

STANDING UP AGAINST INJUSTICE

Kingswood College Neil Aggett Memorial Lecture

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Introduction

The Headmaster, Mr David Arguile, teachers, students, parents and families, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

It is a great honour to be invited to deliver Kingswood College's Neil Aggett Memorial Lecture, to enjoy the privilege of addressing you on the theme of 'Standing Up Against Injustice', and in the process to speak about the life and death of Dr. Neil Hudson Aggett.

The life and death of Neil Aggett is an indelible and bitter-sweet part of our common heritage, and Heritage Day is an appropriate moment to reflect on both the tragic loss of an outstanding 28-year old young South African and also the inspiration that we may derive from his example.

It is my hope that this annual lecture in memory of Neil Aggett will be occasions on which we reflect critically on issues of social justice in a society characterised by acute injustice with honesty, and freedom from the fears and orthodoxies that all too often imprison our intellects, stifle our thoughts, blind our visions, and constrain our actions.

I wish to begin by recalling the facts about the inspiring life and tragic death of Neil Aggett. Thereafter, I will address the theme of 'Standing Up Against Injustice', opening with the question of injustice and concluding with the issue of fighting injustice.

The Life and Death of Neil Aggett

Neil Aggett has been described as a 'quiet, hard-working, man who gave up a medical career to organise one of the fastest growing union branches in the country' (*Rand Daily Mail*, 6 February 1982); as a man 'who had dedicated his life to building worker organisation for a just South Africa, free of exploitation and oppression' (*Rand Daily Mail*, 6 February 1984).

Aggett was 'born in the small farming community of Nanyuki, 200km north of Nairobi on the slopes of Mount Kenya' (*The Star*, 6 February 1982) and came to South Africa as a child when his parents relocated here.

In the light of the choices that Aggett made as a young man and the path that he travelled in the years before his death, there is an extremely sad paradox here. Neil Aggett refused to accommodate to white minority rule that deprived his fellow black compatriots of their humanity and political and social rights. Yet the Aggett's left Kenya because in the words of his father 'we did not want to live under black rule' (ibid.).

Aggett attended and matriculated from Kingswood, and then studied medicine at the University of Cape Town. Thereafter, he practiced at black hospitals in Umtata, Tembisa, and Soweto. Here, he became exposed to the suffering experienced by workers and poor people under apartheid. At the hospital in Soweto 'he won respect among staff and patients as one of the few...white doctors who made an effort to speak Zulu to consult directly with those he treated'. Dr Roy Jobson, an ex-Kingswoodian who followed Aggett to the Soweto hospital recalls that Aggett 'wrote the best admission notes for patients'.

After helping in the Industrial Aid Society to address worker's medical needs, he 'became drawn to the growing black union movement' (Friedman, 1982). According to Jan Theron, in 1978 when the Food and Canning Workers Union 'decided to re-establish (its) Johannesburg branch, Neil offered to help and then asked to work full-time'. He says that under Aggett's leadership the union 'took off dramatically', and Aggett rose to become the Transvaal secretary (cited in *RDM*, 1982). Described by a fellow trade unionist, Dave Lewis, as a person with 'incredible inner resources', he was chosen to 'convene a crucial (trade) union summit meeting' in late 1982 (*ibid.*).

Aggett's sister has said that her brother 'did not discuss with the family giving up medicine but that he probably "felt he could work better towards his ideals for society that way. But there is no doubt that he thought about his decision very carefully before choosing his path"'. She describes him as 'quiet and gentle, but a very strong person and very mature. He thought about things carefully before committing himself' (cited in *RDM*, 1982).

It has been noted of Aggett that he 'liv(ed) simply, approach(ed) all he met with equal respect, (and) exuded a quiet strength which won him the trust of those he met and those he worked with'. A colleague commented that 'he was a very committed man and was prepared to make great sacrifices – such as giving up full-time medicine' (cited in *RDM*, 1982). Another colleague, Elizabeth Thomson, observed that 'he was an incredibly strong and committed person – often working a 16-hour day', and suggested that 'he came to see that it was only at the organisational level that the medical problems of workers could be met' (cited in *The Star*, 1982).

