

# The prophetic voice of the South African Council of Churches: A weak voice in post-1994 South Africa

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One of the factors that dismantled the apartheid system in South Africa was the prophetic voice of many religious leaders who emerged from ecumenical formations and fought the system by speaking truth to power. However, many scholars agree that the attainment of democracy in 1994 caused the prophetic voice to become silent. This article argues that the prophetic voice is not silent but rather weak in post-1994 South Africa. There are three reasons for this weakness: (1) the prophetic voice became part of the democratic government system, (2) the system swallowed it, and (3) the prophets retired without passing the baton. The article also seeks to highlight some of the recent events and national challenges in South Africa like Marikana, #FeesMustFall, State Capture, Life Esidimeni and Expropriation of Land, where the prophetic voice has been weak. Ways to strengthen the prophetic voice are proposed here as part of the recommendations.

## Introduction

It is important to define the prophetic voice as a point of departure in this article. Nell (2009:565) defines the prophetic voice as 'one form of preaching, pertaining to social comment and socio-economic and political critique of a society and its body politic'. The question that one asks in post-1994 South Africa from Nell's definition is whether the prophetic voice is critical of the current government. Göranson (2011:52), who refers to the concept 'prophetic' as an act of communication, gives another definition. Behind the sender must be (or at least a claim that there is) a divine power. Prophetic communication also distinguishes itself from ordinary communication by containing some sort of criticism or evaluation. The prophetic voice is an activity that addresses injustices in the society.

The prophetic voice of the South African Council of Churches<sup>1</sup> (SACC) refers to the voice of the church that rose during apartheid in South Africa and spoke to the national challenges of that time. This voice was consistent and persistent until the fall of racial segregation in 1994 when South Africa received democracy. The prophetic voice of the SACC comprised church leaders and theologians who were solid in biblical truth and used that truth to confront the evil system of racial segregation. These leaders spoke in unity about reconciliation, peace, unity and a prosperous South Africa. In addition, the prophetic voice of the SACC in pre-1994 South Africa was a confrontational, critical and authentic voice.

Many scholars speak about the strong prophetic voice of the SACC but only in pre-1994 South Africa. Many other scholars agree that the prophetic voice has been silent in post-1994 South Africa. This article reveals that the prophetic voice of the SACC is still active to date but very weak compared to its strength in pre-1994 South Africa. The article attempts to address the reasons behind the weakness of the prophetic voice in recent times. The article recommends ways of strengthening the prophetic voice in post-1994 South Africa.

## The prophetic voice of the South African Council of Churches in pre-1994 South Africa

According to Göranson (2011:5), in pre-1994 South Africa the focus of the prophetic voice of the SACC has been more on fostering unity, and subsequently also on reconciliation, than anything else. The prophetic vision was a nation where people from different ethnic groups would live in peace and harmony. Resane (2017) adds:

1. The SACC is a fellowship of churches and organisations that confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfil their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The council affirms that the church is the body of Christ and, therefore, is one based on the scriptures. Though in obscurity and marred by sinful division, this unity of all Christians is the gift of God and does not need to be created (see SACC 2007:1).

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[t]hat during the liberation struggle, the prophetic voice of the Church was loud and clear. The oppressive regime was not worried about inter-political opposition. The government of the notorious rulers such as Verwoerd, Vorster, and Botha knew that their main opposition was not Colin Eglin or Helen Suzman of Progressive Federal Party, but the voice of the church through SACC. Under the inspirational and charismatic leadership of the 'prophetic preachers' like Beyers Naudé, Peter Storey, Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Frank Chikane and others, the SACC had a unified voice addressing injustice and apartheid unreservedly. (p. 2)

From an under privileged and socially, politically and, to an extent, spiritually marginalised perspective, the ecumenical church was very strong, active and committed prior to 1994, to critically and vitally championing the cause of justice, freedom, democracy and non-racism. It was equivalent to the struggle of the church, the voice of the people, and the church of God (Katts 2015:197). Churches during this period were prophetic and judged by their approach to the injustices of apartheid. For instance, their prophetic voices became loud from the beginning of the official start of apartheid in 1948 (Masuku & Niemandt 2012:5). The prophetic voice continued to be strong until 1994 during the attainment of freedom.

