

Through The Cross

The South African church's painful path to victory

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANK CHIKANE

Jim Wallis:

You're now the general secretary of the South African Council of Churches, but it was a long road that brought you to this place. Tell us about your background.

Frank Chikane: I grew up in the Apostolic Faith Mission, a conservative, almost fundamentalist, Pentecostal church which later trained me as a pastor. After my ordination, the church began to accuse me for being involved in politics. I had been asked to address a student conference on Christianity and the political situation, and the press picked it up.

The church council produced its file of press cuttings as evidence against me. I still have the letter which says, "You are suspended from pastoral work because you are involved in politics, because you appeared in the press." I was suspended for one year, from 1981 to 1982; I spent eight months of that

time in detention.

After my suspension, I joined the Catholic Institute for Contextual Theology, where I spent five and a half years. That experience was very significant. I had started with a very conservative, highly pietistic theology that could justify and accept the status quo: a pastor's job was to prepare people to go to heaven. But then I was confronted by the reality of the oppressive system, which made me raise new questions that were not answered by my training or tradition.

It was extraordinary for me to be appointed general secretary of the Institute for Contextual Theology from the Apostolic Faith Mission. It's even more extraordinary that I was appointed to that position in the South African Council of Churches from that church, which decided in 1975 not to join the Council of Churches. To quote a letter the church circulated after my appointment, the Council of Churches "produces violence and liberation theology to Marxists and Communists."

During my suspension I argued that my church's interpretation of politics is anything that opposes the system. If you do not oppose the system, it's not politics. You can have P.W. Botha addressing you, but you cannot have [Oliver] Tambo [of the African National Congress], because that's politics.

P.W. Botha's letters and the statement from the Dutch Reformed Church are saying exactly the same thing: There is the spiritual realm and the political realm. And if you interfere with the political, you are moving away from what is spiritual and Christian.

But I believe you cannot separate religion from the life experience of people. I do not believe that Jesus Christ came for

spiritual human beings rather than concrete human beings who live within a particular historical experience. You have to live your life on that farm or in that township, and your Christianity is tested by how you handle that reality.

Some think you can lead a spiritual life outside your experience. That's why people continue to oppress others. Some Christians don't see anything wrong in exploiting farm workers, because that's not spirituality, and they can still go to church on Sunday and do their spiritual thing.

So your conservative evangelical background did provide you, as mine provided me, a faith and a biblical foundation that you use against the system now.

I don't regret growing up in the Apostolic Faith Mission because the church has a particular quality of spirituality which helps you to survive. When I sat in the jail cell, I needed to refer back to that spirituality. I needed to say that there is something more than the life I am living here.

I had to be able to say to the guy who tortured me—who happens to be a deacon of my church in the white congregation—"For me to live is Christ, to die is gain. If you kill me, I go to heaven, and it doesn't solve your problem. But if you release me, then I continue preaching the gospel. It does not matter which way you take it, because both ways you're going to be a loser."

They said to me, "You're going to die slowly but surely. Why not decide quickly what you want to do?"

And I said to them, "Well, you also have to make your decision, because I'm not going to change my mind. If you put me under pressure hoping to change my mind, I might die, you see. And you might not have planned to kill me. So you need to make your decision whether in fact you want to kill me or not."

You could easily be suicidal when you are subjected to torture. The torturers actually say, "Why not commit suicide, because you're going to die in a terrible way."

And I said, "No, I'm not going to deprive you of the responsibility of my death."

When you sit in that jail cell, you realize you aren't in control of the world. And that spirituality, that sense of your own limits and dependence on the Lord, which could be seen as a traditional theological position, is very helpful. And that's why I've kept my membership with the church. And I worship there every Sunday.

How often have you been detained and under what circumstances?

I've been detained five times since 1977. The first one was in January 1977 for seven days. Within an hour after my detention, I couldn't walk. They used brutal third-degree methods of torture.

And then I was detained again from June 1977 until January 1978, and I went through six weeks of torture. It was during that detention that the deacon of my church in the white congregation supervised the 50-hour period where I was interrogated around-the-

Frank Chikane, general secretary of the South African Council of Churches, was interviewed in his home in Soweto.

church leaders. I suspect that the state might try other than just the legal methods of dealing with church leaders. We are already experiencing harassment and attacks. We might have to go through an experience of assassinations and people disappearing. I believe that the state is going to try to close this space for the church.

The state is saying the church leaders are not really church leaders, that the people will not follow them.

