introduction

The Multi-Event 99 (ME99), had as its theme ‘the role of religion in transforming public life’. It was the culmination of a process which began in 1998. Local communities, particular constituencies and other public actors began meeting to discuss issues and problems in preparation for the ME99, which included an earlier academic conference in October 1998. It was conceived, in its last phase, as a series of multiple events held over one week. The events would draw together various public actors, and would seek to disseminate their insights and knowledge as widely as possible. The intention was to create opportunities for diverse groups to share their experiences, to build coalitions and to co-operate. The ME99 was, therefore, to be the means to involve local people in debates and activities at a time when the nation, as a whole, would be thinking about future directions and policies.

The ME99 made provision for the participation of normally marginalised local community groups in a debate about the issues concerning the role of religion in the making of cultural values and public policies. The commitment to creating space for these groups arose out of the conviction that their voices are at least as significant, if not more significant, than the voices of academics, and religious and political leaders. Many communities are on the periphery of public debates that affect them. It cannot be assumed that the voice of normally marginalised local community groups is available to debates dominated by elites which, by their very nature, are exclusive. It was thought that the marginalised groups could more strongly present their case if a substantial period of time was devoted to developing the ‘communicative competence’ of their representatives, so that they could be articulate and command attention in public debates.

It was, therefore, necessary to select appropriate community groups, and to develop their representatives’ communicative powers through a series of workshops and weekly meetings. This would also help to cultivate a shared vision of what they wanted to achieve through the ME99, and hopefully in their further participation in public life in the future. In order to ensure that
the process would benefit the participants representing community groups, and that it was not simply dictated by the agenda of the ME99 organisers, the principles of action research were employed.

The aim of this report is to provide some insight into the development process, and to evaluate it against the aims and assumptions of action research. The report will provide:

- an outline of the aims and objectives for the involvement of the community groups in the ME99
- a brief explanation of action research and the reasons why it was felt to be the appropriate tool
- a reflection on the process by providing ‘windows’ into significant moments, from the point of first contact with the groups up until their presentations at the ME99
- an evaluation of the process in terms of the community groups’ experience of the ME99 and in terms of the tenets of action research.

Objectives for the ME99 and beyond

The vision for the Multi-Event was to create a space in which various participants in public life could come together to discuss ways in which religion could contribute to the making of public policy. These participants would bring with them particular insights and experience and, hopefully, take back into their communities new insights and experiences gained at the Multi Event. The term which was frequently used to describe this sharing of ideas and energies was ‘synergy’.

For synergy to take place the debate has to include a wide range of voices. It was felt that, along with religious leaders, academics, government representatives and business people, carefully selected groups from different faith communities should also participate. It was important to include the voices of grassroots people and their problems. However, it was not enough to simply invite community groups; more importantly, it was necessary to ensure that they would make an impact. It was feared that their voices might easily be ignored or their presence be used simply to give legitimacy to the Multi-Event.

The objective then, was to organise their participation in such a way that they would be able to make themselves heard, and so that they could thereby shape the event itself in accordance with their particular interests and concerns. The participation of community groups in the ME99 had to be facilitated in such a way that they could command attention during the ME99, while at the same time develop new skills or refine existing skills so that they could take effective action on home ground.

The community groups had their own identity apart from the ME99. But by linking with the ME99 it was hoped that they would gain a wider perspective which they could bring to bear on local problems. The ME99 would in this way be contributing to the life of communities beyond its limited life-span. Hence, the community groups’ participation in the ME99 was both a way for the community groups to break out of their isolation and a way to break through the exclusivity of academic life and party political debates. (end p. 3/)

To achieve the above objectives the following strategic goals were established:

1) Capacity-building and developing communicative competence

This meant that the participants needed to sharpen their communicative skills so that they would be heard when face to face with party politicians, academics, religious leaders and business people. In particular, a sense of confidence in what they have to say, and a belief in their competence to do so in ways that become genuinely public, were important elements of this process.

2) The development of a sense of solidarity

The community groups needed to identify what they themselves considered to be the key issues to be brought to the ME99. They also had to reach consensus about how these issues were to be addressed, at least for the purposes of the ME99. This meant that they had to develop a self-defined sense of purpose through working together. Firstly the diverse groups had to articulate their particular concerns and then, by their representatives working together, a sense of solidarity would be developed for them to be able to confidently present their agenda at the ME99. It was also hoped that the fruits of the process would have a life beyond the ME99—that new partnerships would be forged among them and that the experience gained from other by the groups would be helpful in dealing with local problems.

3) Make use of the Multi-Event to make their voices heard

This meant that the community groups had to play a significant role in the ME99, in as much as their concerns needed to
effectively influence the various debates and, hopefully, lead other participants—especially political and religious leaders—to engage with them.

Action research was the tool used to achieve these objectives. Since action research depends on a mutually rewarding relationship between the researcher and the participants, it is never simply shaped by the agenda of the ‘interventionist’ (in this case, the organisers of the ME99). Thus, once the principles and techniques of action research had been selected as a way of reaching the above goals, the objectives of the community groups and the way they chose to define themselves became central.

**Action research: what is it and why use it?**

At this point it would be helpful to have a brief outline of the key tenets of action research in order to see why these principles were thought to be useful in the community group process. Action research can be defined as a set of activities aimed at improving the quality of life of a particular community (McNiff, 1988:2). It is based on a mutually rewarding relationship developing between the researcher and the participants. Action research aims at generating usable knowledge that will help people in their everyday lives. It leads to change, both of those involved in the process, including the researcher(s), and of the institutions and structures at which it is directed. The researcher is accountable to the participants, the focus is on the process, and the process needs to generate liberating alternatives for those involved.4

As we explore the community group process, then, we will be looking for evidence that action research took place and that action research was indeed the appropriate tool to use in the process. We will ask ourselves the following questions that will reveal whether the principles of action research were indeed reflected in the process: 

- Did the researcher, or in this case the facilitator, and the participants establish a mutually rewarding relationships?
- Did the process generate usable knowledge?
- Did the process result in action that could lead to the creation of a more humane environment?
- Did the facilitator honour his/her accountability to the participants, and did the process generate liberating alternatives for those involved?

Because of the time constraints, and because action research was merely used as a tool, rather than a methodology,5 we cannot realistically expect to find that all the principles were comprehensively applied.

**The community groups process**

The process began with the vision of the ME99 team, as described above. Jacques De Wet, who has training and experience in action research, was asked to facilitate the process. Because of the time constraints involved, very careful criteria had to be set for selecting the participants. They were drawn from existing community groups which already had a high level of internal cohesion and were stable. They also needed to have strong leaders, and a commitment to meet regularly.6 Community groups were contacted and asked whether they would be interested in participating, and whether their group met the above criteria. Jacques contacted groups from as far north as Attridgeville and as far south as Stellenbosch and Khayelitsha. He learnt about these groups from people involved in community projects, and selected those groups which he felt could share in and benefit from the project.

