



## **FEES MUST FALL PROTESTS AND THE STATE OF OUR NATION**

### **STATEMENT FROM PULPITS BY HIS PEOPLE AND EVERY NATION CHURCHES IN SOUTH AFRICA**

***Sunday 16 October 2016***

We are deeply concerned by the lack of resolution on the way forward for our universities during the on-going Fees Must Fall (FMF) protests. We are also grieved by the power struggle and politics at play in Government on multiple fronts that is also affecting the stability of our campuses and the stability of our nation during this crisis. There is much work to do to address the growing issues of inequality, poverty and the crisis in education. If ever there was a time for strong, godly, courageous and corrupt-free leaders at every level and in every institution in society, it is now!

We acknowledge that the FMF movement has highlighted a long overdue need to overcome significant financial, cultural and institutional barriers that still alienate and create high levels of vulnerability and trauma for many of our students and those still hoping to access higher education in our country.

We support a vision for free quality education for those who cannot afford it. Nelson Mandela said that education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. We need a lot of things to change in South Africa to realise our rainbow dream and education is a key. Therefore all of the combined efforts of our academic institutions, the government, the private sector, the church and civil society need to be urged on to see this dream become a reality.

However, we are concerned that FMF, through acts of violence perpetrated in its name, has suffered damage to its credibility. This may be due to others who may have tried to hijack the movement and who may even serve the agendas of others. It would therefore appear to many observers that FMF is no longer about free education for the poor but it is about causing chaos and instability in our institutions of higher education so that they will have to be rebuilt from scratch. This will lead to a brain drain of our top academics and our top students irrespective of the colour of their skin. It will directly and indirectly disrupt up to 2 million people who are current students, prospective students, staff members or family members of students and staff. And it runs the risk of sending our universities into a downward spiral that will take decades to recover from. Therefore, we must seriously question the logic of that approach and wonder whose agenda it will ultimately serve. There must be a better way to bring about the change that is needed.

At the same time we can see that Vice-Chancellors and university management teams have been difficult to engage and have been lacking and slow in the most part to open themselves up to independent mediation so that proper dialogue can take place. Many have also used the unfair tactic of suspension without trial to suppress the voices of the protesters from the onset of FMF 2015. This has angered students and further damaged their trust in those in authority.

All the while national government seems obsessed with its own power struggles and faction fighting while our campuses are held hostage to unreasonable demands and moving targets. National government has the biggest role to play to achieve free education for the poor. It needs to get serious about finding short-term and long-term solutions and open its Inter-Ministerial Task Team up

to independent advisors and observers so that this crisis can be resolved without political or other agendas. National government has failed to appreciate or wilfully ignored the severity of the crisis. The composition of the Inter-Ministerial Task Team is of deep concern to us and clearly shows the State's intent to respond with an attitude of policing, intelligence and the strong arm of the law. This is not going to solve the crisis since it will make it harder to negotiate the agreements necessary to bring about transformation and peace that is pleasing to all.

Therefore, we appeal to government and other stakeholders to find solutions through deep dialogue and understanding. We need to create places for such dialogue to take place so that win-win-win solutions can be reached. Such solutions must restore the stability of our university campuses and enable them on their journeys of transformation that will achieve quality education based on academic freedom where the best ideas win and an education that is free for those who cannot afford. We believe that this is possible and we, in all sectors of society, must do our best to achieve it.

To be clear, we wish to re-iterate the following:

1. We cannot condone the intimidation of students and staff by activists and protesters.
2. We reject outright the use of violence by any party in this struggle.
3. We condemn the acts of arson, attacks on people and mob justice that have brought this struggle into disrepute. Those responsible must be brought to account and face the consequences of their illegal actions.
4. We condemn the unnecessary arrests of and victimisation of students by the authorities to suppress their voices.
5. We call on FMF to stay focused on reaching its objective through protesting positively not negatively and to engage the negotiating table with reasonable demands.

In the wake of this turbulence, we appeal to all the students, university staff members and families of students and staff who are part of our churches to stand strong and be an example of godliness and Christlikeness in these difficult times. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God." We must believe God for a lasting and sustainable peace, not an artificial peace but the true "shalom" that the kingdom of God brings. This is a peace based on justice and righteousness that creates harmony and freedom that is a blessing to everyone.

As a movement of churches that is home to many students and university staff, we have committed ourselves along with the body of Christ to serve in the following areas:

1. As Christian activists involved in Fees Must Fall, we call for a commitment to non-violence and an environment free of intimidation in all protest action, dialogue and debate. We commend the courageous role Christian activists are playing in calling for a Biblical approach in the cry for justice.
2. We have also got involved with training and mobilising "Peace and Justice Witnesses" under the banner of SACLI (South African Christian Leaders Initiative) in W.Cape, Gauteng and KZN. As Peace and Justice Witnesses, we commit ourselves to be observers and prayer walkers on the ground where conflict is at risk of breaking out. Our teams of volunteers have been ably led and supported by some of our campus ministers. They have done an incredible job over the past two weeks already. It has been great to see volunteers from many different churches in the various regions get involved in this important peace-making effort.
3. As a church movement, we are also supporting and involved with SACLI's More Than Peace initiative that has mobilised a team of experienced mediators from the Centre for Conflict

Resolution that university management and student formations are accessing to help to resolve the deadlocks. They are also helping at faculty levels at several universities to create safe places for dialogue. And along with the SACC (South African Council of Churches), we will be engaging the Inter-Ministerial Task Team and the Fees Commission that have been set up by the President to address the crisis.

4. We have sent out a call to all church leaders and clergy from all denominations to join us on the 26 university campuses of South Africa on Monday 17 October 2016 for two hours from 9am – 11am for an hour of prayer walking followed by an hour of conversations with students and student leaders. [Please note that this day and time may vary from region to region.]

We must stand strong in spiritual warfare against the forces of wickedness that seek to bring violence, division, hatred and instability into our land. We stand in the gap for our campuses and our nation in this hour. We declare according to the Word of God that upon the rock of Jesus God will build His church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her. We also proclaim that the kingdom of God is an unshakeable kingdom so that even when shakings take place we choose to build on that which is unshakeable.

We urge every believer to play their role as the salt of the earth, the light of the world and the leaven in the dough of civil society in this hour.

We urge every citizen of South Africa to avoid buying into divisive narratives but rather seek a deeper understanding of the issues at stake and do everything in your power to contribute to our rainbow dream. There are many who want to trash the rainbow dream. But we say no to those voices. Lets pick up our rainbow dream once again. Lets dust it off. Let us breathe life and hope into it once again by our words and our actions. Let us serve South Africa. Let us lead South Africa. And let us not stop until we see our dream for a better future become a reality.

*[Please publish this statement on your local church website and/or facebook pages so that people can forward it and share it with their networks.]*