

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 29, 2012 at 8:21am

South Africa reformers, bishops pursue dialogue

by Bronwen Dachs

CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA -- Talking and listening are what both South Africa's year-old Catholic group seeking church reforms and the bishops' conference say they intend to do in their new tentative relationship.

"It's important for us to establish dialogue with the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, even if that takes a long time," said Brian Robertson of We Are All Church, an organization of about 120 South African Catholics that is affiliated with the international We Are Church group.

Robertson, a retired psychiatrist who lives in Cape Town, and his wife, Francoise, are the national coordinators of the group, which says in its mission statement that it "upholds primacy of conscience, and the need for questioning and dialogue" and "openly addresses contemporary concerns such as priestly celibacy and women in ministry."

We Are All Church "does not question dogma. We all accept that. What we want discussed are the practices that flow from that," Robertson said in a Feb. 7 telephone interview from St. Helena, where he is working for two months in the tiny south Atlantic island's hospital.

In November, We Are All Church wrote to the bishops' conference, saying they "hope to be recognized as a group of Catholics in good standing who wish to promote the implementation and furthering of the renewal of the church that was begun at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Robertson said he may have moved too fast in 2011 when he approached both Archbishop Stephen Brislin of Cape Town and his parish priest to tell them about the new group and its aims.

Robertson said that Brislin told him the organization was "outside the church" and could not meet on church property. And when the time came for the annual recommissioning of ministers of the Eucharist in

Robertson's Cape Town parish, he found his name was not on the list.

While it is crucial that the institutional church in South Africa takes seriously the concerns of We Are All Church, a problem is that the South African bishops can't make decisions that affect the universal church," said Fr. Ricardo Smuts, a theological advisor to the bishops' conference.

"The demands in their manifesto cannot be met for South Africa because they are universal demands," he said in a Feb. 13 telephone interview from St. John Vianney Seminary in Pretoria.

"But we can listen. And we will move with caution, prudence and due diligence," Smuts said. Members of the theological advisory commission are scheduled to meet with bishops' conference officials March 17 to discuss how we will engage them [We Are All Church] and address the issues that concern them," he said.

The members of the organization, which has branches in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban, formed in November 2010. Members "are all devout, concerned Catholics who want dialogue. We don't want to leave -- or trash -- the church," Robertson said.

"We don't want to force change," he said, noting that the group is being careful not to say anything that could be seen as grounds for rejection."

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However, the organization does "want the South African hierarchy to accept that without dialogue there will be a rift, and radicals will form a different church," he said.

"The South African church is outspoken about human rights but our own house is not in order," he said.

The main aim of the group is to "put across the ideas raised at the Second Vatican Council," Robertson said, noting that the memory of the late Archbishop Denis Hurley of Durban, who was among 25 members of Vatican II's agenda-setting Central Preparatory Commission, is an inspiration to We Are All Church.

"His motto is ours: "Where the Spirit is, there is freedom" (*Ubi spiritus, ibi libertas*, 2 Corinthians 3:17), Robertson said.

Dialogue between the group's leaders and the bishops is "very tentative and some bishops are not sure how best to do it," Smuts said, noting that the talks were necessary to "give the lead to priests, some of whom are unsure how to engage in their parishes with these groupings."

While We Are All Church is "very vocal in some sectors, particularly urban dioceses," it does not "speak for the masses of the church and this is another reason for us to move with caution," Smuts said.

White urban professionals, many retired, largely make up the organization.

"We're hoping that this will change over time, as we grow," Robertson said.

He said that talking with Catholics has often challenged his "assumption that most Catholics, especially bishops and priests, hold the views of the established church."

“People often surprise us, saying, “We agree, we think like you do,” he said. “We’re encouraging them to speak up.”

There is a “culture of fear” in the church, particularly in South Africa with its “legacy of apartheid,” Robertson said.

“People don’t feel free to say what they think. They seem to fear that if they do speak out they will get a negative reaction” from the church, he said.

Catholics in the Northern Hemisphere “have a confidence that we don’t have. They live in a culture where freedom of speech is highly prized,” he said.

The “way forward in dialogue” between South Africa’s bishops and We Are All Church will largely depend on the “tone of the initial meeting” between leaders of the group and representatives of the bishops’ conference, Smuts said, noting that he hoped there would be “a tone of willingness to listen and to compromise, rather than of demand.”

He noted that the conference has taken care to recommend bishops known for their sensitivity and diplomacy to take part in these early discussions.

[Bronwen Dachs is a freelance writer from Cape Town, South Africa.]

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