

MODERATOR'S OPENING ADDRESS

*Behind the corpse in the reservoir,
Behind the ghost on the links,
Behind the lady who dances and
the man who madly drinks,
Under the look of fatigue,
the attack of migraine and the sigh
There is always another story, there is
more than meets the eye.*

WH Auden

What are we not seeing? This was the question in my mind as I took office last year in Vereeniging.

What is going on in the UPCS that is not being spoken about? What are we **not** seeing? What we are seeing is clear, loud and sometimes down right disturbing.

- Disunity in the Church's Associations;
- Middle sized congregations struggling to pay assessments;
- Decline in small congregations' ability to sustain themselves as individual entities;
- Increasing numbers of vacant congregations with our ministerial personnel stretched to their limit;
- More and more black ministers in chaplaincy and dual employment.

Some years ago I saw a film called "The Forgotten" and when I saw it, it struck me that this film illustrates the way the world can blind us to the way things really are.

A woman wakes up and all at once she's in a world she doesn't remember. The world looks and seems like her world but certain things are missing. There is a child she remembers, her own child, who, now, does not exist. The child seems never to have been there – this is a different reality. She has memories which her reality sees as fantasy.

Slowly but surely she starts to see clues, evidence that things are not as they should be – something is being hidden – clues that the world she remembers is being hidden - deliberately hidden! She is beginning to uncover the attempt to keep her from knowing the truth.

At first, the movie seems rather fantastical but when you think about it, it describes what sin has done to us – it reveals only part of the story, the negative part.

What are we not seeing?

The king of Aram (modern day Iraq) was at war with Israel. He encamped in a certain place. Elisha sent word to the king of Israel, saying: "Don't encamp in that place".

The king checked the place and heeded Elisha's advice. The king of Aram was furious and called for the traitor, who was passing on classified information, to be found. His officers told him about Elisha and how he seemed able to know things the king believed were secret.

The king sent a group of soldiers to kill Elisha but Elisha was unperturbed. Elisha's servant was hysterical – he saw horses and chariots and troops right around the city walls. Elisha remained calm.

"Oh my master", cried Elisha's servant, "What shall we do?" Elisha replied: "The army that fights for us is larger than the one that is against us."

Elisha's servant remained perplexed. "Lord", prayed Elisha, "open my servant's eyes, and let him see".

The Lord opened the young man's eyes and he saw that the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

What are we not seeing?

Being able to see God at work in the world or even in the Church is not a foregone conclusion. We don't enjoy the privileges which apparently our first human parents enjoyed – they walked and spoke with God, according to Genesis story, in the cool of the day. It doesn't happen that way with us – we need to work at it.

Why? Because sin has created a new world all around us, a world of suspicion and intrigue. Sin is a master at creating illusion. Sin uses all possible means to fool us – persuasive word, alluring images, exciting thoughts, sensual feelings – all this to construct a web of lies and illusion – until we start believing that the world that sin has constructed is real and then we start responding to its demands and obeying its instructions. And sin keeps us happy by providing pleasure as an opiate (or maybe gossip or sensationalism) but we find, to our shame that having been strung along, these things do not satisfy for long.

The philosopher, Plato, has a theory that the way you and I see the world is like being shackled, hands and feet, to the roof and floor of a cave. We're tied there facing the back wall, looking at the reflections on the cave wall. Reality is happening behind us just outside the mouth of the cave – we can't look at reality, said Plato, because we're tied up with our backs to it – so we must be content with looking at its reflection on the wall of the cave.

So, I began with the question: "What are we not seeing?". "What are we **not** seeing here in the UPCSAs?"

Brothers and sisters – I've had to cram a year's work and experience into 10 months. These 10 months have been full.

10 ministers of the UPCSAs died this year.

9 were retired:

- Patrick Montgomery;
- Brian Woods;
- Jimmy Stevenson;
- Leslie Dawson;
- Edwin Pons;
- Francis Moletsane
- Joel Dube;
- Arnold Mallinson and
- Roy Mallinson

Three of those were former Moderators of the General Assembly, two were brothers and one, Edwin Pons was not only the oldest surviving ministers of the church when he died (94 years) but also the longest ordained (68 years). He was Moderator of the General Assembly in 1970.

Tragically, Dr Moshe Rajuli, a son of Pietermaritzburg and one of eGoli's Presbytery's much loved ministers was killed after being knocked down by an out of control minibus taxi in March.

10 Ministers and then, of course, my dear friend and our long standing elder, Professor Alastair Kerr, who died in Grahamstown while the 9th General Assembly was still in session.

What are we **not** seeing?

In March, I toured the Presbytery of Lekoa, a small and seemingly struggling Presbytery, occupying west Gauteng and most of the North West Province of South Africa. My tour began in the gold mining areas of Carletonville, Westonaria and Fochville. From there north west to Klerksdorp and Stillfontein and Orkney. Westwards to the sometimes forgotten Vryburg (where kaki clad Boere are), to Kuruman in the Green Kalahari to Mafikeng where once Mangope ruled.

