

Reflections on Boesak at 70

by Ryland Fisher*

PASTOR-turned-politician-turned-pastor Allan Boesak turns 70 on Tuesday. Many young people who missed the 1980s and maybe even the 1990s could be forgiven for asking: Allan who? Recent history has not been kind to Boesak, who was once internationally arguably the most recognizable of South Africa's anti-apartheid activists.

Boesak's rise in the Struggle hierarchy was meteoric. After studying theology in the Netherlands from 1970 to 1976, he returned to occupy several crucial positions in South Africa, among them in the theology department at the University of the Western Cape (UWC).

His doctoral thesis, *Farewell to Innocence* (1976), is still considered a profound text on liberation theology. Boesak has written 17 books and edited a few more. He became the moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and oversaw the church's signing the *Belhar Declaration* against apartheid and all forms of discrimination in 1986. In his role as president of the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches* – a position he held from 1982 to 1991 – Boesak began to play an international role in moves to isolate the apartheid regime.

He based his opposition to apartheid on his religious beliefs. His oratory style, reminiscent of Martin Luther King Jr's, was a major strength and helped to fill stadiums and halls throughout the country.

The chant of “*Boesak! Boesak!*” followed him wherever he spoke. Boesak's Foundation for Peace and Justice supported the Struggle financially and was often used as a conduit for people and foundations from overseas to support it. In the early 1980s at a conference in Lenasia, Boesak issued a call for a united front against apartheid. This led to the formation of the *United Democratic Front* (UDF) on August 20, 1983 at the Rocklands Civic Centre in Mitchells Plain.

The UDF played a major role in the opposition to apartheid, especially at a time when most organisations in the liberation movement were banned and their leaders exiled. In 1985, Boesak, along with Winnie Mandela and Beyers Naudé, won the human rights award given annually by the *Robert F Kennedy Centre for Justice and Human Rights*.

Also in 1985, Boesak called for the release of Nelson Mandela during a march from Athlone Stadium to Pollsmoor-Prison where Mandela was held at the time.

Boesak was unable to lead the march, however, because he had been **detained** by the police shortly before. The march continued and ended in clashes between police and protesters. In many ways this open defiance by a wide range of demonstrators was a turning point in the Struggle.

A few years later, Boesak played a key role on the day of Mandela's release from Victor Verster Prison in Paarl, when he calmed the waiting crowds on the Grand Parade as the organisers of the welcome rally contemplated for several hours whether they should risk Mandela speaking in a very exposed situation.

In 1991, Boesak became the *ANC's leader in the Western Cape* and went on to serve as economic affairs MEC in the province. In 2008 he defected to the ANC breakaway party, the Congress of the People (Cope) for a short while before leaving the country to lecture in the US. He occupies the *Desmond Tutu Chair for Peace, Global Justice and Reconciliation Studies at the Christian Theological Seminary and Butler University in Indiana*.

While Boesak's contribution to the Struggle was immense at times, he made some, probably *avoidable, mistakes*.

This is maybe why Boesak is not mentioned in the same breath as Nelson Mandela or Archbishop Desmond Tutu, although there was a time when his international profile was arguably even bigger than theirs. The first mistakes were the affairs he had, one with a colleague at the *South African Council of Churches*, another with the woman who later became his wife.

The first affair, with *Di Scott* in 1985, was costly and damaging because it was exposed by the security police who had bugged a bed where he was sleeping with his lover. They gave this recording to a Joburg newspaper which then reported on the affair. The second affair, which took place around 1990, was with *Elna Botha*, who was at the time married to a well-known television news anchor. It was the final straw for Boesak's loyal wife, Dorothy, who left him.

He later married Elna and they are still together after more than 20 years. Boesak was always a larger than life character and he was severely criticised for moving into *a house in Constantia* at a time when living in Constantia was seen as the preserve of rich white people. Nowadays, of course, it is the preserve of rich people, irrespective of colour.

His most recent mistake was exposed a few years later when the American singer *Paul Simon* accused him of misappropriating a few million rand that had been donated to his foundation by Simon and two overseas foundations for development projects.

Boesak was charged with fraud. He opted not to testify in his defence. He felt if he gave evidence he might implicate some of his comrades, something he did not want to do. He was *convicted of fraud* in 1999. He spent just over a year of a three-year sentence in prison. Boesak was *pardoned*; his record was cleared by President Thabo Mbeki in 2005 and he was able to return to the church.

In many ways, Boesak's story is one of missed opportunities. He should have gone down in history as one of our greatest statesmen and many people, particularly from the Western Cape, still think he was. This was evident in July 2008 when he spoke at a rally in UWC's great hall, at the annual *Ashley Kriel*

lecture. More than 2 000 people filled the hall which resonated with the “**Boesak! Boesak!**” chant.

Boesak’s speech, delivered in his trademark staccato style, did not disappoint. It transported one back to the 1980s when Boesak was the biggest drawcard at rallies throughout South Africa, the unofficial king of the Struggle.

When he reflects on his life on Tuesday, Boesak must surely realise that at times he has lived a charmed life, despite the hardships of Struggle and prison.

But he will also surely see that things could have turned out significantly better for him and he could still have enjoyed international recognition and acclaim were it not for his having made *some bad choices* along the way.

* [Ryland Fisher, Weekend Argus / 20 February 2016](#)

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