Towards Reconciliation or Deepening the Wounds?

The Afrikaans dictionary says: *weer tot vriendskap* (to restore to friendship), accept, not resist. But in this country, there is nothing to go back to, no previous state or relationship one would wish to restore. In these stark circumstances, ‘reconciliation’ does not even seem like the right word but rather ‘conciliation’.¹

Identity is memory. Identities forged out of half-remembered things or false memories easily commit transgressions.²

The other main focus of the TRC, apart from the production, acknowledgement and recognition of the truth, is to develop and promote reconciliation across and within the divided nation of South Africa – a divide that given its history and its massive levels of political violence and civil strife appears almost unbridgeable. Part of the uniqueness of the TRC is the way in which, at least compared with many other truth commissions, it is based on the notion of truth leading to reconciliation; hence the amnesty provisions for full disclosure of political crimes. When one considers the way that apartheid separated people, the way it divided and the way that it distorted and manipulated relationships, this might appear at first glance almost impossible. As has been mentioned, the TRC is seen as only one mechanism in the overall process of nation building. In fact, of course, the TRC is bound by the Act of Parliament by which it was brought into being. For the commission, it would be both impossible and undesirable to attempt to impose or
force upon people national reconciliation even if it were feasible and practical in this sense. That remains true even if the majority of people who live in the ‘new’ South Africa shared a common understanding of the term itself. Reconciliation, it appears, is one of those long-term, cathartic processes which will work its way out in the new South Africa for many decades to come. Essentially, the issues being dealt with are long-standing emotional ones in what is and continues for the time being to be an ‘unhealthy’ society. The previous apartheid regime inflicted grievous damage to the South African body politic and the entire system of societal relations in South Africa. It might take decades to repair the kind of psychological, political, social and economic damage that has taken place. In this chapter I look at the various views and ideas about reconciliation and how they relate to the South African context. I will also assess how far the process of reconciliation has taken place since the truth commission began its work and ask how far they still have to go.

**Concepts and views of reconciliation**

Reconciliation often has peculiarly religious overtones; it is seen as having a spiritual dimension in the first instance. One hardly talks about the term in practical or pragmatic terms yet it is the latter that would probably prove more useful than anything else to the bridging of the divisions between the different groups in the new South Africa. For Desmond Tutu, the head of the TRC, reconciliation appears to have classical roots which have been ‘Africanised’ to suit the circumstances and context of the society he lives in. While the church has argued that ‘you must forgive because God has forgiven you for killing his son’. Tutu argues that ‘You can only be human in a human society. If you live with hate and revenge, you dehumanise not only yourself but your community. You must forgive to make your community whole.’

In Tutu’s vision, reconciliation is the start of change, the beginning of the reformatory process in society and clearly his vision for a new South Africa. The Reverend Khosa Mgojo, one of the commissioners in Durban, also stressed the religious aspects when I interviewed him: people must know the truth he maintained and from there you can move towards reconciliation with the victim able to forgive and the perpetrator able to say that they were sorry for having committed these crimes. Reconciliation in this sense was