

Speech by President Nelson Mandela during the opening ceremony of the Young Christian Workers World Council

26 November 1995, Oukasie

Dear Chairperson;

Delegates and friends,

It is indeed a great privilege for me to be present at the Official Opening Ceremony of the YCW World Council. It is a special pleasure to associate myself with the Young Christian Workers' long record of standing up against injustice throughout the world, including South Africa.

You are all most welcome in South Africa, and we are honoured that you have chosen our country as the venue for your meeting.

Your decision to hold your Council here in the small and poverty-stricken community of Oukasie speaks louder than mere words. Once more you are demonstrating in a practical way that a true commitment to justice demands more than good intentions and fine speeches. It calls for a full association with those who are struggling for justice.

Oukasie's long struggle for survival against some of the most vicious onslaughts of the apartheid regime, is renowned. After every attack the residents of Oukasie reorganised themselves and sustained their resistance to forced removals.

As part of their struggle, they formed partnerships with Anti-Apartheid organisations throughout the world. Oukasie became a symbol of the power of community resistance assisted by international solidarity. Eventually the apartheid regime retreated and the people of Oukasie were victorious.

I recall this history because it speaks of everything that Young Christian Workers stand for. One of the YCW's most important characteristics is that it situates itself within the social realities of people, especially young workers, and places strong emphasis on effective organisation.

Our decades of struggle, outside and inside prison, taught us that the most important tool of resistance is proper organisation. No matter how unequal the situation, if the people are committed and well organised then not even the most vicious oppressor can hold them back forever. The people of South African demonstrated that, and I want to thank YCW for your contribution to that wonderful victory.

However, the fight against oppression and injustice did not end with the establishment of our first democratic government. In many ways the struggle for justice is today even more intense and challenging. We still carry many of the rusty old chains of apartheid with us. Every now and then racism still lifts its ugly head. The consequences of years of neglect and exploitation are evident everywhere in the terrible poverty that most South Africans still experience.

Now that we have our political liberty we must also gain our socio-economic liberty and freedom from hunger, ignorance and disease. This is a struggle for reconstruction and delivery, and working together with communities to assist them to help themselves to build a better life.

In this huge enterprise the experience of YCW will be very important. YCW was founded with the specific aim that the Church should respond to the needs of workers, but not as charity where the workers are passive recipients of aid. Rather, the objective was the empowerment of young people from worker families to unlock their own capacity and to empower themselves through proper organisation.

YCW's emphasis on active participation of its members in developing plans to change their lives has proved to have great potential for capacity-building among our youth. It is common knowledge that YCW has made a significant contribution to building the organs of civil society in South Africa, in particular worker organisations. Many of the worker leaders it trained continue to occupy positions of leadership in the trade union movement, in government, in business and in wider civil society.

The youth of South Africa face serious problems because of the years of deprivation, violence and interrupted education. Great courage and commitment will be needed to overcome the obstacles and for our young people to fully enjoy the benefits that our fledgling democracy holds for them.

Religious organisations, especially those which concentrate on the youth, can help bring reconciliation to our country and help us build the Rainbow Nation that most South Africans yearn for. Not so long ago our young people were looking at each other over the barrels of guns. But today they are reaching out to each other to build a common future. This demands emotional maturity and moral strength, and I firmly believe that the various religions can help develop these qualities.

All the major religions teach the importance of peace and reconciliation. But they also insist that with reconciliation must come an end to injustice.

I refer to this challenge of genuine reconciliation because it is a political and moral issue which will gain increasing prominence as our Truth and Reconciliation Commission addresses its difficult task. I also mention it here in Oukasie because of this community's history of suffering. The YCW's approach has always been to acknowledge and challenge injustice, and then to build the capacity of the oppressed to act in a constructive way that will bring an end to injustice and create a better world for all of us.

The youth of South Africa made a crucial contribution to the struggle for liberation, and I have no doubt in my mind that they have what it will take to put the injustices of the past behind them. This will demand exactly the kind of determination for organisation and self-development that YCW stands for. I urge you to continue your work for the development and empowerment of the young people who are members of YCW, and the youth of South Africa in general.

I have often said that South Africa's greatest asset is not our mineral wealth, but our young people. The future of this country depends on you - the young people sitting here. I have always had the greatest confidence that the gains we have made for democracy and justice are safe in your hands; and that you will build South Africa to fulfil its potential to become the great nation that it ought to be.

May God bless the Young Christian Workers in the important work that you are doing!

May you have a good stay in South Africa, and a very successful World Council

Thank you.

Nelson Mandela

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