

SYNOD OF BISHOPS

ANGLICAN CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

“You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before people that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” – Matthew 5: 13-16

The Synod of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, assembled in Benoni from February 20 to 24, reflected on the state of education in South Africa with specific regard to the disruptions of the educational process arising from the protests over university fees, curricula and the living conditions, transport problems and safety of students which have formed part of the #FeesMustFall, #Decolonized Education and similar campaigns.

The 2017 academic year

The Synod of Bishops applauds the efforts of students, university management teams and the National Education Crisis Forum to save the academic year at the end of 2016. We pray God's blessings over the 2017 academic year and beyond.

Civil society involvement

The Synod acknowledges and wishes to encourage the tremendous work of civil society through the South African Council of Churches, the Higher Education Parents Dialogue (HEParD) and the National Education Crisis Forum, and of the business community and political parties in certain areas, in engaging with government, university managements and students in seeking to normalise life on campuses while at the same time addressing the real and urgent problems which #FeesMustFall and #Decolonised education activists have brought to the fore.

The responsibilities of students

We acknowledge the right of students to protest over issues about which they feel strongly. At the same time we plead with them to find and maintain constructive ways of making themselves heard without resorting to violence or destructive action. We urge them to accept the responsibility for facilities on their campuses which accompanies a sense of being co-owners of their institutions.

The responsibilities of university managements

We plead with university managements to adopt a deep listening posture in response to student unrest, and to work with students to find creative solutions to the pressing issues with which we are confronted. While we are grateful for those campuses which have returned to normality, we are deeply concerned at the presence of police and increased numbers of security personnel on a number of campuses. This militarised presence kills dialogue and serves to deepen polarisation between students and management. In doing so, it induces a false sense of calm on those campuses, which conceals the potential for renewed violent confrontation. We therefore also call on university managements to withdraw the police and to scale back to normal levels the presence of security guards on campuses.

The Government's responsibility

Whilst we commend efforts by government to address the tertiary education crisis, we feel it is at times overwhelmed by it and we would like to see government, especially the Minister and the Department of Higher Education and Training, play a more pro-active role in addressing it. We strongly urge the government to seek more creative ways of providing more resources for education, and in particular of creating a “free funding model” for tertiary education – including provision for high earners and companies to contribute to the costs of that education – so that students do not have to graduate with crippling levels of debt. We acknowledge the Minister of Finance's allocations for tertiary education in his budget and we appeal for further tangible commitments and timelines for increased funding.

Conclusion

We call the church to prayer and action to help all parties involved to develop a new vision for the future of education in our land, a vision which will guide us in finding a long-lasting solution to the challenge of giving all our children, especially those living in material poverty, access to a good education which enables them to realise their God-given potential.

Benoni, February 2017