

Democratic spanners in religious works

CHAMPIONING democracy is one thing, learning how to be democratic from day to day is another.

That's been the steep learning curve of the South African branch of the interfaith organisation, World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), and, to a lesser extent, Idasa's Pretoria office in the ambitious attempt to draft a Declaration on the Rights and Responsibilities of Religious People.

As the process has unfolded it has been instructive to see how it has mirrored the national process. Many of the debates, practical problems and compromises have been present, but on a lesser scale.

The declaration's carefully plotted democratic course started in 1990 when a national interfaith conference on religion-state relations mandated – the magic word – the WCRP to produce a document on religious freedom which could be appended to, or included in, a new constitution for South Africa.

The next step, in classic democratic process theory, was to identify the stakeholders. That was easy: all the religious organisations. But then came the questions:

- what is a religious organisation?
- can all the religious groupings be identified and located?
- is it possible to consult with every religious group?
- what if they don't support the process?

Just dealing with the Christians alone was a headache – with about 100 different religious groupings and a group/sect always waiting to be discovered. The consistent weakness was the woeful lack of information about and access to the African independent churches. Did all of them, in fact, even want to be classified as Christian?

Being a volunteer organisation, WCRP was faced with a lack of money, time and infrastructure. Pragmatism prevailed. Each WCRP region was asked to be sensitive to regional dynamics and draw the main religious groups in its area into a multi-faith dialogue on religious freedom. Right from the start, however, Bloemfontein and the northern and eastern Cape were left out of the process because the WCRP was not pre-

sent in those areas.

Stumbling through the bog of democracy – to draw up a Declaration on the Rights and Responsibilities of Religious People – was ALICE COETZEE (right) who laments the gap between ideal and practice.



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Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria and Johannesburg steamed ahead, with representatives of the main faiths – Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Christian – working together to plan the multi-faith workshops.

Early on in the process, the issue of power through representation came up. In the Pretoria region there were two positions. One was that the present status quo should be reflected, resulting in an overwhelming Christian domination. The other was to be more democratic in spirit by beefing up the numbers of the minority faiths so that meaningful dialogue could develop. In the end, the Pretoria group compromised: Christians were in the majority but the other faiths were significantly represented.

The multi-faith workshops were a success, although some groups cold-shouldered the process, while others were not adequately represented by their representatives on the working committees. One region did not manage to hold a workshop at all.

This confirmed some basic points about democracy:

- true consultation depends on structures being in place, and in South Africa, with our lack of money, structures and people, this is not always possible;
- true participation in democratic debate depends on a high level of public awareness and education.

Another very South African obstacle was a lack of trust; of Idasa's political agenda (within WCRP and outside it) and of WCRP's religious agenda. The fear, not unfounded, was that some of the stronger or more fundamental religious groupings would be cautious about involving themselves in a move which was not directed by them.

This raised a key issue facing every serious designer of democratic process; how to get everyone on board. What do you do

when people/groups exclude themselves and does this necessarily scuttle the democratic process? Are you vicious and insensitive if you wave them goodbye?

After the interfaith workshops, the regional recommendations were sent to the national drafting

workshop attended by representatives from the religions, split along faith lines. Still under-represented were African Christians and Muslim women.

For two intense days the working groups wrote, analysed and dissected 20 clauses covering matters such as religious education, military service, the religious rights of prisoners, personal law and the propagation of beliefs.

FOR ordinary working people to spend their weekends in cold rooms poring over religious clauses was an incredible display of commitment. Was it, as guardians of process would have us believe, a sense of responsibility to a process which kept them involved from the start, had their social diaries hit an all-time low, or was this one of democracy's divine mysteries?

Out of that weekend came the Draft Declaration on the Rights and Responsibilities of Religious People. The next step, under way now, is to disseminate the declaration throughout South Africa so that every religious person has the opportunity to make his/her input.

The national office of every religious organisation is receiving declarations for distribution. Huge amounts have already been distributed to ecumenical gatherings and synods and WCRP regional committees are meeting to work out how they will distribute the document locally.

It's here that everything is at its most diffuse...and where Faith and Hope (to coin a Christian phrase) have to play their part. Now WCRP has to place their hope in people in the religious organisations and in the media to get the message out; and in people on the streets, in churches, temples, synagogues and mosques to receive the message and take an interest and cast their vote...in a manner of speaking.

But what about the people who are illiterate – the submissions need to be written –

and who cannot read English. WCRP can only afford to publish the declaration in English. What about those who do not have access to either the media or a church structure that will inform them about such a document. That's the nightmare of democracy at a macro level in South Africa.

Even at a micro level WCRP has been grappling with democracy in its own committee meetings:

- when is a decision final?
- can members who were not at a meeting later challenge the decisions taken at that meeting?
- what about office bearers who do not do their job?
- how do you keep your sense of humour?!

There are no clear answers, just as there have been no clear answers to the other questions raised above. Just as there is no clear sense of just how democratic the whole process has truly been? And who is to make the value judgement anyway?

One thing is clear, there is a gap between the ideal and the actual practice. The width of that gap depends on time, people, infrastructure and money available to bolster the process. And the width of that gap seems to vary with each process.

What is the oil that keeps the wheels of democracy turning? Looking at the WCRP experience it seems to be things like pragmatism, patience, generosity of spirit, addiction to meetings, the stamina of a horse, the willingness to neglect family/personal life, a thick skin, a well-developed social conscience, a religious calling (ie orders from the Archbishop) plus some romantic idealism.

Now, WCRP's eyes are on the national interfaith conference in November when it is hoped that religious leaders will endorse the declaration. (They will have received the first draft and a revised draft incorporating the public's amendments.) Will the religious leaders feel that they have a mandate to sign a declaration on behalf of their religious groupings? Will they feel that the discussion time has been too short? What happens if they cannot agree?

For the next searing episode of *Stumbling Through the Democratic Bog*, watch the November press for details. In the meantime, get your copy *now* of the Draft Declaration on the Rights and Responsibilities of Religious People by contacting Idasa in Pretoria (012) 3421476.

Go on, do it, prove how democratically responsible you are. And if you can't be bothered just think of 10 more questions that will throw a spanner into the democratic process.

Alice Coetzee is a regional co-ordinator in Idasa's Pretoria office.

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