“Apartheid” is an Afrikaans word that can be translated into English as “the state of being apart.” It was a system of racial segregation imposed on South Africa starting sixty-five years ago in 1948, when the main nationalist Afrikaner party won the general election. Apartheid divided the population into four racial groups: white, black, colored, and Indian. A series of laws passed in the early 1950s compelled the four groups to live in separate locations based on race.

This system of apartheid was said by its supporters to be God-ordained. Officials of the regime claimed that it had a biblical foundation. The most popular biblical verses cited at the time were Genesis 11, the story of the Tower of Babel, and Romans 13, in which St. Paul counsels Christians to be subject to the governing authorities. The Bible quotes, however, conveniently disregarded Revelation 13, which speaks of an oppressive government as a blasphemous beast, and the many stories of abusive government in the Old Testament to which God was resolutely opposed. In truth, the system of apartheid was based solely on racial purity. The superior race was European. The church was not exempt from the plethora of racial laws that criminalized many normal aspects of life for blacks, such as where to live, whom to love, and with whom to establish a family. Racial laws also affected black people’s choice of occupation or profession, the institutions in which they could study, and even where they could sit in a train—though not a bus, since those were completely segregated. The law even went further in prescribing where a black pastor could be trained for ministry. It was terrible at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) seminary at Umphumulo, because the students were allocated housing areas according to whether they were African, colored, or of Indian descent.

South Africa’s territory had also been divided according to ethnic groups; each African ethnic group was allocated a homeland. Missionary work was done by five mission societies that had come to the country at different times. These were the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the Berlin Mission Society, the Church of Sweden Mission, the Hermannsburg Mission, and the Norwegian Mission. Each mission had a special area for evangelization, though some overlapped.

Until 1994 South Africa was further divided into four provinces: Natal, Cape Province, the Orange Free State, and Transvaal. The mission societies established stations in each province. All five mission societies had stations in Natal and Zululand, while the Berlin Mission Society spread its wings to Transvaal, the Cape Province, and the Orange Free State. In all of these provinces, the main area of focus was either the homelands or the townships. White areas, especially residential ones, were reserved for white church members. Black Christians were confined to their townships over the weekend, so there was no need for them to go to the white areas for worship. The churches, including the Lutheran bodies, did not challenge the apartheid system.

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The challenges posed to those oppressed by the apartheid system were such that anyone who opposed it was branded a communist or atheist. It did not matter whether the activist was a pastor or lay preacher. What really mattered to the regime was whether you supported the system. As such, the system managed to sow the seeds of mistrust among the oppressed. This mistrust was combined with a superiority complex that considered the white race superior to the black. But the enforcers of the system, unsurprisingly, doubted that the oppressed groups would be loyal to it. Police informers became like salad dressing oozing
through every bit of the oppressed communities. As many as one in four people were police informers. Fear gripped the oppressed so much that those who became collaborators benefited from the rotten system.

Death was used as a tool to cow those who were deemed inferior. The saying that “the limits of oppression are determined by the mind of the oppressed” carried water in the context of apartheid. Some blacks became faithful servants of the oppressive state; in actual fact, they were more brutal than the majority of their white counterparts. This brutality was clearly demonstrated in prison during torture sessions. Most of those who were tortured by black security officers experienced more severe attacks than those who were interrogated by white officers. Of course there were exceptions, as some black officers would not assault any political prisoner; they risked losing their jobs by treating detainees with kid gloves.

Theological Challenges to Apartheid

The rise of black power movements, black theology, and liberation theology opened the eyes of many clergy who saw the injustices meted out to God’s people. They sought the heart of God on this matter. There were biblical precedents for resistance. One could join the group of prophets who were in the good books of the apartheid regime, like the four hundred who were in the employ of King Ahab; or one could become a lone ranger like Micaiah, who vowed to say only what the Lord told him (1 Kings 22:14). The latter choice had dire consequences. The same can be said of Elijah, who confronted the king after the latter had abused his power and had Naboth killed for his vineyard, which was an inheritance that he would not sell or give away to anyone else, including the king himself. Elijah prophesied: “Have you killed your man, and taken his land as well? ...Where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, there dogs shall lick your blood” (1 Kings 21:19).