In November 1981 Aggett was detained under Terrorism Act, in terms of which a person could be detained in solitary confinement indefinitely and were usually denied access to lawyers or family. At 1.30 am on 5 February 1982, after 70 days in detention he was found hanging in his prison cell at John Vorster Square in Johannesburg. Aggett was to become the 51st death in detention and the first white South African to die in detention.

One of the aims of detention was to break people. And to break Aggett, the security police subjected him to brutal interrogation and torture. Aggett had told a visiting magistrate that he had been assaulted. But it was only more than two weeks later and just 24 hours before his death that a police sergeant, Alletta Blom, was sent to take a statement.

Aggett had told Blom that he 'had been deprived of sleep for more than 70 hours'. (*The Star*, 21 May 2007). He had also complained to Blom that he 'had been subjected to at least 62 hours of prolonged interrogation at the hands 'of a security police lieutenant Steven Whitehead, and that he had been 'tortured with electric shocks'. (*Mail and Guardian*, 9 March 2000). 'Lieutenant Whitehead (had) blindfolded (him) with a towel... made (him) sit down and (had) handcuffed (him) behind (his) back... and shocked (him) through the handcuffs' (*Weekly Mail and Guardian*, 30 May 2002).

We are also able to get a sense of what Aggett may have been subjected to through the testimony of another fellow detainee Prema Naidoo. Naidoo was brutally tortured on different occasions and 'interrogated continually for six days and six nights' by teams of security police. On the sixth day of (his) interrogation (he) began to fall asleep on (his) feet and ...began to talk about (his) involvement in harbouring and assisting in the escape from the country' of a comrade, Stephen Lee. Ashamed that he had broken under torture and had 'implicated other comrades who took part in t(Lee's) escape..(he) contemplated suicide... because (he) felt (he) had betrayed the cause' that he had 'believed in' (Testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission).

A number of fellow detainees who passed Aggett in the corridor on the tenth floor of John Vorster Square have testified about his condition. Reverend Frank Chikane, today Director General in the Office of the President has stated that he had 'seen Aggett...returned from one of his interrogations, being half carried, half dragged by warders' and took this as 'as a sign how badly injured Aggett was already at the time'.

Aggett's funeral service was attended by 3 000 people and led by the then Bishop Desmond Tutu in St Mary's Cathedral in Johannesburg. In his oration, Jan Theron stated that Aggett died because his beliefs and actions ran counter to those of government: 'Where they seek to create divisions, divisions of race, divisions of language, divisions between the workers, Neil was working towards unification' (*The Star*, 25 February 1982). The Very Rev Simon Nkoane, the Dean of Johannesburg observed that Aggett knew 'real life is not self-centred' and had lived for others (ibid.)

It is an interesting fact that 'the first white to die in detention was mourned largely by blacks' (ibid.). As the *Rand Daily Mail* commented, it was an 'extraordinary spectacle of Neil Aggett's funeral (that) about 15

000 people, mostly black, came to pay their final respects to a remarkable young man who happened to be white' (15 August 1982). Bishop Tutu noted that we are told that the interests of whites and blacks 'are mutually exclusive. And in this murky atmosphere of increasing racial bitterness and hatred, suspicion and misunderstanding, what do we get? We get an incredible demonstration of affection and regard for a young white man by thousands of blacks' (ibid.).

He went on to say that 'this white man (Neil Aggett) gets the kind of tribute that blacks reserve for their heroes – the Bikos, the Sobukwes, the Lilian Ngoyis. Neil Aggett got the kind of salute and tribute that black townships provide only for really good people and he was white'. He also lamented that 'I am sad that Neil's parent did not understand what happened because they ought to be proud of their son who evoked such admiration and gratitude' (*Rand Daily Mail*, 15 August 1982).

The inquest following Aggett's death found that no one was responsible for his death. Yet as the late Helen Joseph, a remarkable and indomitable fighter for justice who was banned and under house arrest at that time noted, 'the Aggett inquest was a mirror held up to reflect the unimaginable depths of depravity, brutality and destruction employed by the security police' (*The Star*, 21 May 2007).