They challenged political structures fearlessly during the era of apartheid, and in the process offered varied perspectives on eschatology. They understood their 'prophetic task' as maintaining the status quo and resisting disruptive influences – underlined by their own fitting 'eschatology' (Johan 2015:374). It remains a question whether that voice is still strong in post-1994 South Africa. The main question is, what is the status now? Is the prophetic voice of the SACC still vocal in post-1994 South Africa? Are the prophets of the current SACC fearless in addressing the injustices of today? If not, one seeks an answer for why the prophetic voice of the SACC has become so weak in post-1994 South Africa.

## A weak voice in post-1994 South Africa

Where have all the prophets gone? This according to Johan (2015:379) is indeed an appropriate question within the post-apartheid context. Many observers lament the fact that the church's voice is silent. People like Desmond Tutu are no longer actively preaching, and a prophetic vacuum seems to have resulted. Kumalo (2007) agrees that the question 'where have all the prophets gone?' is a legitimate one:

Constantly we have heard questions such as, where is the prophetic Church. Where have all the prophets gone? Most of the time such questions come from people either who work with poor people who feel that the church has neglected them. However, it also comes from government officials when they want the church to help them deal with problems such as the breakdown of the moral fiber or to deliver services. For businesspeople when they are in frustration because of crime and corruption they also, ask the same questions. The above groups ask the question of the whereabouts of the church not because they are looking for a prophetic church, but one that can cooperate with them and most of the time in their own terms, not those of the church. (p. 2)

Resane (2016) concurs that this sentiment is common, as the ecumenical voice has disappeared:

The South African leader, respected worldwide, former President Thabo Mbeki, realises that the churches had become silent. At an Anglican Conference Mbeki reiterated that the church was one of the principal fighters for liberation but has now become demobilised. It has distanced itself in a way from responding as it used to respond to national challenges and has disappeared somewhere over the horizon. The church's voice is no longer strong as it used to be. That voice is important now than ever. He concluded his speech by highlighting 'The leadership of the church is sorely missed'. In the post-1994 South Africa, that voice is no more. (p. 5)

In addition, according to Göranson (2011:5) the prophetic voice of the SACC has become more diffuse. Before 1994, the focus was on abolishing apartheid and ultimately establishing unity between the different ethnic groups in the country; but after 1994, it has not had this focus. In relation to other intersectional injustices, the SACC has not formulated a clear prophetic message. The SACC has been searching for a renewed kairós. I argue that the SACC has changed its focus because apartheid is no more. The SACC cannot continue to fight an enemy that does not exist. However, the prophetic voice of the SACC can focus its energy towards fighting the current challenges facing the country post-1994.

Furthermore, I argue against the point that the prophetic voice of the SACC in post-1994 South Africa is silent as raised by Johan, Kumalo, Resane and Göranson in the sense that the SACC continues to speak to the current government. The SACC is not silent from the public sphere. It is more appropriate to say that the prophetic voice of the SACC has become weak in post-1994 South Africa. Obviously, the likes of Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak and Frank Chikane are in their retirement age and other prophetic voices have passed, but that does not make the prophetic voice of the SACC silent. It is not the voice of a specific prophet but the voice of the organisation.

In this article the term 'weak prophetic voice' refers to a voice that only responds to the media and issues statements in national challenges but does not necessarily confront such situations. I shall demonstrate later in the article that in recent events in South Africa like Marikana, #FeesMustFall, state capture, Life Esidimeni and land expropriation without compensation, the prophetic voice of the SACC has been soft and weak. By a 'weak prophetic voice', I refer to a voice that speaks with government rather than a voice that speaks to government. It is a voice, as many scholars have alluded, that rather stands in solidarity with the state than speaking truth to the state. In the next sections, I attempt to answer the questions of why, when and where the prophetic voice is weak in post-1994 South Africa. I also attempt to find ways of strengthening the prophetic voice to avoid a further downward spiral.

## Why is the prophetic voice weak in post-1994 South Africa?

### When the prophetic voice became part of the system

One of the reasons why the prophetic voice has become so weak in post-1994 South Africa is that it is now part of the

system it used to critique. A point that has silenced the church from effectively ministering to the victims of oppression is the close relationship that exists between individual religious leaders and the post-1994 democratic government. Religious leaders who used to exercise their prophetic ministry during the apartheid government are today in the employ of the democratic government, occupying senior positions. This trend has silenced them, and they have become recipients of petitions from victims of oppression during protest marches. They stand against the victims of oppression, taking the side of the state (Masuku & Niemandt 2012:6).