But even the strategy King Ahab employed fell short of co-opting the religious institutions of his day into his total rule. The apartheid regime sought to perfect such a move. It declared itself a “Christian” state but refused the core command of Christianity to love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself, which would have convinced everyone that the land of South Africa and her minerals belonged to all who lived there. So the South African regime’s nominal adherence to Christian faith lacked visible practice or public witness. Any loving and redeeming acts of agape as reflected throughout the Scriptures were lacking in the apartheid system. Instead, the system preferred to get rid of “troublesome” clergy who were rabble-rousers or “instigators,” in the hopes that the rest of the oppressed would be at peace with the system. When black students rose against the Bantu system of education in 1976, the pro-apartheid politicians sought a scapegoat. They blamed the black consciousness movement, and Steve Bantu Biko (1946–1977) paid the ultimate price as the head of that movement. Biko’s death in police custody fuelled the fires of revolution; anger eclipsed the fear of death. The system of apartheid had proved deficient in its thinking and policy implementation.

There was no way to justify apartheid as being consistent with the Christian faith. In the Old Testament, God was always sickened by injustices committed against His people. Theologians of all races who were disturbed by the apartheid system applied the Exodus experience to the situation. They could not imagine that the Lord, who had liberated Israel from the house of bondage, would turn a blind eye to the injustices suffered by people who were created in His image. The fact that God saved Daniel from the lions’ den and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:19–27), and the fact that this God is unchanging in His commitment to righteousness, energized the clergy to continue calling for the walls of oppression to tumble down. The clergy relentlessly inspired worshippers of the living God to see that they had all it would take to bring down the idol of apartheid, because God opposes the proud and sends the rich away empty.

Attempts at Black-White Lutheran Unity

Unity talks among Lutherans of different races in South Africa date as far back as the 1960s. The main objective was to found a single church whose membership would not be determined by racial identity or the color of one’s skin but by faith in Jesus Christ as articulated in the Augsburg Confession. Instead of blacks and whites together founding such a church, a United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (UELCSA) was formed. Some thought that it was a united church that included all racial groups residing in South Africa, only to learn that it was white Lutherans in South Africa and Southwest Africa (now Namibia) who constituted the membership of the UELCSA. Talks continued among Lutherans from other racial groups residing in south Africa, only to learn that it was white Lutherans in South Africa and Southwest Africa (now Namibia) who constituted the membership of the UELCSA. Talks continued among Lutherans from other racial groups (Africans, Colored, and Indians) until they founded the ELCSA in December 1975. Initially there were four dioceses, but now there are seven: Botswana, Cape Orange, Central, Eastern, Northern, South Eastern, and Western.

Discussions regarding unity between the UELCSA and the ELCSA continued, especially after the 1984 Lutheran World Federation assembly in Budapest, when two UELCSA member churches, namely the ELCSA Cape Church and the German Evangelical Lutheran Church in South West Africa, were suspended from the Federation. Already in 1977 the LWF had declared apartheid a matter of status confessionis because the UELCSA was not challenging or denouncing apartheid, which existed even at the communion table. In 1991 and 1992 two constitutions, one for the proposed
racially integrated denomination and the other for local congregations only, were drafted and circulated to all parishes in both the UELCSA and the ELCSA. The ELCSA rejected the congregational constitution in favor of the denominational one. This was mainly because the ELCSA saw the autonomy of congregations as opposing the unity of the church. This was more so because of the apartheid system, which divided people according to race and ethnic affiliation. It also meant that there would be no equity between black and white congregations, since independent congregations would be legal personae, whereas the ELCSA had the whole diocese as the legal persona with the bishop as overseer. This outcome resulted in a stalemate. There was a cooling-off period that lasted for quite some time.