It may be of interest to you that shortly before the inquest into Aggett's death Aggett's torturer Steven Whitehead and another security policeman, Paul Erasmus, travelled to Grahamstown to obtain, in the words of Erasmus, 'evidence that Neil Aggett had suicidal tendencies from the time that he was a child'. With help from the security police in Grahamstown, Erasmus pretended to be a private investigator by the name of Paul Edwards and visited Kingswood College. He has said that 'we went to Kingswood College, we saw photos of Dr Aggett, we spoke to the headmaster, who showed us some of the school records. He fell for the story that I was this private investigator and we were researching on behalf of an overseas client ...the life of Dr Aggett and we wanted material for a book' (TRC Commission Amnesty Hearing, 16 October 2000).

A fellow detainee of Aggett's, Auret van Heerden has noted that Aggett made a choice – 'he refused to break' (*Rand Daily Mail*, 6 February 1984). It is accepted in some quarters that because of inhuman torture, Aggett may well have taken his own life rather than betray his comrades. But as Bishop Tutu has commented, 'it really does not matter whether Neil was killed or committed suicide. The system, in either instance, is fully to blame for his death' (*The Star*, 25 February 1982).

Standing Up Against Injustice

Injustice

There are many kinds of injustice – political, social, economic - and injustice takes many different forms.

1. First, there is the readily recognisable injustice that is rooted in beliefs, prejudice, stereotypes, chauvinism, intolerance and fear of the 'other' – whether the 'other' are people of different 'races', social classes, sex, gender, sexual orientation, cultures, religions, languages, nationalities or live in different geographical areas.

As South Africans we ought to be all too familiar with racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and similar kinds of injustice. These and other pernicious ideologies and practices create patterns of unjust social inclusion and exclusion, privilege and disadvantage, and domination and subordination in our society and have caused and continue to cause tremendous pain and suffering for individuals and particular social groups.

2. Second, and fundamentally important, there is the often ignored and largely unrecognised injustice that is deeply woven into the social and economic structures and relations of our society. These social and economic structures and relations have the appearance of being natural, pre-ordained and god-given. Over time they have become so ingrained that we forget that they are produced and reproduced by our own thinking and through our own actions.

These structures and relations underpin the coexistence of unbridled accumulation of wealth and desperate and grinding poverty, great privileges for a small minority of rich and huge deprivation for a large majority of poor, unbound economic and social opportunities for some and the denial of such opportunities for many others.

Before his tragic murder deprived the world of an outstanding humanitarian and fighter for justice, Archbishop Romero of El Salvador observed that 'when the church hears the cry of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises'.

The late Archbishop Dom Helder Camara who worked among the poor of Brazil was another who questioned the structures, systems and policies that produced great inequalities in Brazil. He once observed that 'When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask WHY they are poor, they call me a communist'.

Jody Kollapen, the Chairperson of our Human Rights Commission, eloquently observes that:

...the reality remains that for millions of people the promise of human rights and the vision of a just and caring world remains an illusion. Intolerance, war and impunity; starvation and greed; power and powerlessness all combine in a conspiracy of the powerful against the weak that invariably deepens the faultlines that exist in the world and within nations.

(T)hese millions... see a world where disparities in wealth, resources and opportunities have grown, where human rights norms and values seem invariably to yield to the dictates of the rich and powerful; which expresses shock and outrage at arbitrary killing but at the same time is complicit in the killing of many more thorough hunger and disease – which could have been avoided (Kollapen, 2003:26).

Romero, Camara and Kollapen all draw attention to the injustice that is a consequence of how our societies are economically and socially structured and conduct their affairs; that it is not accidental that are wealthy and poor, well-fed and starving, privileged and disadvantaged, and powerful and powerless.

Take our own country, South Africa. During the past thirteen years of democracy there have been some important economic and social improvements. Yet the reality is that South Africa continues to be one of the most unequal and unjust societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, living conditions, and access and opportunities to education, social services and health care.

The Presidency's *Development Indicators Mid-Term Review* released in late June 2007 reveals that the Gini coefficient, which is a measure of income inequality, increased from 0.665 in 1994 to 0.685 in 2006 (2007:22). This indicates that the social grants that are provided to 12 million people and new jobs that have been created have been insufficient 'to overcome widening income inequality' (ibid.).

The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994 from 2.0% to 1.7%; conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994 from 72.0% to 72.5%. At the same time, the per capita income of the richest 20% has risen much faster than that of the poorest 20% (Presidency, 2007:21). 43% of our fellow citizens continue to live on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year (Presidency, 2007:23).