Ultimately twelve very diverse groups joined the process: 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Group</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tirelo Setshaba</td>
<td>Attridgeville (urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist Convention Theological Empowerment Group</td>
<td>Soweto (urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV/AIDS Job Creation Group</td>
<td>Pietermaritzburg (urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenosis</td>
<td>Pietermaritzburg (urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mamelodi Couples Group</td>
<td>Mamelodi (urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umtata Women’s Theology Group</td>
<td>Umtata (peri-urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Transfiguration Project 2000</td>
<td>Grahamstown (urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter Module</td>
<td>Grahamstown (urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singles Group</td>
<td>George (urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice and Service Group</td>
<td>Bergvlei/Retreat (urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khayamandi Youth Group</td>
<td>Stellenbosch (peri-urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian Youth Group</td>
<td>Khayelitsha (urban)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first workshop

While the various groups knew about each other from correspondence that Jacques had distributed to their leaders, their representatives (a facilitator and one member from each group) met for the first time at a workshop held on 2-3 October 1998 (see appendix 2).

As a result of his visits to the community groups Jacques anticipated a number of possible obstacles which he thought might undermine the workshop and the entire process of preparing the community groups for the Multi Event. Firstly, there was the problem of the lack of confidence, which in part may have been a matter of language (both ‘academic’ language, and English as a medium of communication). Secondly, there was a sense of distrust which some of the community groups had raised with Jacques. These groups were worried (and rightly so) that the ME99 would be little more than an academic exercise that would simply use community groups to give the ME99 credibility for its claim to inclusivity. Thirdly, the groups did not share a common ideological framework. Fourthly, Jacques wished to avoid dominating the process as the group facilitator. These concerns guided the aims of the first workshop which set the tone for subsequent meetings and preparation for the ME99.

The aim of the first workshop was to create a sense of connectedness and belonging, to develop a common vision, and to provide the groups with a clearer picture of the nature and shape of the ME99. Also the groups were introduced to the Inclusive Consensus Approach to decision making, and a method of analysis and strategic planning called SEE-JUDGE-ACT. Initially the term ‘action research’ was not introduced because it was felt that such a term carried too much academic baggage, thus possibly creating the impression that the community groups were merely ‘subjects’ in a research program. The Inclusive Consensus Approach and the SEE-JUDGE-ACT technique draw on the principles used in action research.

To begin with, the representatives of the community groups introduced themselves and the interests and concerns of their groups. This was both a way of ‘getting to know each other’ and of developing rapport. The workshop participants familiarised themselves with the Inclusive Consensus Approach with the help of a role play and discussion. They were also taught about different styles of leadership (pioneering vs integrative), and different styles of participation (e.g. ‘impulsive’ vs ‘contemplative’ participation). The group facilitators were encouraged to keep these different styles in mind so that they could use what they had learnt about decision-making and group work when they went to their own groups. In the short term this helped develop a collective voice in preparation for the Multi-Event; in the longer term, of course, the techniques could be used in the community groups’ local campaigns and strategies to bring about social transformation.

Finally, a shared vision was built up by means of what Jacques called ‘forming a solidarity movement’. The process entailed dividing the participants up into their respective community group pairs with the instruction that they should articulate a vision of what their group back home had indicated they wanted to achieve through their involvement in the ME99. Once a pair agreed they then signalled that they were ready to form an alliance with any other pairs. Once this bigger group had reached a consensus, they again signalled to indicate a willingness to form a further alliance with another group. The process continued in this manner until there was one large group with a single vision statement. The final (crude) vision statement which emerged from this process read as follows:

The ME99 was envisaged as a forum where the voice of the (religious and) community groups will be heard in a dialogue between the community groups and the ‘heavyweights’.

Through the ME99 community groups hope:

1. to achieve commitment on the part of the ‘heavyweights’ who participate in the ME99 to effect policy changes that will reflect the concerns of the community groups on the one hand, and shared religious (including Christian) and African norms on the other; [end p. 7]

2. to establish an ongoing process of shaping South African society such that both the community groups and the ‘heavyweights’ look at the realities of our society as one family.

In general the workshop participants felt by its end that most of the objectives of the workshop were achieved, but that something still needed to be done about putting in place mechanisms to ensure that the ‘heavyweights’ at the ME99 would respond to the community groups’ concerns.

In terms of the tenets of action research outlined above, this initial encounter demonstrated the usefulness of action research as a tool. It is clear that the workshop facilitator approached the exercise with the aim of creating an opportunity for the participants...
to reflect on their situations and think of new possibilities for social intervention, as well as constructing usable knowledge. The participants learnt skills which would be useful to their respective groups, not simply in preparing for the ME99. Also this education was designed to be a means of changing the structures and institutions which the community groups sought to address at the ME99; i.e., their vision was to ‘...achieve commitment on the part of the ‘heavyweights’ who participate in the ME99 to effect policy changes that will reflect the concerns of the community groups...’. The workshop was designed to be participatory at every stage, and an atmosphere was created in which a supportive dialogue could take place, and mutually rewarding relationships begin to be forged. The workshop facilitator also demonstrated a sensitivity to the danger of exploitation of the participants and a commitment to putting mechanisms in place to avoid this.

As we continue our reflection on the process we need to keep the following questions in mind: Did the participants acquire usable knowledge by demonstrating a grasp of the Inclusive Consensus Approach, and were they able to make use of it? Were mechanisms put in place to avoid the exploitation of community groups at the ME99, and was the trust of the community groups damaged or strengthened by the ME99 itself. That is, were there rewarding symbiotic relationships between the workshop facilitator and the participants?

**Between workshops**

Groups received a summary of the proceedings of the first workshop for comment and criticism. The groups were also given a small budget for meeting costs and asked to record their expenses. Facilitators were reminded to use the principles of the Inclusive Consensus Approach and the SEE-JUDGE-ACT technique to prepare for the ME99.

One week before the second workshop, groups were reminded that they needed to put the final touches to their ME99 presentations. A list of questions was sent to the groups to help them structure a progress report. By this time all the groups had gone through a process of identifying a single ‘burning issue’ and they had prepared a draft presentation on this issue for the ME99.

Also, between the two workshops, Jacques negotiated with the director of the ME99 to put in place a mechanism to ensure that the community groups did not become a ‘side show’. It was decided that the community groups would have the opportunity to make a joint presentation at the centre of the event, on the most high-profile occasion of the week—the Gala evening on Wednesday night, directly before the speech of then Deputy President Thabo Mbeki.

The progress reports received from the community groups demonstrate, to varying degrees, that the groups were making use of the principles of the inclusive consensus approach and the SEE-JUDGE-ACT technique.

