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"Interacting with the river of violence" Violence in a maximum-security correctional centre in South Africa³

ABSTRACT

Perspectives portrayed in this article are the outcome of a participatory action researched process embodying principles underlying narrative therapy. The co-researchers and researchers embarked on conversations to find out whether religion does play a role in rehabilitation as described by the White Paper on Corrections. The heading of this paper is borrowed from a metaphor that arose from one of the discussions about violence in a prison situation. Expert knowledge on violence, the effects of witnessing violence, and the experience of the consequences of violence are portrayed. The research emphasizes the fact that Inmates converted to Christianity have acquired a new identity on different levels and, although being in prison, they are living from an alternative knowledge with meaning for everyday life. It is clear that religion can play a very positive role in changing perceptions and behaviour about violence amongst Inmates. A narrative, contextual, practical theology needs to take note of these perspectives in order to accommodate marginalized people within society.

Once more I froze at the somehow surreal thought that I could be speaking in coded language with this man, that he could take me into his world of secrets and private language, and that I was becoming a part of that world... (Gobodo Madikizela 2003:35-36).

1 INTRODUCTION

The heading of this paper is borrowed from a metaphor that arose from one of our discussions about violence in a prison situation (22 inmates – Mangaung Correctional Centre).⁴ Although

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4 The voices of the 22 Inmates are portrayed as co-researchers in this article. Challenging positions of power, we opted to portray the names of the "22 Inmates" in the so called first author's position.

the metaphor of a river of violence will be explained later in the report reflecting the different discussions, this metaphor acknowledges the different streams of stories flowing together in the telling and retelling that lead to a fusion of horizons of understanding in which new meaning is developed. In our opinion, one of the best possible positions to take in describing this confluence is to choose to describe practical theology as a narrative, hermeneutical, practical theology (Gerkin 1997:111-113; Müller 2000:17).

The flow of this newly construed stream is edged out within a post-modern landscape by social constructionism which accommodates hermeneutics and understands human map-making as systemic in nature (Müller 2000:56-59). As the chosen epistemology for this research endeavour, social constructionism is therefore suitable because it promotes dialogue (Gergen 2002:283) in the way by which it provides space for the challenge of communicating across boundaries (Schweitzer 2002:176).

Taking this research position embodies important paradigmatic shifts within pastoral theorising. Louw (1999:21-27) points to the movement from an individual approach to taking account of contexts, from explaining problems in a one-sided fashion to a hermeneutical understanding, from kerugma to construing and storytelling, and from one-sided professional emphasis to collectively caring for each other.

The rationale for the explanation above is to be found in the need to pave the way for us to embark on these conversations with Inmates to find out if religion does play a role in rehabilitation as described by Section 4.2.3 in the White Paper on Corrections (2005:38):

Rehabilitation is achieved through the delivery of key services to offenders, including both correction of the offending behaviour and the development of the human being involved. The correction of offending behaviour and development are two separate, but linked responsibilities. Rehabilitation is achieved through interventions to change attitudes, behaviour and social circumstances. The desired outcome is rehabilitation and the promotion of social values and responsibility.

Research within a South African context on religious care in prisons is scarce. Although the role of religion in a prison context is not the first priority of this research, the research portrayed within this article, specifically focused on what role religion played concerning violence in Inmates lives in a South African prison. In this regard the words of Dammer (2002:1375) are meaningful that:

Although it is difficult to judge why an inmate becomes involved with religion, it is apparently for a variety of personal and practical reasons. The common belief held by many, including by some whom live and work in correctional facilities, is that Inmates “find religion” for manipulative reasons. Although this may be the case in some instances, there is evidence that some Inmates have been changed for the better due to their incarceration and religious practice.

The question following from this would be whether religion can change behaviour and attitudes, and especially those concerning violence and the proverbial river of violence of which Inmates have been part. In the following report, we want to describe the engagement with *this river of violence*. In recognition of the role that our own narratives play in our participation in the process, we thought it honest and wise to start exploring the different streams of this river by documenting some aspects of the different stories involved in the process, by introducing the different story-tellers whose voices can be heard. Where possible and as part of narrative methodology, authors voiced their stories in the “first person”-telling position.