I don't think the state president has the credentials to decide whether we are church or not. They [government leaders] are used to the Dutch Reformed Church, which blesses the state, so when you begin to question them, they say, "You are not the church."

You could see from the upsurge of support for the church leaders that we are planning to get the body of Christ—the whole body, the congregations—taking up the issues themselves. I find it amazing that the churches in South Africa—at least those who are member churches of the Council—have moved away from debate about whether they can or should do anything as a church. They are debating what type of action they need to take.

The attacks on the church by the state have, in fact, mobilized more Christians. This mobilization that P.W. has caused is amazing. The government will have to face a massive upsurge of the members of the churches against the apartheid system. Anything they do besides going to the negotiating table is going to make the situation worse.

What will happen when honest, nonviolent disciples take their place in the streets, willing to put their lives on the line against a system that has demonstrated its willingness to be so vicious and brutal? What is ahead for the church and the country in this period?

I think we are going through the worst period, and it's going to become much worse than it is at the present moment. I suspect that as the congregations go to the streets, the system is going to be more and more brutal. And it's going to mean the murder of a lot of our people. And in the course of the murder of our people, the system will begin to disintegrate because of the contradictions created by its own brutality.

It seems—and this is a painful thing—that the international community does not respond unless we die in great numbers. When we want to take on the system, some say, "You're committing suicide, you know. You're going to be murdered." And we say, "Can you help us?" If they say, "No, we cannot help you," what they are telling us is to leave the system to oppress us indefinitely. So we find ourselves in a vulnerable situation where we cannot do otherwise but, in fact, offer ourselves for sacrifice.

I don't believe we can avoid the cross as a church now. If Jesus Christ had an option, I would think he also would not have gone to the cross. One theologian said, "Jesus Christ didn't choose to die.

He simply had no option but to die."

And it looks as though we have no option in the face of the level of evil in this country. For us to go over into victory, we will have to go through the cross.

Through that experience of the cross, I believe the system is going to be put down, and the church will come out being the real church of Christ. In this situation, if you're not a persecuted church, it seems that you can't become a real church of Christ.

Now we are faced with the reality that to be a Christian has to be a conscious decision. It is going to be too costly for those who became Christians by tradition or chance. Some might withdraw from the church. People will have to make very conscious decisions, knowing that to choose Christ is to choose death for the sake of justice against evil.

By going through that experience, we are forced to review our Christian faith, our own commitment. And that might be helpful in cleansing the church in South Africa. But I'm convinced that our victory is going to be at the level of that experience.

What can you say about the role of whites in this struggle?

A small number of whites have taken a stand against the apartheid system. And their presence in our midst helps us to lessen the type of pain people go through. If we could get many white Christians to come in, it would help to lessen the pain even more.

But I'm not very hopeful that this will happen. Those churches with whites in them would have to begin to preach the gospel in such a way that whites would have to choose whether they would stay in those churches. At the end we would have church members who would take a stand against the government which gives them the benefits.

Your situation seems to many on the outside to be hopeless. Yet I'm deeply amazed and moved, as you face the cross, by the hope that you and others express again and again.

I think one feels pessimistic when one approaches the problem from a pastoral perspective. As a pastor you're concerned about the lives of people, the pain they are going to go through. You wish that it wouldn't happen. It is just like Jesus saying, "I wish that this cup would pass." Humanly no one wants to go through that experience.

But on the other hand, it is that experience that gives you hope, because through that experience one has redemption, one has freedom. And because there's no option, we're bound as Christians to go through that experience.

Especially during 1986, as the system became more brutal, the young people said they actually felt they were closer to their liberation. They understand the fact that you cannot get closer to liberation without bringing out the viciousness of the system. The pain is an indication of the closeness to your day of liberation.

It is our faith that gives us hope. We know that in our helplessness we become more dependent on God. In our powerlessness we become powerful. It is our weakness that is our strength.

Those who run the evil system know it will end, and therefore they have no hope. They just become madder by the day, and in their madness take more and more lives.

But we know that our struggle is a just one. That is really what makes it hopeful—God cannot allow evil to prevail forever.

One would hope that as you move toward the cross, the eyes and ears and hearts of the church all over the world would be awakened to respond.

Our act is redemptive—not in the sense that Christ died to redeem the world—but that, in our weakness, our experience helps other people to have a new understanding of their faith and their commitment. And so the suffering of the church in South Africa itself becomes a message of salvation and hope and redemption for the greater body of Christ. □



Frank and Kagiso Chikane with their sons outside their Soweto home.