**The second workshop**

The second workshop, held on 16-19 January (see appendix 3), was an opportunity for the groups to consolidate their work and to put the finishing touches on their presentations, with the help of two arts and culture professionals from Article 27, who were brought in as consultants for this purpose. The community groups did one round of presentations and received constructive criticism from their fellow participants and the consultants. They then worked on improving their presentations and did a final dress rehearsal. The workshop participants learnt a great deal about using the creative arts to powerfully communicate their ideas and experiences to a wider audience. (See appendix 5 for sample presentations).

The second workshop was also an opportunity for the groups to put together a joint presentation for the Gala evening. Since this was the most visible contribution which the community groups would make, this section of the report will focus on how this presentation was constructed.

On the first day of the workshop a task team was identified and given the mandate to generate a general framework for the group presentation. This team was chosen using the consensus approach, and consisted of Vuyani Vellum, Nontando Hadebe, Victor Molobi and Welekazi Sokutu. (Each community group had to identify two people whom they felt should serve on this task group, the above names emerged as the four most popular. Of these four names Welekazi Sokutu’s was the most frequently mentioned and so the task team felt that it was appropriate for her to serve as the spokesperson of the community groups for their presentation.)

On the second and third day of the workshop, community groups were asked to come up with a position statement on the role of religion in public life. The groups were asked to consider how they would motivate their position in such a way that the ‘heavyweights’ at the ME99 would ‘sit up and listen’. During the discussion of this question, the following position emerged: ‘As community groups we are unique [sic] because we are religious and we are also marginalised by the mainline churches and by political leaders. We are therefore a unique interest group who [sic] should be taken seriously by government.’

Jacques ‘played devil’s advocate’ and asked whether the community groups thought that they had a special contribution to make on the basis that they were religious people; or whether religion itself was a force which propelled them to intervene in their communities; and, whether therefore, the value of their contribution lay in their understanding of the role of religion to move people to act. A heated debate ensued as to whether the position of the groups was that of religious people on the margins of society, or whether they were people who were propelled into the public sphere by their religion. Because of the intensity of the debate, the formal agenda of the workshop was temporarily suspended to allow the group to go through the difficult process of reaching a consensus. /end p. 9/

Initially, the discussion seemed so chaotic that it threatened to break down. People felt fearful and uncomfortable with the sense of divisiveness which the discussion engendered, and asked Jacques to provide a solution. However, as a facilitator, Jacques resisted the pressure to intervene and allowed the process to run its course. Ultimately one individual made the point that the two poles of the debate were not mutually exclusive, but were in fact part of the same dynamic. This connection enabled the group to reach the following consensus: Community groups were both religious people on the fringes of society and people whose religious convictions drove them to action in the public sphere. This position, then, became the framework for the presentation given at the Gala evening (see appendix 4).

The consensus reached here demonstrates how the model of the Inclusive Consensus Approach to decision-making was able to draw the groups together and enable them to produce a compelling, insightful and ‘owned’ presentation. The lesson that emerged was that a discussion apparently going round and round in circles can with minimal yet appropriate intervention produce a very creative shared solution to a complex problem.

**The community groups at the Multi-Event 99**

At this stage of the report we will focus on two occasions at the Multi-Event itself at which the community groups had the opportunity to demonstrate their communicative competence.

The first interaction began as an apparent failure in terms of the objectives of the community groups. However, it ultimately demonstrated the communicative competence of the community group involved. The first two days of the Event were taken up with what was called ‘open space workshopping’ which addressed various themes around the question of religion and public life. At one of the mini workshops the facilitator seemed unaware that the community group participating was to be given an opportunity to make a presentation. This seemed to be a realisation of the worst fear of the community groups: that they would be treated as a side show. However, when the affected community group brought this the attention of Jim Cochrane, the director of the ME99, his response demonstrated that the community groups were indeed able to make themselves heard, if not through their presentation, then through protesting the fact that they had been marginalised.

The community groups took the initiative to call a special meeting with Jim to discuss the matter. Jim, in his capacity as the director, took full responsibility for what had happened and apologised privately to the community groups, then published an apology and explanation in the ME99 Chronicle (a newspaper published on each day of the ME99). He also apologised at the plenary session, and an alternative time was arranged for the group to make their presentation. This served to restore the confidence of the community groups in the ME99. Ironically it also made the other participants more aware of the community groups’ presence than if this ‘oversight’ had not occurred! /end p. 10/

The second moment in which the community groups were clearly visible was, of course, during their presentation at the Gala evening. The presentation was made between the speech of Bishop Dandala, president of the South African Council of Churches and presiding Bishop of the Methodist church, and that of Deputy President Mbeki. The representatives of the community groups accompanied Welekazi Sokutu to the podium singing a special song. The words of the song stated that the community groups expect to be represented in parliament soon (Directly translated the words were: ‘we are going to parliament’. The melody was derived from a liberation song). They then returned to their seats, and Welekazi made the presentation which had been put together during the second workshop (see appendix 4). Her presentation clearly had a powerful impact on all present (she received a standing ovation from the audience). When Thabo Mbeki got up to speak he completely abandoned his prepared speech and spoke frankly about his concerns instead. Whatever his motive for doing this was, it seemed an appropriate response to the passionate presentation which Welekazi had made. In this way a dialogue was initiated between the Deputy President and the community groups, demonstrating the power with which they delivered their message and their ability to achieve, in apart at least, one of their primary objectives.

**Evaluation of the ME99—the community groups’ perspective**

The following evaluation is taken from the minutes of a feedback session held on the last day of the ME99.

The highlights of the ME99 for the community groups were 1) their representation in the workshops, and their interaction with...
people from different levels, from those directly involved at grassroots to those who operated at a more theoretical level; and 2) Tuesday's speeches, both Welekazi's and the Deputy President's. It was felt that both spoke 'from their hearts'.

The following positive comments were made about the ME99 experience as whole:

- There was good teamwork on the part of the organisers.
- Interaction was good, with delegates sharing experiences.
- Exposure to new concepts such as 'globalisation' and 'African Renaissance' was valuable.
- Bishop and Frank Chikane's speeches demonstrated an openness to people in marginalised groups.
- Groups had the opportunity to represent their communities and to share their 'burning issues'.
- They felt inspired to continue with community work.
- Meeting and working with Jacques boosted the community groups' morale.
- The ME99 was a moment of 'awakening and introspection', particularly in relation to the community groups' responsibility to the poor.
- The conference offered opportunities for meeting members of other religious groups and for financial assistance to community groups.
- There was a chance to interact with people who are normally only 'seen on television'.
- There was a spirit of fraternity and belonging among the community groups. \textit{end p. 11/}

The following failings and inadequacies were mentioned:

- There were too many overseas speakers, and not enough black South African religious leaders.
- The organisers failed to draw together a wide cross-section of religious leaders.
- It was difficult to comprehend some of the abstract concepts and terms used by speakers.
- It was felt that real-life problems were not tackled, nor were viable solutions offered.
- There were insufficient representatives from local community groups.
- Some felt there was a lack of prayer at what they saw to be a religious conference.
- There was a lack of balance between academics, community group representatives and politicians.
- The community groups were very disappointed that the government leaders were not able to spend enough time interacting with the conference participants.