2 THE DIFFERENT ROLE-PLAYERS

2.1 Stories of imprisonment

During our first meeting, 22 long-term Inmates voluntarily showed up for the planned group sessions. All the Inmates were quite young, seeing that according to African culture a man can be regarded as still being young at up to 35-40 years of age. A substantial part of the group was under the age of 30 years. After we introduced ourselves and explained the aim of our project, we asked the 22 Inmates to introduce themselves. Although no names of Inmates will be revealed, as agreed with the Mangaung Correctional Centre, permission was granted to document aspects of the different stories told. The 22 stories told by Inmates revealed different aspects of crime and violence associated with it. Crimes of murder, rape, and armed robbery were part of the different stories told by Inmates. The sentences for the different crimes varied from life-imprisonment to double figures.

There was one factor central to each of the Inmates' stories. Everyone attending our meeting could tell how he became born again and that being a Christian became part of the day to day life in prison. Being Christians together not only lead to the experience of a brotherhood in Christ between us, but also influenced the outcome of every story told by the Inmates.

Dawid and I told the Inmates that they would be viewed as the experts on violence and that it was a privilege to document their different perspectives.

2.2 Dawid Kuyler - A story with an angle

In 2001, the first private prison in Africa opened at Bloemfontein, and I was called to be the chaplain. Here I could start working in a prison set-up that we have dreamed about. No more overcrowding, no more fighting for a rightful place for religion and other helping professions. A Religious Care Centre for religious activities was even established. All these things were more than a chaplain could ask for. Since we are a Maximum Correctional Centre, we received all our prisoners from the Department of Correctional Services. Many old acquaintances from Correctional Services prisons were surprised to see the chaplain again. All the gang leaders from various prisons ended up with us. Violence and threats of violence became part of life. Prisoners wanted to "open" the prison by killing an employee. Assaults on employees took place and since most of the employees were new to working in a prison, the levels of fear was high. Helping employees who were traumatised by acts of violence was part of the company's policy and old skills could be utilized within a team approach.

The prison has settled and violence is managed as far as possible. The church is growing. More than 50% of Inmates are involved in religious activities. The 51 religious workers from 35 different churches form a team, and equipping them for the ministry in the prison and towards victims is a huge challenge. The religious development of Inmates and their skills is an enriching journey. Together we seek and experience God's grace within a prison that creates opportunities for hope.

Unless prisons and prison philosophies change, the challenge posed by violence will not be met. In Mangaung Correctional Centre, we strive to make a difference. In Religious Care we create opportunities for stories to be told of how God changed and are still changing people exposed to violence and people who committed violence.

2.3 Jan-Albert van den Berg - A story with a history

My involvement with prison life started when I was but a young boy and heard the different stories my grandfather and father told. My grandfather was a member of Correctional Services and my father, although serving as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, worked as a prison

warden on death row during his student days. Today I am sensitive for the fact that this exposure must have influenced my earliest memories about prison and persons involved.

2.4 The context: Mangaung Correctional Centre

As heard from the story by Dawid Kuyler, Mangaung Correctional Centre was the first private partnership prison in Africa.⁵ Currently it is one of two privately run prisons in South Africa. The other one is situated in the north of the country at Makado. Mangaung Correctional Centre is situated on the eastern side of Bloemfontein. It houses 2928 Inmates with around 500 employees.

3. A PROCEDURE FOR OUR MEETING(S)

It is a fact that there are many who find themselves outcast, on the boundaries of society, without recognition and self-respect (Dreyer 2002:93). In order to give a meaningful voice to the Inmates living on the boundaries of society, we decided during the research process that, according to our view, the best possible way to achieve this is by using a Participatory Action Research Model. This would fulfil a need to empower people through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge to their own benefit (Reason 1994:47-48, Kotzé & Kotzé 2001:10). We were therefore "... to facilitate the group largely informed by narrative ideas, with minimal other theoretical influences" (Duncan 2001:24). When it becomes clear that it is more about research with people rather than research on people (Reason 1994:1), one understands that, in this participatory bottom-up approach, the investigated become the investigators (Strydom 2002:420).

Central to this methodology is the term co-researcher(s). In this preferred term, we see the Inmates as research participants participating with us in this project. The term further brings together the respectable notion of research combined with the rather odd idea of the co-production of knowledge by research participants and researchers (Epston 2004:3).