The unity talks have resumed during the last decade. Again, a constitution for a United Church Council was drafted. We all hoped that at last the unity of the church would be real - a united church. This time it came about because a member church of the UELCSA began to discuss selling its share of a jointly owned conference center at Bonaero Park as well as the portion of the Lutheran Theological Institute at Pietermaritzburg owned by the UELCSA. It became clear to the ELCSA that there was no real interest in unity on the part of the other church. Unity discussions, already failing, went into the intensive care unit.

The prevailing situation as of 2013 is that the UELCSA, which has traditionally used the German language, has now incorporated English as a third language of worship (the second is Afrikaans). The doors are now open to members of the ELCSA to join the UELCSA if they so wish. I attended one UELCSA church service in mid-April and was surprised to realize that it was an English-speaking service that was attended by blacks; the white Lutherans waited outside for a little longer because that church service was somewhat longer than usual. There was a baptism and holy communion, and the attendance was good.

South Africa has eleven official languages, most of which are spoken by indigenous peoples. It is normal in the church to use different languages in the congregation during worship. Although there is no common hymnbook as of 2013, efforts are being made to compile one that will include hymns in different languages, including English and Afrikaans.

**Resistance to Apartheid and the Fate of Resistance Leaders**

The repression and brutality that characterized life in South Africa after 1948 did not dampen the desire to be free in our country of birth. I will cite a few experiences that many people underwent during the apartheid era. The opponents of apartheid were both black and white. The system detained all opponents, though the treatment differed once the arrested arrived in prison. Blacks were denied the luxury of sleeping on a bed, as opposed to their white counterparts. Wolfram Kistner, one of the white Lutheran pastors who were vocal in denouncing apartheid, shared his prison experience in the following words.

I was brought into a cell with five prisoners. There were no spare beds in the cell. A mattress was pushed into the cell and was located on the floor. I was given blankets and sheets. The five people in the cell were already sleeping. I had the impression that they were prisoners who had already been sentenced. Later I heard that two of these prisoners had robbed 1.4 million rand [about $200,000 in 2013 dollars] from a train to Pietersburg.

The inmates of the cell inquired why I was arrested. I said that I was arrested under emergency regulations. They expressed an opinion that I was an ANC man who instigated the people to stone throwing. I was told that the inmates of this cell and the neighbouring cell were all AWB supporters (Afrikaanse Weerstand Beweging).

One of the inmates asked whether I wanted to have some food. Gradually the inmates became very aggressive and poured water on the mattress on which I was lying and spread soap foam on the blankets and on my clothes. They tried to pull the blankets from the mattress. One of the inmates of the cell said that he wanted to sleep with me. I told him that I would not allow this. They could rather kill me. I then stood up in the cell for a time. After approximately two hours the inmates calmed down and I was able to lie down... I was not interrogated during my stay in prison...

In the late afternoon of June 16, [1986,] my daughter Ulrike was arrested at her home, though she was seven months pregnant. Her husband was left behind with their three-year-old son. My daughter Ulrike was treated rudely by these policemen and was locked up in a very dirty cell at a police station. With the aid of a legal adviser, her husband travelled from one police station to the other to find out where she was locked up, in order to bring her medicine, which she urgently needed. At every police station at which they called, they were told that it was not known where she was. Late at night a lady security police official brought my daughter Ulrike back home. She told her that she had insisted that she could not share the responsibility for keeping my daughter Ulrike in detention in view of her pregnancy.

There are too many stories of detention. There were forced removals in addition to detention without trial. Thousands of blacks were removed from their ancestral lands or white
areas, as their land was defined as a black spot in white areas. The present location of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the South African Central Diocese is a case in point: it was originally located in Roodepoort, not Soweto. Similarly, the existence of townships in and around such major cities as Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Durban attests to these forced removals and seizures of land.