The cleavages of 'race', class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to

blight our democracy. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, flaunted wealth, crass materialism, unbridled individualism, and a vulgar mentality of "greed is cool" runs rampant in our society.

Patriarchy and sexism continue to stifle the realization of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to development. The rape and abuse of women is a pervasive, morbid ill that destroys innumerable lives and wreaks havoc in our country. HIV/AIDS exacerbates the fault-lines of our society, intensifies our social challenges and has over the past decade reduced life-expectancy from almost 60 years to about 47 years.

3. We can highlight a third form of injustice, which is rooted in the abuse and irresponsible exercise of power, or the ethical failure on the part of those who wield economic and political power to appreciate the immense responsibilities that are associated with their powers, and especially in so far as governing and functioning in a 'democratic and open society' in which 'everyone has...the right to have their dignity respected and protected' is concerned.

We must be concerned whether some who are entrusted with governing, leading, managing, providing key public services in education, health care and social development fully grasp the profound moral, political, social and organisational responsibilities that are associated with the freedom for which Aggett and countless other black and white and men and women South Africans gave their lives. We must also be concerned whether there is an appreciation of what is at stake and what the implications of particular choices, decisions and actions (and non-actions) are for our society and future generations.

Any number of examples can be provided here. Three will suffice to illustrate the injustices that can arise when those in power fail to act or act irresponsibly.

- One is the response of the state to the HIV/AIDS pandemic that afflicts our society. The fruitless debate on the cause of HIV/AIDS resulted in a stultifying absence of leadership in dealing with the crisis while the initially myopic and tardy responses created unnecessary delays in the provision of treatment and tragic loss of lives.
- Another example is that the government has committed itself to building an innovative, effective and efficient 'Public Service that will provide an excellent quality of service'; a Public Service that would be the 'servant of the people (and would be) 'accessible, transparent, accountable, efficient and free of corruption'

(Reconstruction and Development Programme). The watchword of the Public Service was to be *Batho Pele* (People First).

It has become clear that not all of our public service is imbued with these laudable ideals. Instead, there is widespread unprofessional and disdainful conduct and service, and sheer indifference to ensuring that the basic needs of people are met. Instead of Batho Pele we have among some a culture of Batho Morago (People Last).

The poor of our society hugely depend on the effective provision of public services to enable them to meet their basic needs and improve their lives and those of their children. Shortcomings and weaknesses in the provision of public services undermines their dignity, compromises the development of the potential and talent of their children, thwarts the realization of constitutionally and legally enshrined social imperatives and goals, and violates their human and social rights. In short, it perpetrates grave injustices on the poor.

- Yet another example is the injustice that we, but especially those who make political and economic decisions and control huge resources, do to our environment and our natural world through our unrelenting pursuit of what we call 'progress' and 'development'.

Indian Americans have a saying that we inherit the earth in safe-keeping for future generations. We may wish to reflect on what indeed are we leaving for future generations given our reckless degradation of our environment and the climate change that we are causing globally in the names of 'progress' and 'development'.

4. I wish to note a final form of injustice that is very pertinent to our society. This is the injustice that stems from the refusal of institutions and individuals to openly and truthfully declare the perpetration of heinous crimes and wrongdoings, to apologise to survivors, and to show sincere remorse for the tragic consequences that these visited on their fellow humans.

We know that Aggett was inhumanly tortured. Yet the inquest that followed Aggett's death found that no one was responsible for his death.

During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a William Smith was the only one who applied for amnesty 'specifically for the torture of Aggett' (*Mail and Guardian*, 9 March 2000). Steven Whitehead 'who led Aggett's brutal interrogation' (*ibid.*) and who Advocate George Bizos describes as 'a thoroughly unsavoury character' did not apply for amnesty (*Weekly Mail and Guardian*, 30 May 2002).

Without any acknowledgement of wrongdoing, or apology or show of remorse, and without any retribution the torturers of Aggett walk freely in our midst. In 2001, a major opposition political party hired Whitehead to 'bug-proof' its offices. A prominent official of this party said that he had 'no problem' that Whitehead was a former security policeman. He was 'hired because (he was a) professional...' (*Weekly Mail and Guardian*, 30 May 2002).

