

Foreword

Dear friends

Below you will find 'A call for critical engagement – study document'. 145 people have endorsed this Call since Monday 17 October and we now distribute it as widely as possible. During the process of receiving endorsements technical problems resulted in the loss of certain names. We apologize to those affected and hope that you will resend your name.

This document should not be seen as conclusive but as an invitation to an ongoing conversation.

Since Monday some of the endorsers made critical and important contributions. In addition to what the Call currently articulates, we acknowledge that further attention should be given to the facts that

- the church is present on all campuses in the widest sense of the word – management, lecturers, workers, students and security staff – and we acknowledge our pastoral responsibility to care for everyone equally in a time of conflict, tension, polarization and uncertainty;
- the Call in its current format does not speak adequately and directly enough to government – calling it to provide leadership at a time such as this and to cease from fuelling further polarization.

We also realize that much of what is contained in this Call needs deeper collective reflection and the diverse insights of both those who have endorsed it and many others who did not yet have a chance. Therefore this is an invitation to go on deep journeys together in times to come.

Over the next days we would like to explore possible ways in which engagement can take concrete shape. Any suggestions or thoughts can be emailed to acallforcriticalengagements@gmail.com.

20 October 2016

A Call for Critical Engagement – Study Document

We, a group of concerned theologians, working on South African University campuses that have become militarized by police and private security firms, as well as other concerned theologians, inspired by our heritage of prophetic engagement in public life and deeply concerned with the volatile conflict in our higher education landscape, hereunder articulate a call for critical engagement. It is arising from our on-going engagement with events unfolding on the ground during the current student protests, and being deeply challenged by the call from the #FeesMustFall movement for free, quality and decolonized education, ultimately envisioning a more humane society.

We acknowledge:

- With empathy, the deep pain, disappointment, anger and frustration of black students in particular, and all other students on campuses across our national landscape. This angst within our higher education landscape is symptomatic of the much deeper and festering *woundedness of our people* not adequately addressed with the dawn of the so-called rainbow nation in South Africa post 1994, until it has now burst open.
- That such pain, in particular black pain, disappointment, anger and frustration stem from unceasing systemic, economic and racist exclusion, perpetuating feelings of estrangement at institutions of higher learning, manifest in the lack of curriculum transformation, and the hierarchical institutional cultures at our Universities.
- That this woundedness further stems from the poor quality of basic education in the majority of public schools, leaving learners often unprepared for post-school academic engagement
- That the above are expressions of systemic violence and injustice, further perpetuated during the #FeesMustFall protests by the militarization of campuses; the often one-sided, misleading and

untruthful reporting by the media and official communiqués of Universities; and the victimization of protesting students and academics and those showing solidarity with them

- That human beings are physical, emotional, rational and spiritual beings and when existential conditions are unbearable with social exclusion a daily and systemic occurrence, it is inevitable that emotive responses will spill over to the extent that we have seen in recent weeks.

We mourn:

- The growing arrogance of those in positions of governance – government, universities, private sector and even the church in response to this pain
- That it is usually those in positions of power who demand ‘rational’ engagement unilaterally determining the rules of engagement, whilst they themselves close most doors for honest, inclusive, robust engagement, arising from below.
- The commodification of education from basic to tertiary level. Only those with resources can afford to ‘buy’ good, quality education whilst others are forced to put up with poor quality education that prevents them from developing their full potential.
- The bureaucratization of universities in South Africa, coupled with hierarchical institutional cultures, that prohibits and punishes dissenting voices instead of inviting and hosting spaces for critical intellectual debate.
- The way in which some of our South African institutions seem to be more concerned about their position in international rankings than to contribute to the socio-economic-political transformation of deeply unequal South African communities.
- The lack of decolonization at our institutions in relation to curricula, course content, pedagogical methodologies, and institutional culture.

We confess:

- Our own complicity as drafters and endorsers of this call to engage, for our silence in the unfolding events
- The inadequate responses from Faculties and Schools of Theology and Religion, which show complicity in perpetuating the status quo, in silencing voices of dissent and frustration, in failing to create consistent and sustainable spaces for difficult conversations that could start to deal with our collective woundedness and anger, and in opening up possibilities for deeper, mutual and multiple transformations
- Our inadequate witness to our rich tradition of robust theological engagement –reading the signs of the times, exposing the wrongs of the day and articulating the Biblical demands for justice without which lasting peace and reconciliation are but pipe-dreams:
 - our theological language can sometimes be used to white-wash wrongs and to override concerns of justice with a false call for decency.
 - we have too often concentrated on reconciliation without demanding or doing justice, thereby ‘wasting’ the grace of our peaceful transition in 1994
 - white ecclesial power still seems to dominate in some of our Faculties and Schools of Theology and Religion.
 - we have often not lived up to the Biblical demand for restitution where we have wronged others, and commit ourselves anew to lives of reconciling justice

We affirm:

- That the events unfolding on our campuses are symptomatic of a nation ‘at war’ with itself – growing inequality, black pain and institutionalized racism, unbridled greed, public plunder, and compromised leadership, all colluded to create a national crisis
- That the events unfolding on our campuses are symptomatic of a deeper battle for the soul of the university, questioning the very nature of our institutions of higher learning.
- The courageous students who articulated, in words and actions, the pain we would not see; the anger we dared not confront; the

inequalities too ghastly to contemplate – we need to hear their voices, see their actions and respond!

