

Religion and Development – A Church and Education. An Encounter with Pastor Don Makumbani

by Max Reichenheim

It's 9 o'clock on Wednesday, the day before last of the Digital Intensive Course. Everyone is joining the Zoom meeting, some on time, some a few minutes later, like every day. I am still overwhelmed with the impressions of seven days filled with lectures, seminars and discussions and I am sure, everybody else is feeling the same. We already talked about the overall topic of **Religion and Development**, about Religion and Environment, Religion and Gender Justice, Religion and Politics, Religion and Peace, about Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. And this Wednesday, we want to see how practitioners actually deal with the problems and opportunities within these fields.

The first person, who is willing to answer our questions this morning, is **Pastor Don Makumbani**. He joins our meeting while sitting in front of a brick-lined wall inside the building of his church in **Polokwane, South Africa**. The **Covenant House Family Church** celebrated its 10th anniversary last year and is driven by the vision of „**Bringing Gods principles to Gods people**“, as Pastor Makumbani explains during his introduction. Because he himself grew up in poor conditions with very limited access to education, he knows how these foundations are key for the children and the youth. And therefore he placed emphasis on education, when he founded his Church.

Marie-Luise already visited Pastor Makumbani in Polokwane and is sharing some pictures now: the church building and the almost finished school building at the end of a street, a billboard with a picture of the pastor and his wife, the municipal site near the church with a lot of garbage on it and the informal settlements at the other end of this site. Pastor Makumbani describes the environment of his church as **semi-rural, located between these informal settlements and middle income-neighbourhoods**. Looking at these pictures, suddenly we are right in the discussion. Many of the participants are not only PhD-candidates or Master students, but also pastors. It seems to me, that some of us are even more critical with a colleague, another pastor, than with our lecturers. Beside the questions around organizational issues, cooperation and the situation during the time of Covid-19 prepared on Miro, now there are questions about **a pastor's picture on a billboard**, popping up in the Zoom-Chat. Pastor Makumbani appears not to be surprised by these questions and answers experienced: he wants to show accessibility to his community (with private phone numbers), he wants to promote the value of marriage and in any case, more than a picture shows the practice.

Due to our different interests and backgrounds and the rich content of the last seven days, there are also questions about how the Covenant House Family Church engages with the issues of the polluted environment, with the needs of disabled persons, with politics, and Pastor Makumbani always points out some efforts on this issues, but just to come back to his vision of giving education to the community, of **having church facilities, which are more busy on the week, than on Sunday**. This is, what he explains in-depth. How the school is growing, how he wants to implement a training programme for people, who take care of children, how the school is communicating with the parents and I feel, that this is very important to him. It is this vision, which is shaping his view of organizational structures and cooperation. Maybe it's obvious to others, but when I encounter practitioners in the fields, on which complexity I have read much literature, I am always excited about their pragmatic approach and the way they stay focussed. But during an interview, this is also the reason, why it's often much harder to get information about the process than about the output and outcome, questions need to be well prepared. I realize this, while Pastor Makumbani is talking about the challenges, that voluntary work poses, the board of five people, who are doing the administrative work in his church and the organization of pastors, which he is part of. Revisiting my notes on the session, I come across many new questions on these organizational issues.

But back to the interview: the current situation with the restrictions in public life because of Covid-19 is unprecedented for all of us. Pastor Makumbani is trying to figure out, how to cope with this situation. He describes a **campaign on food donation**, which he launched together with a colleague from Johannesburg and his **People Matter Foundation**, services he is doing in a **dialogue format** and an **online membership**, which he wants to establish. Another recent topic: regulation of the churches in South Africa. Churches must be self-regulating, Pastor Makumbani states, and: the laws are there, they just need to be enforced.

This short report just provides a rough overview about the topics touched during the interview, complemented by some of my personal observations. The interviews or parts of it will be uploaded on this website, so that everyone can use them as a starting point to deal with African Initiated Churches and their contribution to sustainable development. Thank you again, Pastor Makumbani, for your responses and may your future work be blessed!

Link:

<https://www.facebook.com/covenanthouse.org.za/>