In the context of our fractured and traumatic past, reconciliation is, of course, hugely important. But so is social justice! A number of opponents of apartheid and fighters for justice are still missing and unaccounted for. Individuals and families continue to bear the pain and scars of the crimes perpetrated by the security police. The approach to reparations for survivors has been sadly neither imaginative nor comprehensive. Until and unless there are full disclosures and a bolder approach to reparations, there will not be closure for survivors and the families of the missing and reconciliation will be that much more difficult to achieve.

Fighting Injustice

To stand up against and fight injustice is, first and foremost, to recognise that injustice does indeed exist, that there are different kinds of injustices, that it takes many forms, and has various origins and roots.

Second, it is the commitment to critique all kinds and forms of injustice, on the basis of the recognition of the oneness of humanity, irrespective of whatever differences may exist between fellow humans.

Third, it is the willingness to boldly confront and progressively erode and eliminate the different kinds and forms of injustices that pervade and blight our society and cause suffering for millions of our fellow people.

Finally, to stand up against and fight injustice is to possess an intellectual, ethical and social vision of a society based on the values of human dignity, equality, social equity, non-sexism and non-racialism, human rights, and economic and social rights and freedoms for all people.

It is to commit ourselves to the development and energetic pursuit of a far-reaching and substantive social justice agenda that seeks to make injustice history and liberate us all. For the truth is that none of us can be genuinely free unless all people possess not just political rights, but also the social, economic and human rights that are fundamental to living full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives; unless 'those who were (and continue to be marginalised and) disadvantaged can assume their place in

society as equals with their fellow human beings without regard to colour, race, gender, age or geographic dispersal' (Mbeki, 1996).

For the sake of social justice and our humanity, we must refuse 'to accept the logic of inequality and the repression that it involves', and continue to 'search for human agency, for the means through which inequality can be undone' and a equitable, just, and humane society can be built (Hammami, 2006:32). Or, as Jody Kollapen puts it, 'we need to be creative and bold...to challenge poverty and inequality, to reshape the way society is structured and does its business and, importantly, to ensure that the concept of the 'oneness of humanity'...comes to mean just that (2003:26).

We must take immense pride in the intellectual creativity, imagination, and stolid courage and purpose that we displayed to rid ourselves of tyranny and to fashion our new democracy.

The wonderful Constitution and Bill of Rights of our country that we have created for ourselves unambiguously proclaims that neither the state nor we as individuals may 'unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth'.

Through our Constitution we have declared our intention to 'establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights'. If this is indeed so, then it is our ethical and social responsibility to 'respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights' embodied in our Constitution, and it is the pursuit of their achievement that must guide our conduct and animate our social relationships and existence.

The measure of our humanity as a society, the freedom of our people, and our social transformation is ultimately how we, its members, think about, and the extent to which we respect, affirm, defend, promote and assert the rights of people that may be different from us.

The unfortunate and harsh reality is that the rights of people continue to be violated on a daily basis. People continue to be ridiculed, ostracized, discriminated against, bullied, beaten, raped and murdered on account of their 'race', sex, nationality and sexual orientation. It is all too evident that the beliefs and practices that for decades have grounded and sustained injustice remain to be eradicated in democratic South Africa.

This must be matter of deep concern to us and calls for social action. Rights are *indivisible*, and any denial of rights to certain people and social groups, any failure to uphold and enforce the rights of people different to us, places us on the slippery slope that leads to an oppressive and unjust society.

In many oppressive and unjust societies, including ours, we hear the refrains “I didn’t know” or “I was not involved”. However, unless we assume responsibility for being informed and actively oppose injustice, then through our ignorance and silence we are in danger of conspiring to create an unjust society. It is precisely apathy and indifference to attacks on particular social groups that Pastor Martin Niemöller who lived under the Nazis warns against in his poem:

*First they came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up, because
I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up,
because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up,
because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to
speak up for me.*

About twelve years ago there was an incident at a prestigious university in the United States. A student from a wealthy family sexually molested a fellow student, a young woman from a poor working-class family in the mid-west who had won a scholarship to this university. It happened while she was cleaning his room, something that she also did for other students in order to fund her studies.

It so happens that the woman and the man who molested her attended a moral philosophy course together and were also among the top students. Following the incident, the woman confronted the professor of moral philosophy. Her question was: What is the point of readings, seminars, lectures and essays on goodness, and the concept of good? How do you teach goodness, teach people to be good?