The critical nature of the prophet's task requires that the prophet keep away from partisan politics, as a representative of the values, principles and presence of the reign of God. However, many clergy have joined politics, probably out of compassion for the suffering masses. By this decision, they have (temporarily) excluded themselves from the calling of their prophetic ministry. Although their presence in politics might have had some positive effects, the frustration thereof has seemed more traumatising both to the church and to themselves as individuals (Nyiawung 2010:6). Their presence in politics cannot have positive effects because they depend on the same system. They cannot bite the hand that is feeding them. As a result, they have become uncritical of the democratic government.

Somewhere in the euphoria of 1994, seduced by the newness and joy of becoming a democracy, the SACC exchanged 'prophetic distance' for the concept of 'critical solidarity' in which the churches would throw their energies into assisting the new African National Congress (ANC) government in its nation-building task. It all felt so very promising, and because of the remarkably humanising policies of the Mandela administration with its promised reconstruction and development priorities, and its commitment to truth and reconciliation, those days had an almost New Testament ethos about them (Storey 2012:13). One can say here that the SACC sold out their prophetic voice because of democracy, while they could not do the same during apartheid.

Resane (2016) explains that after 1994:

... [m]any clergy such as Dutch Reformed Alan Boesak, Catholic Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, Presbyterian Makhenkesi Stofile, Methodist Mvume Dandala, Baptist Peter Marais, Pentecostal Frank Chikane; and many theologians such as Dr Motsoko Pheko, the Anglican Dr Sipho Mzimela, Stanley Mogoba; and others joined the civil service. These Christian leaders, some of them being systematic theologians, joined the government to its highest echelons. Regardless of their presence and position, the prophetic voice started being weak: secularism engrossed itself constitutionally in the hearts of the nationals. (p. 3)

The denominational leaders and theologians were not the only ones to become part of the government system; according to Bentley (2013:4) even the charismatic leaders of the independent ministries joined the queue. This was because of the state-initiated establishment of the National Religious Leaders Forum, which later (in 2011) joined the

National Interfaith Leadership Council to form the National Interfaith Council of South Africa. Under the leadership of Pastor Ray McCauley,<sup>2</sup> this movement began to blur the lines between state and church by becoming so close to government that it even gave political parties a platform at their church services to canvas for votes before elections.

The association of the prophetic voice and government compromised the truth in the sense that the legislation of some laws that are not biblical happened in the presence of the prophets. The other difference between the prophetic voice of pre-1994 and post-1994 South Africa is that under a democratic system of governance, the church cannot infringe on the rights of others, even if it does not agree with such rights. However, the church could make a meaningful contribution if it was outside the system. It would have the ear of the government if it were not part of the government. This brings us to the next point of discussion, that is, that the prophetic voice became weak when the government system swallowed it.

### When the system swallowed the prophetic voice

Not only did the prophetic voice of the SACC become part of the system, it allowed the system to swallow it. Some of the SACC leaders joined the government with good intentions of transforming the system from the inside out. However, they allowed the system to be part of their lives. According to Resane (2016:4), the administration of Nelson Mandela recognised and publicly acknowledged the role of the church during the liberation struggle and in transforming the society. At that time, the church through its ecumenical organs sat at the zenith of the new era. It implemented and practised armchair theology, starting to go along with the flow. The mentality of 'we have arrived' developed subtly and subliminally. They forgot their critical role in addressing the injustices of apartheid before 1994. Bentley (2013:4) adds that, from this point of view, the church created a critical distance between itself and the state, so that it was close enough to the state to be a partner in transformation but far enough removed to speak in criticism when needed.

Le Bruyns (2012) explains why the church cannot or should not befriend the state:

The potential of a progressive 'constantinianism' cannot bode well for a healthy democracy and responsible citizenship in the future. It ends up engendering an unchecked solidarity with the State rather than the people. We lose our critical edge and prophetic witness. The Church and the State are seemingly soulmates, making differentiation difficult. As people in South Africa generally, and churches in particular, we might readily assume an absolutist perspective of the political powers. We, as uncritical supporters of the political leadership or indeed those forming part of this political leadership itself, might entertain little or no room for diversity of opinion and especially for dissent. (p. 68)

2. Pastor Ray McCauley is one of the leaders who invited Jacob Zuma in 2009 to speak in his church. At the time, Zuma had a great deal of controversy, like his rape trial and other charges. In my own observation, many people perceived this visit as endorsement of Zuma by Pastor Ray McCauley.

