

# The man who took apartheid by its horns

**JEMIMAH MWAKISHA**

For as long as the European settlement has lasted in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church has remained the backbone and lifeblood of the Afrikaners.

But unlike what the Christian faith propagates, the Dutch Reformed Church has been a manifestation of injustice, racial segregation and colour bar.

Instead of being at the forefront of denouncing apartheid, that church has, until very recently, embraced apartheid, literally translating what the Jews did before and after Christ.

The whites saw themselves as the clean and pure race as is written of Jews in the bible while the blacks and the rest of the non-whites remained the gentiles. The "gentiles" were neither allowed to set foot in the whites' churches nor to share other amenities.

But while this went on for years a few white Christians were being nagged by their conscience. They began to see apartheid as sinful and unbiblical and started mounting pressure to correct this belief.

One such person is the Rev George Daneel, a man who has fought tirelessly over the years to try and change the thinking of his church and his own race. His fight has been rewarding as is evident in the changes that have taken place in that church over the years and which could be seen in the rest of the White South African community.

The Rev George Daneel, who has been in Kenya attending a Moral Re-Armament seminar and visiting relatives, now looks back to the dark years when he would never shake hands with a black person, to his denunciation and struggle to convince his church and race that

apartheid is sinful.

He says the idea was received with hostility and won him lots of enemies from his own people. But his conviction drove him on.

"You see, as whites, we felt superior and blacks could only be as good as servants," he says. "I had never shaken a black man's hand until I was 53."

But he also points out that before 1948 when the Nationalist Party took power, relations between black and white were peaceful.

"In fact the issue was between Afrikaners and the British, which led to the Boer War."

The Nationalist Party passed a law in 1948 that made segregation legal, leading to revolt by the blacks and other non-whites. It led to racial strife, boycotts and defiance campaigns and the government retaliated by banning black political parties. However, this instigated further protest and violence.

"God spoke to me clearly and told me, my superiority and arrogance towards black people was part of the problem in South Africa," says the Rev Daneel.

He was already a member of Moral Re-armament and a pastor then and in 1953 he helped organise a multi-racial conference intended to bring people of all races together and to make them realise that apartheid was sinful.

"We saw miracles, because many people from either side denounced apartheid."

But that was just a beginning. Building bridges across a bitter people (the black community) on one hand and the superior and unjust white community was not going to be easy. Not even in his church, where literally all government officials had their spiritual backbone.



**The Rev Daneel: Changed hearts**

Most of the church and cabinet ministers, countrywide, opposed him when he first denounced apartheid as sinful. That was in 1974.

"Many of the theologians tried to justify apartheid according to the scripture," he says. Their argument?

"Even the Israelites, were not allowed to mix with the Gentiles."

Some members, particularly politicians, broke away from the main church and formed another party, namely the Conservative Party.

Others formed a new church which was exclusively white.

But he and a few of his colleagues did not give up.

They would bring up the issue in the church senate meeting making a dent in the system every time they did so.

And in 1986 their efforts bore fruit. The church senate gave in to mounting pressure from among its own clergy and from out and opened its doors to all non-whites.

This has made a tremendous dif-

ference among the white people who, until then, had no regard for blacks.

But establishing trust between the white and black members who believed in the equality of either race was not easy, despite the message of love and forgiveness.

"At the end of each conference or meeting that we held, the blacks would go to their inferior homes and the whites to their rich and comfortable homes."

They vowed to change this contradiction if trust and co-operation was to be founded between the two. They begun to visit each other in their homes and associated more often.

Ironically the blacks also had their own Dutch Reformed Churches in their local which were put up by missionaries.

But the government did not take the changes lightly. The then Prime Minister, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, castigated the Rev Daneel and his Moral Re-Armament (MRA) group, branding him a communist.

But how did he change himself? That was after meeting with the founder of the MRA movement, Frank Buchman, in 1929 when he was a university student. MRA, is a movement that aspires to uphold moral standards, with an emphasis on love, purity and honesty.

"I volunteered to work with him for one year, after which I was never the same a gain."

He was already preparing to be a church minister then because at the time "I could not think of anything else but to serve in the ministry".

The Rev Daneel's father was a church minister and both his grandfathers were also in the church ministry.

But despite the Dutch Reformed Church opening its doors to all, there are still many white church ministers who have never accepted the idea of non-whites being equal to whites. There are also many other white church members who have the same opinion.

Says the Rev Steel: "What most of us do is preach the gospel truth and avoid politics. My concern is to tell the gospel truth, which I believe change people's attitudes and spiritual life."

He also hopes that the changes that have now taken place in the church will permeate through to the whole South African society.