A wonderful service in Mafikeng and then on for a week to Vereeniging and Sebokeng, Vanderbijlpark and Sharpville, Evaton and Denysville, Henley-on-Klip, Boipatong and Bopilong. Meeting ministers, elders, proud Presbyterians. The tour culminated in a great survive in the Saul Tsotsetsi hall in Sebokeng. I would like to record my thanks to the Presbytery of Lekoa for its overwhelming hospitality expressed towards me, Sascha and our 2 daughters.

I'm beginning to see ... to see what I have not previously seen.

In the first week of July, I achieved my goal of visiting the office bearers of all 19 of the UPCSAs' Presbyteries. It was a simple ambition, friends, of sitting down to lunch or around a cup of coffee with all 19 of the UPCSAs' Presbytery Moderators and Clerks. It took 10 months, a lot of planning and a great deal of travel. The purpose was to sit down and have a conversation –

1. Learn about the life and work of the Presbytery.
2. Celebrate its joys, share its challenges
3. Network with Central Office and other Presbyteries for the strengthening of the 19 Presbyteries.

I was warmly received, made to feel thoroughly welcome and information, pain and joy were spontaneously shared.

There were countless meetings – some important and valuable, other – well, you know the story.

Several congregations invited us to participate in services of worship, some for important anniversaries, Midrand (25 years), Auld Memorial (90 years), Berea (125 years) and St Andrews, Kimberley (125 years). A new Church was constituted for Highveld Presbytery in Secunda in May. All joyous and profoundly grace filled occasions.

I opened the IYZA Conference in December 2010 and the Denomination's Youth Assembly in early July 2011.

St John calls the church to test the Spirits in his first letter. "Don't believe every Spirit", he writes, "but test the spirits to see whether they are from God."

This has been my enduring task and vocation. I have longed to see the things that are true and real, godly and life giving – the things we **don't** usually see. Many will testify that in my devotions at meetings and my sermons in worship services, there has been this common theme – A longing for wisdom and that God would reveal God's plans and purposes for the UPCSAs in the many and various contexts I have seen. "To test the Spirits" you might say, "to see whether they are from God".

In Plato's cave, every now and then, somebody breaks loose from those shackles, turns around and sees things as they really are – then, only a small number of those who break free turn back to tell us poor fools who are still shackled what they see.

In the movie, "The Forgotten", it is a bit of wall paper in somebody else's house that has come loose which reveals to the lead actress the real world below the wall paper In Elisha's story – God opens the eyes of Elisha's servant.

And then, everything changes For surrounding the army of the king of Aram is a mountain full of soldiers, horses and chariots of fire! How quickly when our eyes are finally open, do we see that the tables are actually turned.

What are we not seeing?

Brothers, sisters, I cannot give a definitive account lest I, in my arrogance, claim to have a clear vision of God's eye view. To answer this question I shall have to humbly ask you to discern with me in these months that lie ahead. I can tell you that I have found life.

- Life in the grief and gratitude of the families who mourn the passing of our ministers who have died in Christ;
- Life in what seemed to be one of our smallest and struggling Presbyteries;
- Life in the churches, in their warmth, their faithful commitment to Christ and determination to serve him in their communities;
- Life in every one of the 19 Presbyteries of our denomination. Life but also courage to make bold and faithful decisions. Hope to see the Lord do a new thing among them. Unity even in the presence of divided structures;
- Life in the committees of the UPCS, passion to build the church, and the kingdom in participation with our Lord.

We must "test the Spirits" says St John. Dear Friends, I see the presence of the "life giver" in our midst. That same one who breathed into the nostrils of our first parent and life came flooding in – He is among us. And I see Him among the Churches breathing His life giving Spirit to turn our feeble endeavours into a powerful force for good in Southern Africa.

That's what I'm seeing friends, in all humility. That is what I'm seeing. "The one that is in you is greater than the one who is in the world", (1John 4:4) for the thief has come to kill and destroy but this Jesus we serve has come to bring abundant life.

The challenges are still there – but they seem more manageable now... like Alice in Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, the soldiers who looked so menacing and powerful before now seem "nothing but a pack of cards".
Now **that's** what we're not seeing!

John the evangelist recounts a difficult encounter between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus has been teaching on his purpose, his vocation. Jesus is addressing the people's response to his miracle of feeding the multitude of people. Everyone who experienced the great feeding with its seemingly unending multiplication of five barley loaves and two small fish was overawed and excited.

Jesus tries to turn their attention away from the exciting miracle with its spectacle value toward himself. He calls himself the bread of life. He goes on to call his listeners to ingest His life – to internalize His life. It comes across sounding like cannibalism.

The disciples are perplexed. "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" is the response. Jesus is disheartened. He has witnessed a thinning in the crowds.

"You do not want to leave too, do you?", says Jesus to the twelve.

"Lord" says Peter, "to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy one of God".

Our discerning will be difficult and the "bad news" will cause some to turn aside. But where shall we go, dear friends? Where shall we go?

Ours is to cleave to the one who speaks life-giving words and to remember that it is by grace that we are called "daughters and sons".

George Marchinkowski
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