- The civil society organizations, including churches, church leaders and Christians who in these times have stood in the gap as witnesses to peace, observers, mediators and prophets. Now is the time for us to rethink, re-imagine and re-assert our roles as theologians and Faculties and Schools of Theology and Religion within the context of a deepening crisis in Higher Education in South Africa.

Instead of condemning students' reactions as merely emotional reactions of anger and frustration, it is time to listen and engage – we have been deeply moved by the rigorous and reflective way in which students engage each other, debating the issues at hand both rationally and emotionally, constructing visions and strategies together, expressing their deep humanity whilst refusing to be dehumanized or prescribed to by others coming from positions of aloofness and privilege.

Therefore we commit ourselves

- to deeply listen to and collaborate with one another as we seek to build a new society
- to initiate honest new conversations as theologians and churches to confront the ways in which we have maintained old vestiges of power without sufficiently decolonizing our institutional cultures and curricula
 - as whites, to embrace the grace afforded to us in the 1994 settlement in South Africa,
 - as those who are privileged with money, institutional positions, intellectual knowledge, or practical skills, to be good and responsible stewards of our resources, given to us to share in ways that will be redistributive and restorative

- o as those of us who are poor, or excluded because of gender, sexual orientation or disability, to reclaim our God-given dignity and assert our inherited wealth simply by virtue of being born; to confess the ways in which we have seen ourselves, and allowed others to see us, as subordinates or sub-humans; to bring to bear our wealth of experience, knowledge and life resources on situations demanding transformation and freedom, both in our own communities but also in the national landscape
- o as those of us who are in positions of institutional power, to embrace a servant posture.

Therefore we plead for the following:

- That University managements immediately demilitarize campuses since it violates the humanity and rights of all who share these spaces: it is not conducive for the vocation of academics to teach, do research and community engagement, or perform administrative tasks; it is not conducive for an optimal learning environment and the success of students; it contributes to the escalation of violence and traumatizes the public exposed to it
- That, whilst we respect and support the right to protest and acknowledge the deep anger and pain of students engaging in it, students desist from any actions that might jeopardize what we regard as their noble vision for more just and inclusive universities, and indeed, a more humane and just society
- That churches, church leaders, people of different faiths, civil society groups, and those belonging to university communities, will continue to provide sanctuary and counselling to traumatized students, engage with them in prayer vigils and do theological reflection to discern the signs of the times, to reflect on appropriate strategies to sustain the quest for freedom, to collaborate in building a society of peace with

justice, and to find ways for supporting the pursuit of the #FeesMustFall movement

- That black and white students and academics will do all they can to listen to each other and to enter each other's worlds, allowing for processes of mutual liberation and healing.
- That the challenge to decommodify and decolonize education, for the sake of our collective humanization, will be made a priority, reclaiming education as a public good, or a commons, to be shared by everyone
- That we, from all sides, will do everything we can, to open up spaces of deep engagement, and honest conversation, with the possibility of discovering ways in which we can co-author a new story for our universities and our nation.

In humility we pose these questions of invitation for on-going dialogue and reflective engagement:

- What should the role of theologians at (public) universities in South Africa be today, particularly in relation to the call for quality education that will be free, decommodified, and decolonized?
- How could theologians and churches contribute to the reclamation of education as a commons, to be shared in the interest of the public good?
- What can theologians and churches learn from, or how could we participate in or support, the #FeesMustFall movement – and similar movements for justice – rising up across the national landscape?

Endorsement:

The following people endorsed this document in their individual capacity:

1. Benjamin Aldous, St John's Wynberg, University of Stellenbosch
2. Valerie Anderson, The Justice Conference South Africa

3. Noelene Arends, All Saints Anglican Church
4. Roger Arendse, Director at EagleCoaching
5. Edwin Arrison, Kairos Southern Africa
6. René August, The Warehouse, SACLI, Restitution Foundation
7. Garth Aziz, University of South Africa
8. Eugene Baron, University of South Africa
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105. Ryan Saville, Jubilee Community Church
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107. Heidi Segal
108. Earl September
109. Laura Singh, University of Pretoria
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