## When the prophets did not pass the baton

There is a Sepedi saying, *Rutang bana ditaola le seye le tšona badimong*, which literally means ‘teach your children skills, do not pass with them to the ancestry’. Another important saying closer to the one quoted in the preceding section is an English idiom used in a relay race, ‘passing the baton’. I am quoting these idioms here to indicate that the prophetic voice could have stayed strong had the likes of Alan Boesak, Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, Makhenkesi Stofile, Mvume Dandala, Peter Marais, Frank Chikane, Dr Motsoko Pheko, Dr Sipho Mzimela, Stanley Mogoba and others trained the younger generation to take over from them. The prophets of old should have passed the baton to a more enthusiastic young generation that would do what they had done before.

Furthermore, there is a need for a younger generation in the ranks of the SACC. The prophetic voice that needs to speak to the nation needs to be energetic and well informed about what is going on in the country. The well-educated prophetic voices of pre-1994 need to mentor a well-educated younger generation to take over. Maybe that is the reason the Economic Freedom Fighter<sup>3</sup> leadership is able to speak on any matter in government; they are young, well educated and well informed. The voices that need to speak in our time need to be influential like Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego, who were young and influential voices that spoke to the government of the day.

## Where is the prophetic voice weak in recent times?

I want to highlight a few national challenges where I think the prophetic voice of the SACC has been weak in recent times. While I say this, we need to differentiate between the prophetic voice and media comments by the SACC. As I have indicated many times above, the prophetic voice is about speaking truth to power. It is about seeking justice for the victims of crime, even when the government has committed the crime. However, in recent times the prophetic voice has been weak. Masuku and Niemandt (2012:7) say that many incidents have continued to happen that have challenged the prophetic role of the church. Examples of these are the general decline in morals, manifesting in high levels of rape, torturous criminal activities and corruption, predominantly in government. The church should therefore be in a position to minister to all sectors of society, including the state.

The first national challenge where the prophetic voice was weak is the Marikana massacre.<sup>4</sup> The SACC only issued a statement citing how the situation could further deteriorate

3.The Economic Freedom Fighter (EFF) leadership is a far-left South African political party that some political analysts describe as being racial nationalist in nature. The expelled former African National Congress Youth League president Julius Malema started the movement in 2013. Malema is president of the EFF, heading the Central Command Team that serves as the central structure of the party (Setumo 2013:1).

4.The Marikana massacre, which took place on 16 August 2012, was the single most lethal use of force by South African security forces against civilians since 1960. The shootings were the same as the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. The incident also took place on the 25-year anniversary of a nationwide South African miners' strike (Battersby 2012).

because the government and Lonmin did not want to reach a consensus (see Daily Maverick 2017:1). What was necessary in a situation like this was a voice that would speak truth to both the government and Lonmin to end the strike. Furthermore, the church needed to be more present to the victims of the massacre to properly advise the families and offer spiritual support. It is not always the case that the prophetic voice needs to be critical and confrontational; at times, it must heal those who have faced difficult situations.

The second national challenge is the #FeesMustFall movement.<sup>5</sup> The prophetic voice of the SACC has been weak in the #FeesMustFall movement. All the SACC (2016) could do was to issue out a statement that:

[t]here should be a condemnation of the intimidation of students and staff by activists and protesters. There should be a rejection of the use of violence by any party in this struggle. There should also be a condemnation of acts of arson; attacks on people and mob justice. Those responsible should account and face the consequences of their illegal actions. The unnecessary arrests of and victimisation of students by the authorities that suppress their voices should equally be condemned. Any protest should stay focused on reaching its objective through positive protests and engage the negotiating table with reasonable demands. (p. 1)

This statement is not enough and only relates to the protest part of the whole #FeesMustFall movement. The prophetic voice of the SACC needed to speak to issues of the feasibility of free education and the attainment of free education. Moreover, it is the role of the prophetic voice to speak to government and show them that they are capable of helping the poor, but there was a hindrance by issues like corruption and maladministration. The church should rise and confront such challenges the same way it did against apartheid and other evil systems. The church can lend a hand to the poor students who need financial assistance. The duty of the church is to not only speak to government but also provide for those who are in need (Kgatlle 2017a:7; cf. Kgatlle 2017b:6).

The third national challenge where the prophetic voice is weak is the state capture scandal. The SACC only revealed the findings of its research into state capture, showing at least seven ways the scheme to loot state resources in South Africa by powerful people aligned with President Jacob Zuma:

- Securing control over state wealth, through the capture of state-owned companies by chronically weakening their governance and operational structures.
- Securing control over the public service by weeding out skilled professionals.
- Securing access to rent-seeking opportunities by shaking down regulations to their advantage, and to the disadvantage of South Africans
- Securing control over the country's fiscal sovereignty.

5.#FeesMustFall is a student-led protest movement that began in mid-October 2015 in response to an increase in fees at South African universities (Kgatlle 2018:1).

- Securing control over strategic procurement opportunities by intentionally weakening key technical institutions and formal executive processes.
- Securing a loyal intelligence and security apparatus.
- Securing parallel governance and decision-making structures that undermine the executive (see City Press 2017:1).

This report sounds more like the public protector report outlining the details of what has been going on with state capture and its association with Jacob Zuma. In addition, this is what civil society and political parties in the opposition benches have been outlining. The prophetic voice should confront state capture and the perpetrators the same way they confronted Verwoerd, Vorster and Botha. It should not duplicate what other parts of society are already doing but fulfil its mandate of being critical, confrontational and persuasive. The prophetic voice should not change just because of democracy but be consistent throughout history.

The fourth national challenge is Life Esidimeni. The SACC has done well through Gauteng SACC ministries to work with the 94 bereaved families for pastoral support, but it is clear that there is an urgent need for rigorous attention to address the gross negligence and victimisation of helpless people in need of social services. The SACC, as a matter of urgency, needs to visit all these institutions and follow up on the condition of those who have survived and who remain traumatised by the demise of so many that they had come to know. An additional layer of consideration are those South Africans who have family members suffering from mental illnesses who they cannot take care of but who now feel failed by the system – not knowing where to turn for care for their loved ones (Calvary 2017:1).

One must applaud the SACC for assisting the victims of the Life Esidimeni incident, but what about those who are responsible for these acts? What is the SACC saying about the then-member of the Executive Council (MEC) of health, Qedani Mahlangu, who was cross-examined about the 143 patients who died, most of them from hunger and dehydration, at various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) after they were moved from Life Esidimeni facilities. During the cross-examination, Mahlangu avoided questions about whether she could have anticipated that the project would result in scores of patients dying. What is the SACC saying about the health minister, Aaron Motsoaledi? Motsoaledi got very emotional during his apology to the families that lost loved ones while under the care of the Life Esidimeni Hospital in Gauteng but did not necessarily account for the lives lost during the tragedy.

The last national challenge is expropriation of land without compensation. One of the recent crucial issues in the public domain is the issue of land. There are so many debates about the issue of land. Many people have and still grab land in townships because they are frustrated about the government programmes that take a very long time to apportion them

land and/or housing. The passing of the motion on the expropriation of land without compensation has somehow given them leeway to go and occupy land on their own. The issue of land like many other issues listed above need the prophetic voice of the SACC. It is true that people need land but is it right for people to grab land just because of a passing of a motion? What is the SACC saying about the issue?

Other than these government and state national challenges, the SACC has been weak in confronting unusual practices by independent ministers and churches.

According to Kgatle (2017:1), there have been unusual practices within some Neo-Pentecostal churches that include, among others, the eating of grass, eating of snakes, drinking of petrol, spraying of Doom on congregants and other experiences. Pastors like Lesego, Mboro, Mnguni and Rabalago have been committing these acts, but someone needs to correct these errors in interpretation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In addition, there are mushrooming prophetic churches that are cropping up almost every day without proper doctrine and order. There are also prophetic churches that although they look very orderly continue to prophesy amiss. Instead of prophesying, they lie. The prophetic voice of the SACC needs to prophesy and correct their own as much as they speak to government and other stakeholders.

## Ways of strengthening the prophetic voice in post-1994 South Africa

### Authentic voice

There are prophets in post-1994 South Africa but they are prophesying wrong things. The prophets of these days are concerned about cell phone numbers and taking selfies in heaven. According to De Klerk (2013:3), true prophetic voice is witnessing, affirmation, proclamation that God is, that God reigns and that God does not abandon or forget. The prophetic voice proclaims a God who is an active agent, who is manifestly present in the life of the world and who is always up to the business of creating new things. Prophetic voice is an attempt to imagine the world as though God – the creator of the world, the deliverer of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we Christians come to name as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – were a real character and an effective agent in the world.

Therefore, the message to the politicians is that:

God is not merely a quality of nature or of humanity; he is not simply the highest human being. He is not limited to our ability to understand him. His holiness and goodness go far beyond, infinitely beyond ours, and this is true of his knowledge and power as well. (Erickson 1999:76)

This God exists above and at the same time independent from creation. The whole universe, including nations and their governments exist in God and for God for the purpose of receiving glory, honour and praise from them (Resane 2016:7). The same God according to Kgatle (2012:21) did not

only ordain that there would be human beings in his creation that possess an individual will but also required moral responsibility from them. If the foundation of the prophetic voice of the SACC is God, this will make the voice a truthful and authentic one.

This means that the prophetic voice of the SACC needs to be clear about what it sees as the 'alternative consciousness'. Its prophetic action should stem from its belief in God and the meaning for people to live with dignity and wholeness. The foundation of everything else should be on these beliefs in God. When, for example, the church takes action and builds a school in a community where there is a need for education, it is effecting change of consciousness and perception, but it does so because of its core beliefs that the action forms part of its missional calling, not because of commitment to achieving the promises of the state. Sometimes the church as an alternative consciousness is in alignment with the ideals of the constitutional democracy (see Bentley 2013:6). However, it does not necessarily mean that the church is under the control of such a constitutional democracy. Instead, the foundation of the church's actions is the Bible.

Thus, through the church's prophetic voice, society gets back to its responsibility towards God, through committed and responsible stewardship. There is no debate on the fact that the church is the backbone of society. There is no religion that condones injustice, discrimination, organised corruption, mismanagement, moral decadence, discrimination, wanton killing, 'bad faith', mistrust, rancour, political jingoism and disunity. Any society that divorces itself from God and does not build its foundation on love is the devil's agent. Genuine prophecy that stands against injustice cannot escape from the webs of controversy, persecution and unpopularity (Nyiawung 2010:8). However, that form of persecution and controversy makes the church strong so long as its actions are based on scripture. Any church that does not like persecution will compromise the truth.

## Independent voice

It is very clear that the strengthening of the prophetic voice of the SACC needs to be an independent voice. By 'independent voice', I mean a voice that is not under the control of the government system. It is also clear that when the prophets of the SACC joined government and occupied government positions, they ceased to be more vocal and critical of the same government. In order to correct this, the prophetic voice of the SACC should stand as an outside voice but one that is more audible so that everyone can hear it. It needs to be a voice and not an echo that only makes noise in public discourse.

The primary responsibility of prophets is to bring direction and correction to the people and to the nation. They cannot do that if they are part of the system. Many prophets in the Old Testament (OT) were independent of the system of leadership in the land. Hence, many of the OT prophets found themselves confronting kings and taking an important

role in national affairs. Some also addressed their words to foreign nations. They demonstrate the ministry of the prophet to the nation. In the same way, the prophetic voice of the SACC needs to be an independent voice.

## The voice of the voiceless

Firstly, when it comes to prophetic action, the church needs to recognise that it has a vital role to play in the building of local communities, in a way the state cannot. The state lacks the short-term capacity to reach communities and effect change at grassroots level; there is no connection to people's daily realities. It has been more than two decades since the change of power and most communities still bemoan the fact that the promised change has not reached them. The church is spread wide enough and is close enough to communities to facilitate change (Bentley 2013:6). A prophetic role in this situation means that the church affirms government when it addresses the needs of all people, especially the poor, but also criticises and distances itself from it when it is ignoring them. In this case, the church never stands with government but with the poor; government joins the church and the poor and it benefits from the affirmation and praise of the church. However, as soon as it leaves the poor, it leaves the church as well and risks the ruthless criticism and denunciation of the church in the name of God (Kumalo 2007:5).

It is obvious that individual believers, faith communities and denominations have a lot of unfinished business within South African society. It is quite evident that reconciliation will be futile if we do not get to the root of the pathological socio-economic structures that further unemployment and ongoing poverty, especially in black communities. In this regard South Africans are in desperate need of initiatives that seek to address the multiple economic, social and political problems in this country (Nell 2009:575). The specific grace of God is at work in the church to bring persons to salvation and transformation, whereas the general grace of God works through these transformed individuals to bring transformation and redemption to the structures of society. He; however, felt that it was not the role of the church to operate beyond its own boundaries. The church was not to be a prophetic voice to society; rather it had the responsibility of working rigorously with its members, who would then go into all spheres of society, like an organism, bringing transformation and the establishment of God's prophetic will that is proclaimed in the church (Forster 2012:85).

Thus, it is also a prophetic voice with an edge. Both a prophetic and political edge come from the edge Jesus himself gave to his ministry in the proclamation of the kingdom of God and in his embrace of the struggles of the poor and the powerless, in stark contrast with and in opposition to the reign of Caesar and the Temple elites in Jerusalem. That struggle, reminding earthly powers and authorities of the limits of their power and the criteria for judging their rule, continues (Boesak 2014:1060). The prophetic voice of the SACC needs this kind of an edge because it cannot continue to be at distance with the people,

especially the poor. It needs to favour people who are at the bottom line; some people cannot take care of themselves but need others to survive. If the prophetic voice of the SACC needs to take sides, it needs to side with the poor and not the government. When it sides with government, it will neglect the poor masses of post-1994 South Africa.

In order to become the voice of the voiceless and marginalised, the church must become the prophetic conscience to government and to those who hear the message of this community. The church as an alternative community in post-apartheid South Africa is to be the catalyst for the flourishing of others, thus requiring it to affirm the bonds of common humanity. This calls for the active caring for justice and the common good, flowing from identification with the needs and rights of others (Harold 2018:21). Therefore, the work of 21st-century prophets is to identify and expose the infidelities that make our common life toxic. The important thing is to name the losses experienced in society, such as a stolen laptop, a husband who has suddenly passed away, loss of income through others' corruption, inequality in income and education and destruction of property during strikes (De Klerk 2013:3).

## Regional networking

In addition, the SACC should make connections with other African regional ecumenical organisations like the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). An evaluation of the prophetic ministry of the church in Africa shows that, in spite of its weaknesses as an institution, the church has played a vital role in the fight for social transformation within African societies. One cannot ignore the role played by the AACC in the process of independence in Africa and the abolition of apartheid in South Africa (Nyirawung 2010:5). Thus, it is important for the SACC to maintain connections with bodies like AACC in order to continue its relevance in South Africa. Another important body for SACC to connect with is the Organisation of African Independent Churches (OAIC), whose main focus according to Molobi (2012:101) has been in development, the empowerment of women and research and communication. The OAIC has been instrumental in assisting the SACC to speak to the real problems that the majority of Africans are facing today.

## International networking

Moreover, there should be a continual connection between the SACC and international networks like the World Council of Churches (WCC). The WCC is a well-known fellowship of churches confessing Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour. They seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The WCC is a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ (Molobi 2012:102). Connection with the WCC is important for the SACC to remain an authentic voice and to reach the international community. Furthermore, the WCC funded the liberation movements of southern Africa in September 1970 under the aegis of its

Programme to Combat Racism. The decision of the WCC was the culmination of a series of consultations that convinced the SACC that racism posed a grave global threat and that apartheid, as its most blatant institutional expression, had to be confronted (Macqueen 2017:88). The SACC should maintain the network with WCC, given other societal problems that need the attention of the church.

## Conclusion

This article disagrees with the notion that the prophetic voice of the SACC in post-1994 South Africa has been silent and has disappeared. It rather opts for the notion that the prophetic voice of the SACC in post-1994 South Africa is weak. The reasons for this weakness are: (1) that the prophetic voice became part of the democratic government system, (2) that the system swallowed it and (3) that the prophets in SACC passed on or retired without passing the baton. The article highlighted some of the recent events and national challenges in South Africa like Marikana, the #FeesMustFall movement, state capture, Life Esidimeni and expropriation of land without compensation, where the prophetic voice is weak. The article proposes authentic voice, independent voice and voice of the voiceless as the ways of restoring a prophetic voice in post-1994 South Africa. In addition, the SACC should make connections with other African regional ecumenical organisations like the AACC and OAIC. Moreover, there should be a connection between the SACC and international networks like the WCC.

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