



Aggrey Klaaste's On the LINE

The power of prayer made us free men

Sowetan
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I RECENTLY received an extraordinary picture. The story accompanying it is just as fascinating. It reflects, in my view, the genius of prayer.

The picture shows me and Dr Nthato Motlana and Leonard Mosala soon after we were released from Modder B prison in 1978. Motlana was the chairman of the Committee of Ten and Mosala one of its members.

The picture was given to me by Motlana. What is arresting about it is the caption in Afrikaans which says: "Die eerste foto van dr Nthato Motlana (middel) en mure Aggrey Klaaste (links), gewese nuusredakteur van die verbode Weekend World, en Leonard Mosala, 'n lid van die Komitee van Tien, na hul vrylating uit die Modderbee gevangenis." (The first photo of Dr Nthato Motlana (centre) and messrs Aggrey Klaaste (left), former news editor of Weekend World, and Leonard Mosala, a member of the Committee of Ten, after their release from Modderbee prison.)

This is how we were released from Modder B after the government detained scores of leaders and other less known people like me on October 19 1977.

That fateful day, the predecessors to Sowetan, The World and Weekend World, were banned. It was called Black Wednesday.

We spent over six months - including some very bad times over Christmas and New Year - in Modder B with political, community and business leaders of all persuasions from all over the country.

**‘I could hear
the sounds of
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Soweto’**

Desperately unhappy

After gloomily - gloomily because some of us thought because we were detained with so many big shots, it would be a short jail spell - spending Christmas 1977 behind bars, and going into 1978 with little hope of being released, I was desperately unhappy.

A few months into the new year, some people were released. We were in the groups that followed.

We were taken to a car driven by an Afrikaans member of the old local authority called the Urban Bantu Council.

We thought we were about to be banished or deported.

We had been detained under Section 10 of the Internal Security Act, which meant you did not know why you were in prison, and how long you would be there.

We got into the car, with Dr Motlana delivering an angry commentary on what was taking place and asking where we were going.

I was nervous but pleased to hear the sound of the Modder B gates close behind us.

I don't qualify to speak about prison life. After less than a year "inside", it seems pretty silly to try and sound like a seasoned jailbird.

In any event, there we were in the car, and on the way, this Afrikaner gentleman surprised us by asking if he could pray!

I became seriously worried. He prayed, and this is the point of today's article.

In the presence of Dr Motlana, who has his own views about matters spiritual, I felt quite uncomfortable. I still feel uncomfortable making this connection, but I am involved with a number of guys, some of them Afrikaners, in drawing up reconciliation programmes as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission reaches its conclusion.

Unbelievably buoyed

We entered Soweto in this surreal way. I was unhappy, also tremendously excited, anxious, unbelievably buoyed about being free.

Last week I wrote how Herman Charles Bosman described the feeling.

We went to Dr Siphos Nyembezi's mansion in Diepkloof and our amazement, confusion and trepidation were now joined by outrage. Why were we being taken to this house?

Not to put too fine a point on it, Dr Nyembezi was politically not in the same league as Dr Motlana. In fact, poles apart. What followed was pure farce.

There were white officials from the local (municipal) board and some Afrikaans journalists in the reception committee.

The mere thought of making a deal with these guys was outrageous. They were unctuous, apologetic, obnoxious.

Dr Motlana flew into a rage and said if this was a deal about our release, we were going straight back to Modder B. I could smell the intoxicating air of freedom. I could hear the sounds of freedom - women, children, dogs barking - in Soweto.

We spent half the night going around this farcical situation, and satisfied that there was nothing sinister about our release, we eventually went home.

Whatever sinister plans were at play, whatever political games the government was playing out, the remarkable prayer on the Modder B-Benoni main road worked.

It worked because we are today free men, doing what we should.