Keeping this in mind, the following methodology was proposed in constructing this project:

- 3.1 The Inmates were being respected as the experts on violence in a Maximum Security Prison in South Africa. We (Dawid and Jan-Albert) acknowledged the fact that they have far more knowledge on this topic than we do and that we are interested in their views regarding this topic.
- 3.2 In hearing their viewpoints by asking questions and listening to their stories, we wanted to strike a rapport with them reflecting our discussion(s). In thinking about our project, certain questions came to mind. We discussed the different questions with the Inmates and told them that we would be privileged if they could help us in understanding the possible answers to these questions. We also asked the Inmates to help us to understand whether there was, to their knowledge, something else that had to be added to these initial questions.
- 3.3 To further thicken this description, we combined some theoretical remarks into weaving the story-cloth of the research report. This not only articulates a social constructivist epistemology but also articulates the fluidity of step between the accents of pseudonymous co-researchers (practice), which are elucidated by

⁵ For more information, visit the website of the Department of Correctional Services at www.dcs.pwv.gov.za as well as that of Mangaung Correctional Centre at www.gslglobal.com

theoretical perspectives with new perspectives on further determining the space of practice (Browning 1991:84).

- 3.4 To be concurrent with the proposed way of working, we wrote down and shaped the content of each of our discussions, bringing it to each of the meetings with the Inmates. Before we proceeded with the next meeting, we would show the Inmates what we have written down so far in order for them to have the opportunity to correct us if we understood them incorrectly. Eventually the contribution of 22 Inmates had been included in "Italic"-font as part of the final research document.

4 QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

4.1 Violence is ...

The first question we addressed was to ask the Inmates what they think violence were. The Inmates helped us to understand that mentioning violence brought different meanings to their mind. During our discussion, we heard that violence is an action beyond one's control and that no one could foresee or understand the outcome. In mentioning violence, the Inmates responded by explaining it with words like *anger, hatred, disagreement, power, cruelty, greed, lack of patience, force, bloodshed, rape, misunderstanding, aggressiveness, fights between groups, bullying, shooting someone, overpower, jealousy, and verbal assault.*

Interestingly enough, many of the Inmates referred to the fact that violence is to their mind associated with a *lack of self-control. In realizing that one was to be in prison for life, a sense of hopelessness could occur, leading one to act without responsibility and caring that could lead to acts of violence.* In this regard, more than one of the group members referred to the fact that violence evokes thoughts of another person(s) rights being violated.

In reflecting on the content of these different words, it seems clear that different meanings and contexts are described in explaining violence. It is a given fact that the concept of violence is complex and that it needs to be explored at different levels and in a variety of contexts (Degenaar 1990:70). Weingarten (2003:5) is thus correct in stating that "...though violence and violation surround us, defining what they are, is not easy." Contrary to what one would expect, the Inmates did not necessarily use meanings associated with the crimes they committed to describe violence. Rather meanings relating to their experience in prison itself are reflected in words like *power, overpower, bullying, jealousy, fighting between groups, and gangsterism*, which directly reflects on the prison situation.

4.2 First exposure to violence ...

The Inmates helped Dawid and me to understand that, growing up in the various townships in South Africa, they experienced violence as a *daily thing*. The Inmates led us to understand that they have encountered violence on at least five different levels: *in the community, in the house, through political violence, in gangsterism, and at school.*

It seemed that many of the Inmates could especially identify with the theme of violence occurring at home. They have tales to tell of *drunken fathers and mothers fighting* with each other, thereby setting the norm for their own involvement in violence. This involvement in violence was so normative that *scars acquired* from violence became *tokens* or medals of honour. *This evil spirit of hatred to fight day and night would therefore fuel one with violence.*

Reflecting on these perspectives portrayed by the Inmates, we took cognisance of Weingarten (2003:5-6) who used different categories in describing the concepts of personal violence, structural violence, and violation. Our attention was especially drawn to what we know

as the concept of structural violence, originally coined by John Galtung (Degenaar 1990:11). The concept of structural violence brings to mind different perspectives implying not only particular acts, but also social structures that violate human rights and dignity (Hirschowitz et al 1994:68).

4.3 Witnessing violence ...

Living in a post-apartheid South Africa where we witnessed the effects of structural violence that lead to a spiral of violence, we were especially interested in those who were "...indirectly affected because they have witnessed such events or because such events have occurred to members of their immediate and extended family or acquaintances" (Lorion & Saltzman 1993:57). When asking the Inmates to help us understand what it meant to witness violence, our co-researchers replied with different perspectives. The Inmates agreed that violence were so common and that *they were influenced to such a degree by the circumstances that it became a way of living and the answer to one's problems*. One of the Inmates even helped us with the formulation that *violence became the principle by which to live one's life*. We also took note of our co-researchers' insight that witnessing violence could take place in different contexts: *watching television, in criminal activities, and in prison*. It is noteworthy that the Inmates agreed that there was lesser violence in their current location in Mangaung Correctional Centre than in other facilities of the Department of Correctional Services (some mention this figure to be as much as 80%).

