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OPINION

2024 is a year to remember the 1994 commitment to justice in SA

NICO KOOPMAN

DEAR Grandchildren. This year of 2024 you must really have patience with Pappa, Miemie, your parents and our peers. We will speak a lot about 1994. That was one of the most exciting times of our lives. It was the year when inclusive and participatory democracy was born in our land. Democracy literally means the people govern, the people, all of us, you as well little ones, shall determine the direction into which our country travels, the type of life we want to build together. In the 1993 interim Constitution of our country, we declared that we wanted to build a country where everyone enjoys a life of justice. Justice has sisters and brothers named dignity, healing, freedom and equality. The sisters and brothers always play together.

Where there is justice, there is dignity, worth, esteem, regard, respect and even reverence for one another. Where there is justice, there is healing, healing of all wounds – political wounds, socio-economic wounds, ecological wounds, social wounds, spiritual wounds, moral wounds, physical wounds and psychological wounds. Where there is justice, there is freedom – freedom from oppression and dehumanisation, freedom for taking responsibility and building a new country, freedom amid threats and risks, and freedom despite so much against us. Where there is justice, there is equality – equality of dignity and worth, and equality of access to the necessities and goods of life, equality that is not absolute but that makes room for differentiation due to factors like difference in talent, potential, use of opportunities and work ethic.

On February 20 every year, people across the globe celebrate World Day of Social Justice to remind one another of justice and its next of kin. Human beings are forgetful. Therefore, we need to be reminded. Celebrations are sounding out to us the farewell words of Simba's father in the Lion King – Simba, remember, remember. Yes, this year South Africans will remember in a special way.

The word, remember, should perhaps be spelt as re-member, again a member, always a member. The year of



NELSON Mandela casts his vote at Ohlange High School hall in Inanda, north of Durban, in this April 27, 1994 file photo in South Africa's first all-race elections. | JOHN PARKIN AP

1994 should always be a member of us. Pappa and a dear colleague returned from the Netherlands to be on time for the establishment of a new church on April 14, 1994, namely the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), which was the merging of two Reformed churches of 1881 and 1910 that were divided along racial lines between mostly coloured and mostly black congregants.

The name "uniting", rather than "united" was deliberately chosen to say we need to seek further unity among members of the new church, and unity with mostly white and Indian Reformed churches in South Africa. Nelson Mandela attended the church service to celebrate the birth of the URCSA on April 17, 1994 in Belhar.

We returned on time to partici-

pate in the country's first democratic elections on April 27, 1994. It was an emotional day. Millions of South Africans could vote for the first time – something they were denied during apartheid. That day, we voted for justice for all, dignity for all, healing for all, freedom for all and equality for all. Our vote was also a vow to accept the responsibility for building a new society of justice for all, one where justice reigns supreme. In October and November 1994, Papa and more than 20 South African theologians visited various universities and research institutions in various parts of America to reflect upon the role of universities, churches and broader civil society in justice quests in democratic societies.

On May 10, 1994, the birthday of the anti-apartheid theologian, Beyers Naudé, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first president of a democratic South Africa. Thabo Mbeki and FW de Klerk were inaugurated as the first deputy presidents of democratic South Africa.

Grandchildren, 1994 was a year of excitement, of promise-making, the promise of justice, dignity, healing, freedom and equality for all. You may ask what happened to the promise. Did we also practise promise-keeping? Did we live up to our joint promise? My response would be that we have made ambivalent progress, that is, in some regards we moved forward and in other senses we stagnated; in fact,

there are people who would say we are, in some respect, even worse off than before 1994.

In some regards, some racial groups grew closer to each other. In other regards, polarisation along colour lines increased. In churches, worship times on Sunday mornings are the most colour-segregated hours in South Africa.

The URCSA did not unite with the mostly white and Indian churches yet, and internally, this church struggles to have harmony between its black and coloured members. Due to socio-economic inequality that runs mainly along colour lines, we must unavoidably refer to colour categories. Hopefully this is only temporary, because we work hard to achieve the day when we are really a non-racial society, where injustices and polarisation along colour lines no longer exist. Hopefully, your children will not have to deal with this.

We have made progress to provide more necessities of life to more people but poverty, unemployment, homelessness and hunger, even at schools and universities, an inadequate access to health care and education opportunities are still with us. Corruption, greed and gluttony in politics, business and civil society worsens attempts by many to overcome poverty, unemployment and unequal access to the necessities and goods of life. Poor service-delivery due to, among other things, inappropriate appointments,

nepotism and corruption deepens poverty.

Violence has mostly increased locally and globally, and our country is not the habitat, the haven within which life flourishes, which we had hoped to give to our children.

This year is a year of remembering the 1994 promise of and commitment to justice. It is also a year of renewing the commitment to seek justice.

Grandchildren, if we look at you, our little ones, then we become engaged to keep on working for a beautiful life for you and your offspring. If we look at you, we do not only remember backward; we also remember forward. We remember the future. We remember tomorrow's children; and this is what energises us.

It reminds us of the words of Brazilian scholar, Rubem Alves, in his book Tomorrow's Children: "Faith is hearing the melody of the future. Hope is dancing it."

If we together, young and old, keep on hearing and dancing to the melody of a world of justice, you might one day respond to your children that as a nation, we have indeed made good, and not just ambivalent, progress on our journey towards justice.

In solidarity. Pappa.

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FATHER OUTLOOK

Today's Forecast

Cape Town City: 20/26 - Fog, partly cloudy.
 Cape Flats: 17/28 - Fog, partly cloudy.
 Alexander Bay: 16/25 - Fog, partly cloudy.
 Beaufort West: 21/41 - Clear skies.
 Calvinia: 15/35 - Clear skies.