Worse still, some widows whose husbands had been farm laborers were subjected to sexual abuse by farmers. One widow related her ordeal, as recorded by Andrea Fröchtling:

Some farmers in our area, they think that they don’t only own our labor, they also think our bodies belong to them. For example, when a husband of a woman died who lives on a farm, I heard it so often that the farmer tried to make her pay with her body for the permission to stay on the farm. And then you don’t know what is worse: Being a refugee with your kids somewhere in the country because you protected your dignity or being in internal exile at a place which is no longer home for you because there is an intruder who wants to get into your very personal sphere.4

Despite all this, the oppressed managed to name the idol and subject it to relentless spiritual pressure until the United Nations declared apartheid a crime against humanity. In ecclesiastical circles, apartheid was declared a heresy. Consequently, many clergy or other opponents of apartheid were persecuted by the regime. In addition to Kistner, I should mention C. Beyers Naudé (1915–2004), an Afrikaner5 and one of the few pastors of the Dutch Reformed Church who opposed apartheid and was banned. Banning meant that he was not allowed to be in the company of more than two people at the same time and could not be quoted in any form.6 But those who were tried could be quoted, as their statements were recorded in court and thus were in the public domain. Here is the closing of one of Naudé’s sermons, delivered to his white-only congregation before he was banned. The text of the sermon was Acts 5:29, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

You who together with us confess loyalty to Christ and His Word, is your primary obedience and loyalty to Christ? Are you willing to call on your people and your racial group to seek and put this obedience above all other things? Even where this clashes with their deepest human sentiments? Are you willing to recognize injustice where injustice is committed, even against the Afrikaner? To give love and express it where needed and to be the least so that Christ can be the greatest? To all Christians of all churches and races and languages and peoples who sincerely seek this obedience to God, and pray, comes his glorious assurance also for the uncertain future—if God is for us, who can be against us? Amen.7

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu’s account of his visits to Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who was also banned, sheds further light on what life was like under a banning order during the apartheid era.

I visited one of these banned people, Winnie Mandela. Her husband, Nelson Mandela, is serving a life sentence on Robben Island, our maximum security prison. I wanted to take her Holy Communion. The police told me I couldn’t enter her house. So we celebrated Holy Communion in my car in the street in Christian South Africa. On a second occasion I went to see her on a weekend. Her restriction order is more strict at weekends. She can’t leave her yard. So we celebrated Holy Communion again in the street; this time Winnie was on one side of the fence and I on the other. This in Christian South Africa in 1978.8

The system was so evil that many anti-apartheid preachers used every opportunity to denounce it. Hence there were informers planted in each and every church, whose task was to listen to anything they considered political and report to their handlers. The surveillance was worse in gatherings of a sociopolitical nature; the informers would even use tape recorders. But either way, the information thus obtained was twisted to fit the intended outcome—which meant convincing the handlers that the informers had done their work well and should be paid for it.

All the draconian laws of this period, such as the Group Areas Acts (1950, amended in 1957 and 1966), the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953), the Immorality Act (1927, amended in 1957), the Bantu Education Act (1953), and many others, made it possible for the churches to remain segregated, because few if any blacks would travel to an urban area on Sundays just for worship. The Lutheran churches remained segregated; in many white Lutheran congregations, the language of worship was German until Afrikaans was added later.

My Story

I have already referred to the demonization of anti-apartheid activists. At this point it will be good to share my personal experience under the apartheid regime. I was at the time a branch chairman of what was then called the South African Students Organization (SASO) at the Lutheran Theological College (as the Lutheran Theological Institute was known at the time), which was then located at Umphumulo. SASO was outlawed on October 19, 1977, together with other anti-apartheid organizations. I graduated from seminary in 1978 and was...
ordained a pastor in the Northern Diocese of the ELCSA in 1979. This was the year that a Venda homeland “opted for independence” from South Africa; it declared itself a republic in September of the same year. There was, however, no popular acceptance of the sham republic.

Many activists were detained and tortured. Some died in prison not only in Venda but throughout South Africa. Tshenuwani Simon Farisani (b. 1947) was one of those pastors who experienced detention and torture at different places, as he detailed in his Diary from a South African Prison.9 There are a few books written by and about life in prison in South Africa, and the film “Cry Freedom” shows what Steven Biko went through.