4.4 Violence in prison ...

Knowing that worldwide "...prisoners needing to remain silent, the extent of violence within prisons is unknown" (Denborough 1996:25), we specifically asked the group-members to help us understand what the meaning of violence in prison is. They replied by saying that much violence occurs in South African prisons. Words and concepts used by the Inmates to describe this violence in prison were *gang-related violence, sodomy, drugs, dictatorships, and guns*.

We asked the Inmates to help us understand why they experienced a difference between the situation in a prison run by the Department of Correctional Services and their current location. The Inmates replied that violence occurs in each and every prison, but that there was less violence at Mangaung Correctional Centre. They helped us to understand that, according to their view, there is much more of violence in a prison like *Sun City*, a large prison in Johannesburg. To their opinion, this is the result of the large numbers of Inmates locked up together (up to 60 males in a single cell), the accessibility of weapons and drugs, the operation of prison-related gangs, and the attitude of prison personnel.

Although, according to the Inmates, violence also sometimes occurs at Mangaung Maximum Correctional Centre, it help that they are locked up two-two in a cell, that no weapons and drugs are available, and that the attitude of the personnel is different.

4.5 Violence influencing one's life ...

In discussing the influence of violence on one's life, Dawid and I were helped with a rich variety of views from the Inmates. Many of our co-researchers explained to us the pain of being involved in violence. Being involved in violence leads one *to be alone deep inside*. Talking about this old behaviour of violence led many of the Inmates to feelings of *hurting* and initially evoked emotions of emotions of being irritable because bygones cannot be bygones. *The opening up of old wounds was disturbing* for many of the Inmates. Because we respected this and also communicated it to the Inmates, they nevertheless agreed that talking about violence and the influence of violence on one's life was an indirect counselling process. This process also opened

up new *space for the future*.

The discussion sprouting from this mutual respect helped us to further understand that, for many of the Inmates in a previous life outside of prison, violence had been a part of the status of being described as a *violent type of person*. Playing in this league led Inmates to become part of the spiral of violence where *violence evoked counter violence*. In this spiral of violence, one would try to inflict *the same pain on another person as what one has experienced yourself*. Inmates helped us to understand something of this attitude towards life by using phrases like *If I'm going to die... So what! I don't care!* and *A dead man is a dead man. A dead man doesn't care*. Ironically enough, the Inmates also agreed that being involved in this spiral of violence led to emotions of *fear* and being *afraid*. This led them to a lifestyle of being *afraid and trying to avoid the other violent person*.

Reflecting on the above, the words of Kaethe Weingarten in her book "Common Shock" about witnessing violence are most appropriate and formed part of our concern during the research process:

There is a lot of violence. There are a lot of witnesses to it. We know that violence begets violence and we are beginning to understand that witnessing violence does too (Weingarten 2003:13).

As part of the session, Dawid helped the Inmates and me with a story of the river of violence:

If one would assume that violence is like a river, some people would be pushed in while some people would jump in themselves. After swimming in this river of violence, some people try to get out, others like it and keep swimming, while some drown.

This metaphor of the story of the river of violence introduced the last movements of our conversation on violence. We asked the Inmates to help us understand how to cope with violence in prison, about the possible role of religion in countering violence, and about the formation of a new identity in prison.

4.6 Coping with violence in prison ...

Research has already indicated that:

"Stories of how women and men have survived the total institution that is prison are largely silenced in this culture. There is little room to consider the ways in which people who served time and survived have tapped into stories of strength, of connection, of love, rebellion, resistance" (Denborough 1996:28).

In asking the group-members to reflect on their coping mechanisms regarding violence, they told us that *attitude* was very important. They helped us to understand that, as Christians, they believed that the working of the Holy Spirit is responsible for their change and leads to the formation of a new attitude. However, *relatives not coming to visit, frustration, and corruption* could challenge this positive attitude.

