and therefore our differences tend to encourage creativity and productivity rather than hostility. Over the years we have produced outstanding leaders for the nation in all fields of development. Let Manicaland once again provide outstanding leadership for the nation in showing the way to just peace.

We commend to the people of Manicaland for their reflection and action the pastoral letter issued on March 15th, 2013 by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference entitled *Zimbabwe Elections 2013 and The God of Second Chances*. We also commend the March 3012 Statement of the Ecumenical Peace Observation Initiative of the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations.

As church leaders in Manicaland we are available to all people regardless of political affiliation for counselling, prayer and discussion on the future of our nation.

This statement was issued July 2, 2013 by Churches in Manicaland representing the following bodies:

Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe

Catholic Commission on Justice and Peace

Zimbabwe Council of Churches

UDACIZA

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you are called to one hope. (Ephesians chapter 4 verses 3-4)