Neil Aggett, without doubt, personified good. We can also point to many other South Africans, men and women, black and white, who are magnificent symbols of good. Their lives and deeds are powerful legacies of courageous commitment to social justice and a humane society, and social action towards these goals irrespective of the costs to themselves.

It is said that a people without an understanding of its history and past has no future. Milan Kundera, the Czech novelist who participated in the 1968 Prague Spring uprising against Soviet domination, writes that ‘the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting’. Those of us who are committed to social justice are challenged to keep alive the contributions of Agget, Steve Biko, Ruth First and other symbols of good. And I suggest that those of us who are educators are especially challenged on two counts:

- First, how, indeed, do we through educating cultivate good? How do we beyond disseminating knowledge and developing expertise and skills also ensure that the moral and ethical issues of how and what we teach and teach towards are not ignored?
- Second, how do we produce intellectuals and professionals who have a social conscience and are sensitive to the challenges and needs of our people and society?

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum suggests that the way to do this is to ensure that an education is simultaneously also 'the cultivation of humanity' (Nussbaum, 2006:5). This requires us to build three capabilities among our students. 'First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions. To build this we must develop 'the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgement' (ibid, 2006:5).

Second, we must get our students to see themselves 'as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern'. This necessitates providing them knowledge and understanding of different cultures and 'of differences of gender, race, and sexuality' (Nussbaum, 2006:6).

Third, we must promote among our students 'the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have' (ibid, 2006:6-7).

Nussbaum's suggestions are worth thinking about and pursuing. And if the result is young men and women who embody good, they could well help ensure that in the years ahead the political, economic, social and intellectual life of our country will not be banal, self-centred and mired in greed or desperate attempts at simply survival, but rich and vibrant, incorporating questions of social justice and intellectual and social action towards a humane society.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is important that we, the intellectuals and professionals or intellectuals and professionals to be, recognise that we make up a very small part of the South African population, and that we enjoy many advantages, opportunities and privileges. Humility of the kind personified by Neil Aggett, therefore, would be a great virtue.

I am certain that Kingwood College would be extremely disappointed if as students you view your education as solely for your personal benefit and self-enrichment. As an outstanding ex-Kingswoodian, Neil Aggett clearly did not. He used his talents to acquire knowledge and professional expertise and skills as a medical doctor. But, as Deputy Minister Dr Rob Davies stated in last year's lecture, the 'Neil Aggett choice' was not to 'carve out a quiet and prosperous life for himself in private medical practice, enjoying the comforts and privileges that were available then to white professionals' (Rob Davies, 24 September 2006). Rising above his family background and breaking with his parents' beliefs, which are never easy things, he also *educated* himself to become an enlightened, ethical, critical, creative and compassionate human.

The stained glass window in this chapel donated by the Aggett family in Neil's memory contains the quote: 'Did not my heart grieve for the poor'. However, Aggett did not only grieve in the face of the suffering, poverty and injustice that he witnessed all around him. He also made a profound social commitment to use his expertise to advance the rights of the poor and joined hands with others to build a society in which there could be justice for all.

The text at Aggett's funeral in 1982 was 'I am the Resurrection and the Life'. This was very appropriate as Aggett had through his hard work breathed life into the struggling Food and Canning Workers Union Transvaal branch and had resurrected it into a powerful instrument of workers rights and power. Through this, he also played an integral part in the overall revival of the mass democratic movement in South Africa.

The Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore has written that 'We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy'. The Jewish sage Hillel says: 'If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?'

Neil Aggett appears to have fully embraced the wise counsel of Tagore and Hillel, and I hope that you too will think about these wise words. Your knowledge, expertise and skills make you precious and vital people with the potential to make a huge contribution to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, economic and social development, and social justice.

I hope too that you will pursue the truth that derives from knowledge, understanding and reason; that you will embrace the virtues of respect for human dignity, compassion, and tolerance, and that you will possess the courage and boldness to fight injustice of all kinds and forms wherever you find it. Above all, I trust you will always remember that only when *all* people possess the political, social, economic and human rights that are fundamental to living full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives, can we claim to live in a just and humane society and can we all be truly free.

That, I believe, was the 'Neil Aggett choice', and it is a choice that we must honour and remember as part of the 'struggle of memory against forgetting', and it is a choice that should inspire us all.

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