Dawid and I asked the Inmates to help us understand what is asked of a Christian to cope with violence inflicted in a prison setting. They answered by saying that *avoidance* is the best route to follow, trying not to get involved in situations of violence. Recognizing that some Inmates tend to be bad-tempered, you had to decide for yourself whether you are going to *fuel their fire of violence*. The Inmates also helped us to understand that, in Mangaung Correctional Centre, the incidence of violence dropped dramatically due to certain *mechanisms like the*

“anti-bullying policy” employed by the prison authorities. Being part of the new, *non-violent, Christian gang*, one becomes part of a new way of living. In this new way of living, the Inmates distinguished between so-called *rights and obligations*. During a chaplain’s period, they were taught that a Christian must not be in the first place insisted on his rights, but rather try to be true to his obligations as a Christian living with others.

4.7 Religion as an answer to violence?

In asking the Inmates about what they think the answer to violence they agreed that from a Christian point of view *the answer is that people should accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour*.

The Inmates also helped us to understand that it is important that there should be opportunities for everybody to *express his feelings*. Such mechanisms for communicating *these feelings are to be structured in such a way so that problems that may arise could be avoided*. Sprouting from this some of the Inmates refers to the *important aspect that forgiveness plays especially if someone has done wrong against you*.

During the group discussion the Inmates helped us to understand that within the Prison environment, *Inmates should be kept busy with things like sports activities and religious programs* to counter violence. For our co-researchers it were also important to point out that the Prison authorities *must provide enough security in order for everybody to feel safe and not to see any reason to retaliate or get involved in gang activities*.

In asking the Inmates about the relationship between religion and violence they helped us to understand at least two aspects given their own context. Firstly it is *good and also important that each and every Inmate be allowed/given an opportunity to practice his or her religions*. Secondly the Inmates stressed that it is very important that Inmates don’t *propagate and use a violent way of persuading people to join their churches/faiths*. Therefore it is *important for Inmates who wish to convert others to their religions to have a good approach*.

4.8 “Inmates” referring to a new identity ...

We were curious about the use of the word *Inmate* within the Mangaung Correctional Centre. The Inmates together with Dawid helped me to understand that the word *Inmate* refers to a new identity. This differs totally from the words *prisoner* or *bandiet* to which they get used to be called in their previous prison environments. The Inmates helped us to understand that the word *Inmate* not only referred to a new identity in a new context, but also echoed a meaning of togetherness with respect for other.

Speaking from their own experience, the Inmates regard the counselling and helping of people whom have experienced violence a very important task. In asking what they think were important factors helping people who have experience violence they said that *these people as victims of violence need to have the opportunity to talk and let free of their emotions. Spiritual support and advice from other Inmates who once had the same experience could also help a lot*. Spontaneously they refer to the important contribution of group discussions *like this one would contribute a lot whereby everyone will have a chance express their feelings*.

A lot could be obtained if people, who were victims of violence, regardless if they were the agents or receivers of acts of violence, *could be taught about the love of God and that God forgives*.

Rather than putting a full-stop after this research project, we reminded ourselves of the words of Degenaar (1990:85), saying that:

Debate on violence is a form of action and should be engaged in on all levels and at all stages. It is only informed action, leading to the rationality of negotiation, which can succeed in overcoming the irrational destructiveness of violence.

5 LIMITATIONS

With the Inmates Dawid and I were aware that our project might have certain shortcomings. In the first place we acknowledged the fact that this project only portrayed the situation in one specific context, namely that of Mangaung Correctional Centre. The question comes to mind what the situation regarding the different themes would be in the other correctional facilities throughout the country. Secondly we are aware and sensitive of the fact that the Inmates participating in our project were all part of the religious activities at Mangaung Correctional Centre. Again the question could be posed what the answers would be if Inmates not part of the religious activities, would be consulted. Although we are sensitive for these possible limitations in the project we also want to remind ourselves that we are specifically interested in the narratives of people within a certain specific context, validating not the general abstractions in the first place, but personal experience.

6 CONCLUSION

In reflecting on the different meetings with our co-researchers we were enriched by their expert knowledge on violence, the effects on witnessing violence and their experience of the consequences of violence. Our discussions emphasize that facts the Inmates acquired a new identity on different levels and although being in prison they live from an alternative knowledge with meaning for everyday. As the prisoners called it... *"..they weren't any more fish swimming in a river of violence"*. It is therefore clear that religion can play a very positive role in changing perceptions and behaviour amongst Inmates about violence.

Our research would then imply the development of a narrative contextual practical theology in which having an ear and an eye listening to and seeing people whose position in society silences their voices, are important (Bons-Storm 2002:38).

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KEY WORDS

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