I was detained on January 5, 1982. I was kept in police custody at Sibasa, then the capital of the Venda homeland, throughout my detention, which occurred after the Sibasa police station was bombed in October 1981. Two police officers lost their lives in that bombing and another sustained serious injuries. Twenty-two activists were detained at different times for that crime but many of them were released without being charged. Unfortunately, Tshihhiwa Isaac Muofhe lost his life within twenty-four hours of his incarceration. He died on November 10, 1981. He had been detained about two months before I was arrested.

I was accused of bombing the Sibasa police station during my ordeal. The first night was difficult, but I was not tortured at that time. A few questions were raised and I managed to answer them. I was given a blank piece of paper for writing a “confession” to explain the role I had played in bombing the police station. It sounded like a joke, because I knew nothing about the bombing except what I had heard over the radio the following morning. I had not even believed what I’d heard until I saw the police station late in the afternoon of October 27, 1981. The fire was still smoldering when I visited the area at about 2:30 that afternoon.

During my January imprisonment, instead of composing a confession, I wrote a sermon based on Luke 4:16–20, the passage in which Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth. I explained how evil apartheid was and how I hated it because “even God hates discrimination and oppression of the poor and the widows.” I was happy that I penned my convictions as far as the apartheid system was concerned. I was booked out of my cell the following morning. One police captain took my paper, read it, and tore it into small pieces, saying, “He wrote shit.”

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This self-talk, however, helped me—especially on Sundays, when I would preach aloud to myself and even celebrate holy communion with water and a biscuit as the elements or visible means of grace. I was locked up for nearly six months until I appeared in court on June 1, having been charged
on three counts, two of murder and one of attempted murder—and all three counts were punishable by death. These charges were concocted under the Terrorism Act of 1967. Luckily for me, all charges were dropped on that day because the state could not prove that I had been involved in the bombing of the police station.

Under apartheid you did not have to commit a crime as long as you were known to be anti-apartheid. That was a crime in itself. Muofhe was out of the country when the bombing took place; nevertheless, he was tortured to death for a crime he did not commit. I can only guess that they were trying to force him to confess that he actually had bombed the police station. He maintained his innocence at the cost of his own life. My torturers boasted that I would follow him if I did not tell them what they wanted to hear. This meant their version of the truth, not what I actually did or did not do. The torture had nothing to do with finding the actual bombers but with finding scapegoats so that the officers could justify their salaries.

This trend had begun in 1978 when the Venda homeland was talking about declaring its independence. There were more than ten anti-apartheid activists who were detained. These included educators, students, clergy, politicians, and nurses. Some of us who were not detained heard that there was insufficient or poor-quality food for the detainees in those police cells. We quickly made up some food parcels and planned to distribute them to the various police stations where the detainees were kept. We managed to deliver our gifts at the first police station, but the police now knew that we were distributing food to prisoners. When we arrived at the Sibasa police station, the officers in charge told us to return at about two o’clock, as they were allegedly not ready to receive and store the food parcels. We believed them, but then we got a tip that the same officers were preparing detention cells for us when we were scheduled to return. We then offloaded the food parcels at the house of one of the detainees and requested his wife to take more parcels to the station, as we were not allowed to distribute food to that police station. That is how we escaped the snare of the security police on that day.

On March 26, 1986, I was visited by the security police in my office at Phodisa-Ditshaba, the central office of the ELCSA Northern Diocese where I was working as its executive secretary (assistant to the bishop). They asked me a few questions concerning refugees who were “wandering” around in what was then called the Northern Transvaal. I responded calmly, telling them that they were in the best position to inform the church about what they were asking me. Barely thirty minutes after the officers departed, their colleagues turned up with the same questions. I became angry. I accused them of wasting state resources because they should have been exchanging notes with their colleagues. I then said, “I know you are studying my movements because you want to kill me at night. You are armed right here in my office. Shoot me and leave, and spare my children the nightmare of seeing their father lying face down in his driveway. Do it now while they are playing at home.” The men stood up and left my office. I never received visitors like that again until I left my diocesan position and became a lecturer at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Umphumulo in the South Eastern Diocese.