The following recommendations were made:

- It is necessary to involve representatives of community groups right from the beginning; i.e. from the planning stages.
- 'White' community groups also need to be involved.
- There should be greater representation of local community groups at similar events in the future.
- Community groups represented at the ME99 should keep in contact with each other, network and tap each others' resources.

Some further comments by representatives of the community groups

In the previous section we chose not to summarise what the representatives of the community groups said in the feedback meeting. We opted to present the participants’ points as they were recorded. In this section we adopt a similar style to allow those who participated in the ME99 to speak for themselves.

A draft copy of this report was sent to the community groups. We include below the comments we received from the group facilitators.

- ‘The Event was powerful and momentous. It has managed to shape our group's vision.’
- ‘The methodology of SEE-JUDGE-ACT and Inclusive Consensus assisted us in our groups to be able to make a social analysis of our various contexts whether it is working with the unemployed, or people infected with HIV/AIDS or "street kids" [homeless children].’
- ‘What was good about the Event was that we were able to articulate our concerns and initiatives as community groups and where we need help from the “heavyweights”.’
- ‘It concerned us that some of the things planned for the Multi-Event were cut short because of the lack of funds.’
Throughout the process the facilitator remained conscious of his accountability to the participants. He also demonstrated trust in presentations, and through the manner in which they made themselves heard when it appeared they were going to be ignored. The community groups demonstrated their communicative competence at the ME99, both through the quality of their was reached among the participants and this formed the basis of their presentation at the Gala evening.

The community groups themselves felt that they had gained additional skills, broadened their horizons and formed relationships that would be useful to them. Hence the process succeeded in generating usable knowledge which is a central concern in action research.

Some comments by the reporters

In this report we have touched on only a few moments in the process, and there is certainly a great deal more which could have been explored. However, we hope that these few ‘windows’ into the process have provided some insight into action research and how it can be used. While it is impossible to follow every footprint on the path to solidarity and ‘communicative competence’, traces are evident in the documents recording the process. This report has not been an attempt to describe the process exhaustively, but simply to pick out some of those traces.

There is significant evidence that action research was useful throughout the process, and that its use was both effective and appropriate. By participating in the process leading up to the ME99, the community groups formed a rewarding ‘symbiotic relationship’ with some of the organisers of the ME99. Their contribution at the ME99 certainly enriched and challenged those present. At least at the ME99 itself, the heavyweights certainly did ‘sit up and listen’ and, at the same time, the community groups themselves felt that they had gained additional skills, broadened their horizons and formed relationships that would be useful to them. Hence the process succeeded in generating usable knowledge which is a central concern in action research.

Throughout the process the facilitator remained conscious of his accountability to the participants. He also demonstrated trust in the process, and resisted pressure to restore order when chaos threatened. By trusting the process a strongly felt consensus was reached among the participants and this formed the basis of their presentation at the Gala evening.

The community groups demonstrated their communicative competence at the ME99, both through the quality of their presentations, and through the manner in which they made themselves heard when it appeared they were going to be ignored. They were also able to define key issues, and to develop a collective identity, albeit ad hoc, as participants in the ME99.
Consensus Approach and the SEE-JUDGE-ACT technique should they wish to do so.

While the Multi-Event did not live up to everyone’s expectations, the process was productive, most of the original objectives were at least in part achieved, and action research functioned as a useful and appropriate method for achieving those objectives. /end p. 14/

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Appendix 1

A Note on Action Research

By Jacques de Wet

McNiff (1988: 2) says that ‘action research’ is a way of characterising a loose set of activities that are designed to improve the quality of life of a particular community. It is essentially an eclectic way into a program of self-reflection aimed at improving the quality of life of those involved in the action. (ibid.)

Although the literature offers numerous and varied definitions of action research, there are certain characteristics, principles and practices shared by the different modes of action research. I now discuss these briefly.

I. Symbiotic relationship

In action research the relationship between the researcher and the participants is collaborative. The researcher has a mutually rewarding, symbiotic relationship with the participants. It is a joint experience of mutually supportive dialogue that brings people together to explore some problem rather than alienating them as operators and puppets. In partnership with an outside researcher, a group or community develops their capacity to express and analyse matters of concern together.

Action research is participatory in that it involves the researcher in his/her own inquiry, and it is collaborative in that it involves other people as part of a shared inquiry. McNiff (1988) notes that one of the earliest propagators of action research, Kurt Lewin, was convinced that the best way to move people forward was to engage them in their own inquiries into their own lives. He, furthermore, stressed democratic collaboration and participation.

II. Usable knowledge

Action research, according to Stinson (1977: 3), has three primary attributes that make it appropriate for community action. One of these is usability. (The other two are understandability and process orientation.)

Argyris et al (1985: x) singles out the need for usable knowledge as one of the primary characteristics of what they call ‘action science’. ‘In proposing an action science, we hope to articulate the features of a science that can generate knowledge that is useful, valid, descriptive of the world, and informative of how we might change it’. Action science, they go on to say, aims to generate knowledge that will help people in their everyday lives.

When we talk about action research it is important to remember that it is something that people do. If we become too theoretical, we lose an integral part of action research. /end p. 16/

III. Action that leads to change

‘Action research means ACTION, both of the system under consideration, and of the people involved in that system’ (McNiff, 1988:3) Stinson (1977:3) concurs. ‘The action researcher tends to observe people in a complex environment engaged as humans in trying to modify that environment to be more humane.’

The action may take the form of internal change or education of the participants and may lead to participant action directed at
changing structures or institutions. ‘The action scientist is an interventionist, seeking not only to describe the world but to change it. More precisely, he or she seeks to help members of client systems reflect on the world they create and learn to change it in ways more congruent with values and theories they espouse.’ (Argyris et al, 1985: 98) Action scientists point out that research of this nature does not pretend to be value-free. Values are recognised to be involved in the change process. As action researchers work within this framework they contribute to raising of awareness and consciousness.

IV. Feedback mechanisms

An action researcher is accountable to those engaged in the action, the participants; i.e., observations, findings, speculations and alternative perspectives are fed back to the participants.

V. Process rather than product

Action researchers are more concerned about the process than the product. Some have likened it to a journey rather than a fixed set of directions.

As the first cycle of action research is completed, the initial goals of meeting a particular local need may be achieved. Through meeting the need that began the action research process, participants begin a journey in which they gain confidence; develop a deeper facility for collective action; strengthen their unity of purpose and vision; gain greater access to resources; become more powerful, conscious and liberated.

VI. Advancing basic knowledge while solving problems

Action scientists are concerned that their research is usable in that it contributes to solving practical problems. They are also concerned that it advances basic knowledge and tests the features of specific theories. Social science is seen to have an important role to play in generating liberating alternatives and action research is one way of achieving this.

List of sources:


Suggested further reading:


Appendix 2

Agenda of Workshop 1
Summary of the Proceedings

Day One (2 October 1998 from 2.30 PM—9.30 PM)
Session one: orientation, sharing and expectations

The workshop was opened with a moment for meditation followed by the singing of Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika. The workshop’s facilitator, Jacques de Wet, acknowledged and welcomed the community groups present.

A. Introductions and sharing

Prof J. Cochrane shared with participants a little about himself, his family, his work with Dr Naude in the Christian Institute and Spro-cas as part of the anti-apartheid struggle, his years at Natal University and how this all has influenced his thinking and his vision for the Multi Event.

Community Groups’ delegates introduced themselves and their groups. (Half the participants did so on day one and the other half on day two). The following is a brief introduction to the twelve community groups:

1. **Umtata Women’s Theology Group (represented by Welekazi Sokutu & Nokuzola Mahlangu)**
   - a group of Christian women from different denominational, cultural and educational backgrounds
   - seeks to do theology or to talk about God from a woman’s perspective, so as to establish what God, through the Bible, says of women and the various situations in which women find themselves in their communities
   - looks at contemporary socio-economic, religious and bio-ethical challenges facing today’s women
   - originated in 1987, meets fortnightly on Mondays, and does Bible studies on contemporary issues democratically decided upon
   - compiles their completed Bible studies into booklets of four to five studies and sells them at a very minimal fee (currently R5.00).

2. **Kenosis Women’s Group (represented by Nonthando Hadebe)**
   - a Pietermaritzburg-based development project working with young women
   - engages the young women in theology and in other community activities
   - seeks to instill in the women the understanding that they have a role to play in their communities.

3. **Singles Group (represented by Rev Debbie Bruce & Cecil Hector)**
   - a church-based group for single people from Parkdene in George
   - most of the members are single parents
   - the group meets every week (Monday)
   - picks up a particular topic affecting members and discusses that topic
   - tackles in the meetings problems facing its members.

4. **Student Group from Soweto (represented by Sepetla Molapo & David Moloi)**
   - a group of students studying at the Baptist Convention College
   - seeks to relate what the students learn at the college to the needs of the community
   - tries to offer theological answers to the problems of the community, especially moral deprivation and unemployment problems.

5. **Grahamstown’s Shelter Module (represented by Zola Nanana)**
   - based at Grahamstown’s College of Transfiguration
   - works with ‘street children’ in an attempt to instill a sense of worth in the young children
   - seeks to help them establish what God says about them and their situation.

6. **Desmond Mizeki/ANSOC Student Group in Grahamstown (represented by Lesego Seturumane)**
   - seeks to inspire and encourage the poverty and unemployment-stricken community in which they work.

7. **HIV/AIDS Job Creation Project (represented by Chris Mbude)**
• based in Pietermaritzberg
• works with HIV positive people
• seeks to equip them with various survival and job skills
• reads the Bible from the perspective of the unemployed and those with HIV.

8. Terilo Setshaba (represented by Victor Molobi & Percival Tau)

• a community group based in Pretoria
• leadership and members are people are from the ranks of the unemployed
• seeks to help people help themselves through waste recycling, nursery and Peace Gardens.

9. Justice and Service Group (represented by John Langeveld & Estelle Hendricks)

• located between Bergvliet and Retreat in Cape Town
• major concern is the problem of corruption and finding ways to effectively watchdog civil servants and deal with the forms of corruption prevalent in the Western Cape
• also concerned about violent crime and other forms of crime.

10. Couples Group from Mamelodi (represented by Andy Kekana and Elias Makena)

• works on issues such as AIDS, drugs and poverty
• intends to form a pressure group that will pressurize the authorities to pay attention to these problems. /end p. 19/

11. Youth Group from Khayamandi (represented by Rev Vuyani Vellum & Thumakele Gosa)

• seeks to find ways of helping the community, government and the church to deal with violent crime
• focuses on ‘migrant labour system’ and its implications for ‘homes’ and landownership.

12. Youth Group from Khayelitsha (represented by Rev Malinge Njeza & Thembela Mvulana)

• a church-based youth group that seeks to inspire people to think constructively and positively about their situation
• addresses questions of crime and violence.

B. Jim Cochrane’s vision of ME99 & the role of the community groups in ME99

Prof. Cochrane made a few introductory remarks and shared his vision of the ME99. He touched on the rationale behind ME99 and went on to talk about the involvement of community groups in the Multi-Event.

Through ME99 he hoped that community groups would

• develop communicative competence as a collective voice
• challenge the ‘heavyweights’ (the policy makers, religious leaders) to sit up and listen to them
• make use of the opportunity offered by ME99 to let their voices be heard.

He thanked the groups for being prepared to take up the responsibility entailed in ME99, and urged the community groups

• to figure out what is really critical for their communities, what it is they want to say to the ‘heavyweights’ in ME99
• to decide how they want to present their concerns in the ME99
• to ensure that the ‘heavyweights’ do not go away without being challenged in the ME99
• to aim at strengthening their groups and their communities even after the ME99 week
• to note that ME99 will feed directly into the 1999 Parliament of World Religious Leaders.

Workshop Expectations were then listed by those attending the workshop:

1. Getting information on effective facilitation to develop a collective voice
2. Getting information on the specific shape and form the ME99 will take
3. Getting further clarity on the whole idea of ME99

4. Setting the time-frames for ME99 preparations

5. Establishing mechanisms that will ensure that the ‘heavyweights’ who attend ME99 respond to the community groups’ concerns;


Session two: towards a common vision, methodology and other issues

This session aimed at the development of a common vision by all groups, i.e., what the groups envisage can be achieved at the Multi-Event 99 and what can be achieved through Multi-Event 99. A crude vision was developed as follows:

ME99 was envisaged as a forum where the voice of the (religious and) community groups will be heard in a dialogue between the community groups and the ‘heavyweights’. (end p. 20)

Through ME99 community groups hope:

- to achieve commitment on the part of the ‘heavyweights’ who participate in ME99 to effect policy changes that will reflect the concerns of the community groups on the one hand, and shared religious (including Christian) and African norms on the other

- to establish an ongoing process of shaping S.A. society such that both the community groups and the ‘heavyweights’ look at the realities of our society as one family.

The day ended with the singing of Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika

Day Two (3 October 1998 from 8.30 AM—1.30 PM)

The day’s proceedings started with a short prayer and the singing of Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika

Session three: more on methodology, some guidelines and wrap-up

A. Practical guidelines on how to facilitate the process of preparing for ME99

Inclusive Consensus Management is an approach used with great success in project management. Its basic pillars are ‘inclusivity’ and ‘consensus’. It works on the premise that for any project to be successful the project manager should ensure maximum inclusivity and target for 100 percent consensus in the group.

The project initiator must find out how much group members know about the issue at hand and ensure that those involved start on an equal footing.

This approach entails four principles:

1. shifting from a ‘win/lose’ meeting situation (for the ‘losers’ may consciously or unconsciously sabotage the project) to a ‘win/win’ situation (where all members own the decisions and process), and viewing all ‘win/lose’ situations as problems to be turned into ‘win/win’ situations

2. going the extra mile to bring the members on the periphery to the centre. Project facilitators need to find effective techniques to involve all group members in group decision-making processes to ensure maximum buy-in and ownership of the decisions.

3. insisting on consensus

4. utilising an appropriate and acceptable process. Facilitators should not impose nor be insensitive to the members’ needs. They should consider what works best for their groups.
The Group Facilitator's Role is

- to set the group in motion
- to help the group develop a local vision and a strategic plan
- to guide the internal group process to achieve the set objectives
- to keep the group on track; i.e., following the strategic plan
- to promote consensus
- to stimulate creative thinking and problem solving
- to draw peripheral people into the centre of decision making
- to know each person's strengths and weaknesses
- to build capacity building and confidence
- to use active listening
- to monitor negative and positive processes and give feedback to group members.

B. Wrap-up: reflections on whether the expectations were met

Expectation 1 on effective facilitation was discussed during the workshop.

Expectation 2 on the shape of ME99 was discussed, but it will be up to the community groups to decide how their presentations will be made. Groups would need to consider whether they want a 'slot' allocated to them; how many people represent their group; who represents the group; do they include all their members in a videotaped presentation and show it at ME99?

Expectation 3 on clarifying ME99 was met.

Expectation 4 on setting time frames for ME99 was dealt with briefly. Group presentations should be ready for presentation at the workshop during the second week in January 1999. The presentations can then be refined before ME99 in February.

Expectation 5 on establishing mechanisms that will ensure that the 'heavyweights' respond to the community groups' concerns could not be met due to time constraints. It will be taken up later, possibly in January 1999.

C. Way forward

1. Groups should think seriously about the format their group presentations will take at ME99.

2. Groups should keep in touch with Jacques, informing him what they are doing.

3. Jacques should circulate information to the groups, e.g., addresses of groups, the issues being worked on by each group, the presentation ideas held by groups.

4. Another meeting should be held in January 1999 to refine groups' presentations and preparations for ME99.

The workshop closed with a vote of thanks by Vuyani Vellum followed by lunch and marimba music and singing by the Matolo Artz Productions.

Appendix 3

Agenda of Workshop 2

Not available at this time.
Appendix 4

The Community Groups’ Speech

Presented by Welekazi Sokutu
Spokesperson for the Community Groups

‘After this I looked and before me was a great multitude that no one could count.... Then one of the elders asked me: ‘These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?’ Rev 7:9a,13.

Salutations

Some of you here may wonder where this noisy bunch of people comes from and who they are. We are a voice from the periphery of this country’s social, political, economic and religious structures. We are representatives of specific religious community groups, in our case, Christian community groups from around the country. We do not claim to speak for the many religious community groups who work on the fringes of society but, like so many in South Africa, we are religious AND community-based AND from the fringes AND we have something we believe is worth saying.

It is we—the ordinary people—who are not only the backbone of religious institutions but also the foundation on which our democratic state is built. When we constantly demand and work for justice, the foundation is broad and strong. When we are apathetic and do nothing the foundation is like sand on which no stable structure, be it religious or political, can be built.

Our religious character—for us our Christianity—makes us a significant entity. One may say religion is obviously one social institution alongside others such as economics and politics and is found in church buildings, synagogues, mosques, temples and shrines. This is true in one sense but it is definitely not true of the religion of the community groups we represent. Our religion does not end in church buildings. It propels us into public space to function as agents of transformation. But people merely see us as ‘agents of transformation’. They miss one thing and that is our religious or Christian calling and conviction. It is our faith conviction, that we have a responsibility towards our fellow human beings, that brings us where we are. This conviction urges us not only to be concerned with what happens at the bottom of the hierarchy of our society but to act. Our faith and values drive us to be involved in social transformation and in the improvement of the lives of the ordinary members of our communities by mobilising our resources and energies into establishing various community-based projects relevant to the needs of our communities. /end p. 25/

Spurred by both our specific religious convictions and the ubuntu value that we espouse as Africans, we have taken initiatives to alleviate some of the ills of our ‘troubled country’, such as the rampant crime rate, violence of all sorts, alcohol abuse, ecological and environmental disasters, unemployment with its offspring—poverty and HIV/AIDS. We view these as threats not only to our livelihood as human beings but even to our existence as a nation.

If it is our religious convictions that propel us to embark on such noble projects benefitting not only the religious people but our communities at large, can it still be said that religion is purely a personal and private matter that has no relevance or role to play in public life?

If our community groups are capable of engaging in projects of social benefit with considerable success, can this country afford to keep our voice on the periphery of public debates?

One may perhaps say ‘yes’ because our policy-making ranks are blessed, for example, to have Christians of high calibre, namely, Sister Ncube, Reverends Chikane, Chabangu, Mkhhatshwa and the like. Whilst that is true, one would like to remind those who might be advocating this argument that one’s socio-economic position influences one’s interpretation of faith—Christianity being no exception. Hence the community groups’ version of their faith and its meaning is likely to differ from the version of faith of those who occupy high ranks in policy making. It is our grassrootedness that distinguishes us from them and the religious convictions of marginal and grassroot people are valuable and powerful—possibly because it is at the marginalised and grassroot sections of the society that the groaning of creation is to be heard.

Conclusion
Religious community groups are a significant entity in this country, for they signify the majority of our country’s people, and this is particularly true of Christians. Because their grassrooted faith propels them to engage in social transformation, the value of their religion in public life cannot be overemphasised.

Hence we hereby call upon policymakers in the political, economic and religious spheres to tap the resources and capacity of community groups realising that no matter how faint the voice of these groups may sound because of its current peripheral status, it has something to contribute to nation building and transformation. As Margaret Mead, the noted anthropologist, once stated, ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.’

Appendix 5

Examples of community group presentations included in mini-workshops at the Multi-Event 1999

Example 1

Workshop theme: crime and corruption

Topic: Is the local government policy on tavern and shebeen licences not contributing to the destruction of our communities?

Talk by Daniel Maritz

I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ. I am Daniel Maritz representing the Singles Group from the beautiful town of George in the Southern Cape.

As the Singles Group we have found that men, women and children in our township are being driven apart by alcohol abuse. The alcohol is not really the problem. So if it’s not the alcohol which is the root cause of the problem what is? Perhaps it is the shebeens and taverns that make alcohol so easily available to the young and old in our community. Perhaps the real problem is not with the shebeens and taverns but the local government policies and legislation that have allowed the mushrooming of taverns and shebeens in our townships. But then again perhaps it’s not the policies and legislation but the evil that gives rise to the legislation.

In our country we have a free market system which gives people the freedom to buy and sell. It is said that as long as there is a demand there is a supply. When alcohol is so freely available to teenagers and their parents is a need not being created artificially. People young and old alike can buy from whoever is selling alcohol. If it’s alcohol today why not legalise the selling of drugs tomorrow. Will this also be acceptable simply because there is a demand for it?

In our municipal area concerned citizens have tried to draw up petitions against the opening taverns and shebeens in their neighbourhood. But people say they are afraid to sign the petitions because many of the shebeen owners are feared gangsters.

I will not get into statistics here but I assure you there is a direct link between alcohol abuse and violent crime in my neighbourhood. Cases of domestic violence, rape, assault are according to the local police station commander often coupled with alcohol abuse. As Christians we are deeply concerned that the values of ubuntu are rapidly being eroded by the phenomenal increase in taverns and shebeens in our townships. We cannot talk about a programme of Masakane, the reconstruction and development of our communities, when what is built with the one hand is destroyed with the other. My beautiful community, my town, my country is being ruined by this evil. The jails are full and our churches are empty. We cannot afford to apathetically stand by and watch as marriages are destroyed and children are driven onto the streets because fathers and mothers, husbands and wives (and increasingly teenagers) live for the next drink.

We, the singles group of Parkdene in George appeal to the government officials to pay attention to our cries from the fringes of society.
In the book of Jeremiah 22:29 it says:

*Land, land (read South Africa, South Africa) hear the word of the Lord.
Sekula kunye, let’s grow together, ons groei saam!*

God bless you and your families.

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**Example 2**

**Workshop theme: abuse of women and children**

*Topic: Homelessness among children in the Eastern Cape and the community’s attempts to address the problem.*

**By Zola Nanana of the Shelter Module**

My name is Zola. I am a theological student at the College of the Transfiguration in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. This brief talk revolves around the following two themes:

1) the response of a religious institution to the problem of homeless among children to illustrate that religious organisations are a valuable resource in the process of social transformation

2) the need to develop an integrated strategy that draws together the different sectors of society to share their resources and expertise in a co-ordinated attempt to address the problem both locally and regionally, and perhaps even nationally.

I begin with the first theme.

A group of us from the College of Transfiguration are working as volunteers with the children at a local shelter for homeless children. This was not by mistake or chance but it is the result of our religious institution’s attempt to get us involved in local social problems in order locate our theology in the real world.

The shelter for homeless children was introduced to us by Revd Luke Pato and Revd Janet Trisk. The college has made this project a formal part of our curriculum. It falls under the theme: ‘The Church and Society’.

Our theological conviction is that before we are Christians we are human beings; part of God’s beautiful creation. Therefore all human beings have a value. Anything that devalues or dehumanises our fellow human beings affects us.

I do not want to spend time describing the problem of homelessness among children in Grahamstown as most of you will probably have some idea of the problem for at a general level the causes and circumstances of people on the street throughout South Africa are not too different.

I want to focus on the specific problems relating to the shelter as an example of what happens when groups of well meaning people try to address problems such as homeless on their own without the necessary resources and expertise. /end p. 28/

Let me give you an idea of the types of problems which the shelter has faced since its inception. Here are some of the more obvious problems:

1) There has been a lack of resources both human and monetary which has meant that the project leaders have not been able to offer much more than food and shelter in a cramped dilapidated building. Their efforts are noble but far more is needed for them to meaningfully address the problem of homeless children.

2) They have tried their best to offer education and emotional support but the staff are few and poorly trained.

3) Some of the children have serious behaviour problems, many have been emotionally, physically and sexually abused for long periods but there is no sustained organised counselling service. The shelter does not even have a resident social worker.

4) The staff do not have the time or the means to investigate the childrens’ backgrounds and make contact with members of their extended families who the children may want to visit.
5) The shelter’s governing body spends most of its time engaged in crisis management and there is clearly no medium and long term strategic plan.

These problems which I have mentioned are just a few from a long list. You must have realised that this range of problems is not peculiar to the Grahamstown area alone. Other projects addressing homelessness in the Eastern Cape experience similar problems. And, from talking to people from other parts of the country, it would appear to be a nation-wide weakness in the way communities tackle social problems. It need not be like this. We are convinced that most of these problems could be solved with the necessary co-operation between the local community organisations, local government, educational institutions, businesses, religious organisations and the broader community.

Who should take the initiative? Well we are not sure who should take the first step but what we do know is that something must be done to get the different organs of society to put aside their sectarian interests and pool their resources and expertise to tackle burning social issues such as homelessness among children.

We, the Shelter Module group from the college, have committed ourselves to do more than work at the shelter and we are in the process of developing a plan that includes the following ideas.

The first is the promotion of the spirit of ubuntu between the various sectors of Grahamstown. Grahamstown’s Rhodes University, which is the only university in the area, could assist. For example, senior management and social work students could do placements at the shelter as part of their course work. For this to be possible Rhodes University needs to formulate a policy which will ensure that these various departments render their services free of charge as part of their contribution to the transformation of their immediate social environment.

Second, the local municipality could also make a valuable contribution by introducing tax rebates as an incentive to all rate paying companies to get actively involved in addressing social problems such as homelessness. This could equally apply to other landowners in Grahamstown. Council would need to adopt a policy that ratepayers be rewarded for working together to address specific social problems.

On the same note, the provincial government has to have a policy in place, enshrined in the provincial ordinances, which will introduce checks and balances to ensure that both human resources and finances which they dispersed in these places are implemented effectively and efficiently, and are adequately accounted for. /end p. 29/

Ladies and gentlemen, we respect these places as they are homes to the homeless children and the only hope which is available to them. We join others who fear God and have a respect for human lives in saying with one voice that there has to be a home with security and comfort for these children. BUT this will not come about without the co-operation of the various sectors of society in a joint strategy to address the problem of homelessness among children in our cities.

Aluta Continua

Example 3

Workshop theme: HIV/AIDS

Umtata Women’s Theology Group ME99 PRESENTATION

[Format: an interview: one group member interviewing the other]

The interviewer greets and welcomes the viewers and introduces and welcomes the interviewee, Welekazi. Welekazi introduces herself:

— I represent the Umtata Women’s Theology Group. We are a group of women from various church denominations interested in contemporary issues affecting women.

What have you got for us today?

— I’m here to share my group’s concerns about the HIV/AIDS crisis, particularly infected pregnant women and their infected children.
Welekazi, of what significance is the HIV/AIDS crisis to religious groups like yours? I would have thought that this issue was being addressed by the Department of Health.

— With statistics showing that about 20 percent of women attending antenatal clinics in our region test HIV+, 250 000 children nationwide are HIV+ and 400 people a day die of AIDS in this country, who cannot be concerned? Losing our next generation is our concern.

I don’t quite understand how this problem affects you as Christian women.

— We have a God-given responsibility to act when a crisis like AIDS threatens to wipe out the human race—the pinnacle / crown of God’s creation.

Welekazi, you sound like a prophet of doom! Surely HIV/AIDS does not affect pregnant women only. Why did you pick on them?

— Pregnant women are bearers of new lives. If AIDS-infected pregnant women do not get the appropriate medical treatment we could breed an HIV-infected nation or an orphan generation.

In your arguments you seem to imply that something can be done about this epidemic. If you were asked to make recommendations towards solving the HIV/AIDS crisis, what would you say, and to whom?

— This country’s policy makers should declare AIDS a notifiable disease.

How do you see this possible, because according to the Health Department’s policy a disease can only be made notifiable if a cure can be provided. In the case of AIDS there is no cure available. \end p. 30/.

— There is no cure for AIDS yet, but we are challenging the big shots in medical research to work even harder to find a cure for this killer disease.

With no cure available presently, how can making the disease notifiable help?

— It will help remove not only the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS but also the secrecy surrounding the disease.

We all know that the right of privacy is entrenched in this country’s constitution. Would removing confidentiality not infringe on the infected person’s right to privacy? Tell us, Welekazi.

— We acknowledge a person’s right to privacy, but should one’s right to privacy infringe on someone else’s right to life?

What are some consequences of keeping HIV/AIDS infection confidential?

— Some HIV+ mothers kill their newly-born babies. Others abandon them in hospitals or dump them in waste bins. Further, it deprives the infected women of the assistance they would get from people like our group who would like to provide support but do not know to whom to give this support.

We are aware that HIV/AIDS sufferers and their families are ostracized when they make their condition known. Will removing the confidentiality not lead to unfair treatment of infected children and also effect the relationships of AIDS-infected women?

— We would implore South African Christians to demonstrate Jesus’ attitude to the outcasts of the Jewish community of his time. He welcomed and accepted even leprosy sufferers.

I know that in your region there are organisations that support and counsel People Living With AIDS, such as the Welfare and Health Departments, people in the Deputy President’s recent Partnership Against AIDS campaign and others. Do you think these interventions are not sufficient?

— Given the alarming rate of AIDS infection in pregnant women these interventions are not enough. There are not sufficient AIDS counselors. Even in the Departments of Welfare and Health officers entrusted with the task of counselling PLWAs are not relieved of their other duties.

Do you have any concrete proposals regarding what can be done to alleviate this crisis?
— AIDS-controlling drugs such as AZT and 3TC should be made available to pregnant women to minimize the risk of passing the virus to their unborn babies.

Have you considered the sky-rocketing cost of providing AZT? The Department of Health reportedly cannot afford to make the drug available to all HIV/AIDS cases because the whole budget of this department would be spent on this drug which is very costly.

— We acknowledge the costs involved but we also feel that policy makers need to prioritise this country’s needs. Cuts can be made in the budgets allocated to the defence, diplomatic trips abroad and subsistence allowances to government officials. The Department of Health should allocate more funds to AIDS programmes.

Say the government finds it impossible to provide AIDS-combating drugs, what other alternatives would you suggest?

— Economically-disadvantaged pregnant women and children should be provided with protein supplements to boost their immune systems. /end p. 31/

You seem to be challenging mainly the government policy-makers. Are there other parties that can help in combating the crisis?

— People from all walks of life, such as civic organisations, traditional groups and initiation schools, should join the fight against AIDS.

Who else?

— Religious leaders. They should engage their constituencies in the struggle. In the same way they used pulpits in the struggle against apartheid, they should use pulpits in the fight against HIV/AIDS. They could also help instil a positive attitude to HIV+ people by emphasizing some Christian principles, e.g., love for one’s neighbour, carrying one another’s burdens, and the strong helping the weak.

Are you not expecting too much from church leaders, most of whom are not even conversant with health issues?

— We do not expect them to do all the work themselves but to mobilise their constituencies into decisive action against HIV/AIDS.

We seem to be running out of time. What remaining comment do you wish to make?

— Not one of us wants to lose our loved ones to AIDS. Let us do all we can to fight this epidemic. We agree that combating AIDS is costly, but lives are priceless!

Thank you. /end p. 31/

Appendix 6

List of sources used to compile the report

1. One audio cassette recording selected parts of Workshop 1 (October 1998)

2. Three audio cassettes recording selected parts of Workshop 2 (January 1999)

3. Two audio cassettes recording an Action Research workshop held on 23/3/’99 which was based on the ME99 Community Groups process

4. A file of correspondence, minutes of meetings and notes compiled from the community groups process.
Footnotes


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Taken from Jacques De Wet, ‘A Note on Action Research’ (appendix 1 below).

5. Action research as a methodology includes an ideology that dominates the entire project. In this instance action research was used as a tool in a process that was not specifically tied to the methodological framework of action research.

6. Letter from Jacques De Wet to various community leaders.


8. Ibid.

9. This is an approach to decision-making and project management which was developed by Jacques de Wet and a group of managers involved in the Modern African Leadership Project sponsored by Old Mutual Employee Benefits.

10. The SEE-JUDGE-ACT technique is based on the work of Paulo Freire and was popularised in South Africa in the 1980’s by Young Christian Students (YCS).

11. Here a group facilitator’s role is 1) to facilitate rather than dictate, 2) to give everyone an opportunity to contribute and buy into the product 100 percent, 3) to stimulate creative ideas but avoid providing answers, 4) to ask appropriate critical questions, 5) to adopt a win/win rather than a win/lose approach to problem-solving.


13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. See footnote 11.

16. Mike van Graan (tel: 4480765/6897672), the director of Article 27, recently won the 1999 Fleur du Cap for best script.

17. Open space workshopping is based on two simple ideas: multiple mini workshops are run simultaneously in a large open space; participants are free as they grow tired of one workshop to move to another.

18. The background to this song is very interesting in terms of action research as a tool. It was initiated during the second workshop by a person who had been very quiet throughout the process. She generated the idea and took the lead in putting it into action.