

Safe Church: Theological reflection

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Safe Church: On our Christian Duty to Care, Protect and Heal

How do we acknowledge the fearful reality of abuse in our Church when the Church is supposed to be trusted as the source of all that is good and vital to our being? In pain, we ask why is there abuse in the Church?

In woundedness, we try to answer this question. We can look to deep wisdom like the African Proverb of the Water Carrier to bring some relief, some sense of direction and some healing action.

In some parts of the Communion, water is fetched from a distance and brought to homes in vessels. But the power and strength of the sun in hot countries can dry up whatever water there is and many communities are faced with a serious challenge; a shortage of the essential commodity, water. The person who carries the water is vital to the life of the community. And yet, there is a saying from these cultures:

The Proverb of the Water Carrier

“The one who carries the earthenware vessel to fetch water for the Household is the one most likely to break the vessel.”

When persons in the Church are called to ministry, they carry the responsibility to provide the living water of the grace of Jesus Christ. If they commit abuse, it is like the water carrier breaking the vessel. It causes harm not only to the individual and the family that is abused, but also to the whole community.

If the water carrier breaks the vessel, the entire community has to react: to make or find another vessel; to care for the victim and the community by bringing new water; to discover why the carrier broke it and if he or she can be helped or relied on to carry water again. Sometimes to protect the community it becomes necessary to replace the water carrier. Similarly in the Church, when one of us has ‘broken the vessel’, we must all care for, protect and help in the healing, restoration of ‘our household,’ our community, our fellow human

beings. So we must offer care, protection and healing where it is needed, in order that we put no stumbling block in the way of God's people.¹

The ability to mend the breakages, and sustain the mending, and heal that which once caused the break, is the theology and work of Safe Church. This will be like the restoration of a network of reliable interdependence, built on trust. This network of reliable interdependence *will* care, protect and heal.

This network of reliability, if violated by one member, brings the interdependence to breaking point. Until the network is mended, it does not hold reliability. Hence the need to mend it, by hearing from all involved, whether positive or negative, through the practice of Safe Church.

How is it that we know we are called to this work?

The answer for this is threefold:

- Firstly, God created us. Creation was and is God's initiative. He made us in **His** image. And so there is a permanent relationship between God and us (whether we acknowledge or not). Further, we know God through the people of our everyday experiences.
- Secondly, God invited Abraham to leave his land and journey to another country, where he 'would be made a great nation'. Gen 12: 1-4. Similarly, he calls and invites us to leave 'our land', the ways that we know, and journey to a land where, through Jesus, we will be made a great nation.
- Thirdly, in this journey, Jesus promises that we are accompanied by him. So **God** created, **invited and accompanies us**. He seeks the company of the hurting and the guilty alike, the whole people of God, with the aim of healing us. This wholeness is the essential nature of God, and he longs to bring it to us also, through His providence. Where there is brokenness, he longs to teach us how to heal the break, the rift, the rupture, by bringing us the daily bread of healing and unity.

In the context of Safe Church therefore, our daily bread is the need for a continuous 'mending ability', guaranteed to all. In many African churches, trust is placed in everyday life as the place where God is encountered. It is *impilo* ('whole life' in the Nguni languages, found in southern Africa) – physical, psychological, spiritual, religious, political, economic and social. If this whole life experience is broken, then our encounter and relationship with God is threatened to be broken too. When reliability is violated by a member, the network of interdependence fails and our daily bread – the freedom to be able to rely on our community - is put in doubt. Then indeed we must intensify our prayer for God's providence, "Give us our daily bread. We have broken the trust. We are sorry. Accompany us again, O Lord. Help us mend. Bring us your healing and unity."

¹ Matthew 18.6 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea."