


Editorial: Prophetic witness in weakness



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South African churches have traditionally played a major role in the shaping of South Africa's politics. Three reasons can be identified: (1) a large segment of the South African society have and still are identifying themselves as Christians; (2) most strands of South African Christianity have traditionally displayed a strong sense of missional responsibility and prophetic calling; and (3) South African governments in the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid eras have, irrespective of different dispositions towards churches, always recognised the importance of the public voice of the church. The role that South African churches played in South African history is, of course, ambiguous. Churches were part of the political divide in South Africa, and political cross pressures divided many denominations from within. Some church communities and leaders were forces of liberation, humanisation, truth seeking and reconciliation, but others were instigators of discrimination, oppression and violence. This mixed picture opens up a variety of questions about the future role of the church in public life.

This volume engages with the question: How should the church, in light of past experiences and new challenges, understand their prophetic calling in South African society? The publication emanates from the annual Tjaart van der Walt commemoration lectures hosted by the North-West University's Faculty of Theology, which was instituted in 2014 to reflect on the public role of the church and the social calling of Christians. In 2018, Prof. Robert Vosloo was invited to present a lecture at the event on the topic 'Prophetic witness in weakness'. To stimulate the debate, scholars from a variety of theological and social background were asked to respond to the lecture by contributing to this volume.

In the first contribution, Robert Vosloo argues that the prophetic role of the church should be linked to the notion of vulnerability. Drawing on Bonhoeffer, Agamben, Katongole and Butler, Vosloo calls for a prophetic witness of solidarity that is both imaginative and performative in nature. Vosloo considers solidarity as born out of a form of 'relational pain' that identifies with the suffering and challenges of the time. Imagination entails that Christians bring visions of hope to those that suffer. These visions should not be cheap or triumphalist, but ought to emanate in accordance with the spirit of biblical prophetic traditions from a deep-seated lament about the effects of human sin. Lastly, he calls for performative prophetic actions. Authentic prophetic witness involves more than speech, statements and utterances, but exhibits a 'performative resistance' that is embodied in presence and actions.

In response to Vosloo, Marius Nel provides a Pentecostal angle to the topic of prophetic ministry. Whilst he does not reject the notion of performative resistance, Nel calls attention to the Pentecostal notion of prophetic ministry as 'Spirit centered, miracle-affirming and praise oriented'. The primary task of the prophet is to administer God's word in a specific situation, and then to engage in problem solving. Selina Palm supports the trajectory proposed by Vosloo, and seeks to apply the methodology proposed to the issue of sexual violence against women. If authentic prophetic witness is to emanate from lament, as Vosloo contends, the church will have to admit their institutional complicity in actions of violence against women and children. Palm calls for a 'pneumatology of vulnerability' that disrupts theological claims designed to exercise and abuse power. Manitza Kotzé applies Vosloo's notion of prophetic solidarity to the Eucharist. She argues that the Eucharist is a celebration of weakness that calls out for transformation and liberation. As such, it can serve as an ecclesiological vantage point to engage in prophetic actions that confronts dehumanising realities. Hulisani Ramantswana's contribution concludes the volume by focusing on new development within African Pentecostal churches. After outlining some orthodox understandings of prophetic ministry, he notes the rise of 'neo-prophetic' churches in South Africa who regards prophetic ministry as a special office in the church. Ramantswana ascribes this development to a longing among believers to hear the word of God anew in a fresh and transformative manner. However, he is concerned that the establishment of prophetic offices

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could open the door to malpractices in the church, as such prophets are held in extraordinary high esteem by ordinary folk and consequently possess significant persuasive power.

The editorial board of *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* greatly appreciates the willingness of the abovementioned authors

to submit their contributions to the journal. We believe that the contributors have raised fresh insights and interesting vantage points. May this volume contribute to and stimulate the larger debate in South African society about the prophetic calling of the church in post-apartheid South Africa.