Retrospective Thoughts
Looking back, I can say that the last years of apartheid were challenging but also exciting. There was no dull moment in that hectic life. We were either counseling political widows or arranging prison visits for those whose relatives were imprisoned on Robben Island or other prisons and police holding cells. We did these things because of the gospel imperative: we must listen to God rather than human beings (Acts 5:29). We were also kept busy by giving advice, together with volunteers who were in counseling/advice offices, helping the unemployed, those whose services were terminated, and those who did not have identity documents.

With regard to the apartheid era, Lutheran and other missionaries have been able to say the following.

The missionaries’ primary and most crucial task was preaching the gospel, encountering African culture and religion, and the gathering and leading of indigenous congregations and churches over decades. We look back with gratitude, respect and joy at the past achievements of our mission workers in the mission field, in the church, as well as in fields of education, schools and health. They were leaders in many areas. But unfortunately that is where the roots of many detrimental developments can be found.

Today we realize: The motivation for mission was very complex. In addition to the zeal of the revivalist movements, the feeling of superiority of the white Europeans in all areas, including the religious one, played a huge role, the conviction of a necessary civilizing mission, which was partly colonial and racist.

Today we recognize and deplore that: Our virtues became our snare. The missionary impulse was often steeped in and overwhelmed by white Europeans’ feeling of superiority, by colonialism and racism.

To this day we often seem to act and conduct ourselves in a paternalistic manner because of such feelings of superiority and the urge towards self-realisation.

We confess: Due to a lack of sensitivity towards African history and cultures we have often condemned customs, conduct and religious beliefs foreign to us. The statement goes further in high-
lighting the theological misinterpretation of the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms. In South Africa, all theological emphasis was placed on individual salvation; church had nothing to do with the sociopolitical realities that black converts were subjected to by the apartheid regime. Such an individualistic interpretation became a spiritual drug that directed black converts to focus on heaven above and the life of the world to come at the expense of the current one here on earth where Christ’s cross had been raised. The Berliner Missionswerk Statement continues:

We preached the gospel of the unity of the Body of Christ as a spiritual certainty, but did not practice it as a community of white and black Christians in a unified church. Even though we had been sent as missionaries to black Christians, we also took over the pastoral care of white congregations but did not work towards a unification of the two into a single church—we reconciled ourselves with the racial division even in the church. In spite of the revocation of the apartheid laws and many talks on unity, the scandal of having separate black and white Evangelical Lutheran Churches is still with us.

Today we recognize and deplore: Our theological tradition made it extremely difficult for us to recognize and criticize unjust social and political structures and to speak out and act publicly in a prophetic way against the heresy and sin of apartheid. By so doing we obscured the credibility of the church and the witness of the love of God which embraces all people, regardless of skin color, language and culture.

The statement ends with a confession:

We confess: We did not resist the whole of apartheid legislation forcefully enough, the racial separation, the discrimination and exploitation of Blacks, Coloreds, and Indians, the forced removals and group areas. Even within the church we obeyed human laws and structures more than God’s commandment.

One must admit that present-day South Africa is free politically but not economically. The gap between rich and poor is widening with each passing year. Unfortunately, the majority of the ELCSA’s membership belongs to the poor segment of the community. Those who are employed have the freedom to move to former white areas and may be tempted to worship in the neighboring Lutheran congregation that is not necessarily a member of the ELCSA but might belong to the UELCSA. Our desire and hope is that one day the ELCSA and the UELCSA will become one church and continue to bear witness to the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ.

Ndanganeni Phawana is Bishop of the Central Diocese of ELCSA, which covers a large part of Gauteng and small portions of the Mpumalanga, Free State, and Northwest provinces in South Africa.