

Public Engagement: Bishop Rubin Phillip

Eulogy by Renke Brahms



Dear Honorable Bishop Rubin Phillip, Dear Mrs. Phillip, Dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

Today, Bishop Rubin Phillip will be honoured with the Bremen Peace Award of the Threshold Foundation in the category of “public engagement”. And, as the “commissioner for peace” of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, I am honoured to hold this laudation.

Rubin Phillip’s public engagement efforts mainly take place far away from Bremen – i.e. in South Africa. Results of his committed actions have made it into German News only a few times – for e.g. Focus, a major German news magazine. In April 2008, Focus published an article on Bishop Phillip’s commitment in the case of weapons delivery to Zimbabwe, when he successfully obtained a court order preventing the transit of arms through South Africa for the dictatorial regime in Zimbabwe. But let me elaborate on this later on.

The fact that Bishop Rubin Phillip is being honoured today for his “public engagement” in this town hall is delightful to many people here in Bremen, as it reminds them of an earlier visit that he paid to Bremen: He was invited to participate in the Ecumenical City Church Day in 2004, as the then-chairman of the Durban-based DIAKONIA Council of Churches. His visit also aimed at deepening ties with forum Kirche, a partnership that had evolved from the sister city cooperation between Bremen and Durban.



Let us turn to the laureate: The political dimension of his “public engagement”, let me put it bluntly, was formed since infancy: Rubin Phillip was born in 1948 in South Africa under “apartheid”. As great-grandchild of an indentured labourer from India who worked in the sugar plantations, Rubin grew up in the suburbs of Durban, predominantly with people of Indian origin. He experienced discrimination

himself through apartheid policies that discriminated against people of African as well as of Indian origin, who were termed as “coloured” people. Coming from a non-religious family, Rubin Phillip decided to get baptized and became an Anglican pastor. He participated in the struggles against apartheid and, in 1969, became vice president to Steve Biko, leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, who was killed in police custody in 1977.

Rubin Phillip was placed under – what might sound a bit trivial in German – house arrest in order to suppress his “public engagement”. Between 1973 and 1976, his pastoral and political radius of action was restricted, allowing him to meet only one person. But his spirit of commitment remained unchanged.

The release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, who had already been awarded the Bremen Solidarity Award in 1988, marked the way towards a democratic South Africa. At the age of 45, Rubin Phillip could exert the right to vote for the first time. A few years later, in 2000, it is for the first time that a person of Indian origin becomes Bishop of the Anglican Church. Since then, Bishop Rubin Phillip leads the Diocese of Natal, encompassing the coastal region with the port city of Durban.



After these biographical notes, let us now turn to Ruben Phillips' "public engagement" and to the reasons for his awarding.

Despite equality under the law for black and "coloured" people – as the majority of the South African population – the legacy of apartheid, especially its economic structures, is prevalent till today. The long shadows of apartheid, besides newly arising conflicts, are a threat to South Africa's young democracy. These are the challenges to which bishop Ruben Phillip responds by getting actively involved in political and social issues. This is also the reason for him being awarded the Peace Prize. As a bishop, Ruben Phillip is – as any other church leader – a person in and of the public arena. The way how he fulfils this role and makes use of his position, makes him a leading example of a church and its representatives that are not only preaching but also practising "good news for the poor".

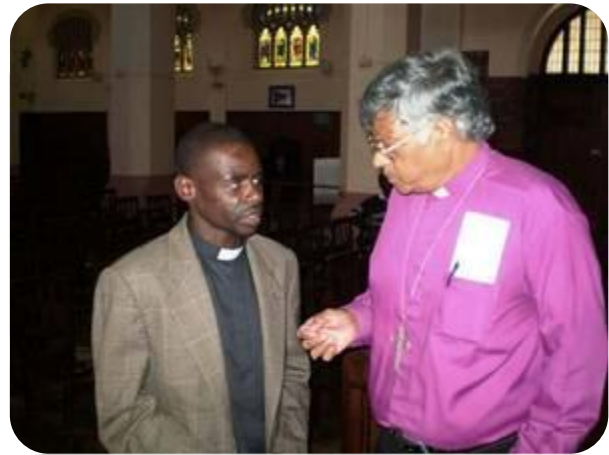
I would like to appreciate Bishop Ruben for being a Liberation theologian sensitive to suffering and injustice, for speaking up against those in power and deducing practical consequences from analysis and reasoned judgement.

There are two focal points of his commitment that I would like to stress here: His social and political engagement at the local level as well as his support for the people of neighbouring Zimbabwe.

Bishop Ruben Phillip gets involved where people face injustice. Kennedy Road, which belongs to his Diocese, is a multiethnic place, like many areas of KwaZulu Natal province. Living together under poor circumstances at Kennedy Road does not lack conflict: it is characterised by lack of employment, dilapidated housing and lack of electricity, uncertain ownership of land as well as fear of displacement. There is however a democratically legitimated body of representation that does not subordinate itself to the ruling party, the African National Congress. Its representatives criticize the government and bemoan the lack of implementation of government programs to tackle poverty.

Ruben Phillip frequently comes to meet the residents of the settlement at Kennedy Road; he attends meetings, holds Ecumenical prayer services and joins protest marches against police brutality. Just recently, end of September, under the pretence of ethnic conflicts, a militia attacked elected representatives of the residents and their families with full brutality, evicted hundreds from their settlement and even killed some of them.

In an appeal of protest dated September 29th 2009, Bishop Rubin Phillip brought these events and their political background to public attention. His call for protest, entitled: “Democracy Under Attack in Kennedy Road”, also describes his positive experiences with its residents: he has seen, as he states emphatically, “the best of our democracy here.” Rubin Phillip also expresses his concern: As in the 1980s, once again his Church has to look for safe houses for



political activists and accommodate them, for doctors for the injured and for legal support for the unjustly jailed. He directly and openly conveys his concerns to political leaders, including president Zuma. He asks to spread public protest and raises funds for the displaced and jailed. Bishop Rubin ends his call with words of warning: “A democracy that is not for everyone is a democracy in name only.” Beginning of October, just about three weeks ago, he visited 8 representatives who have been put in jail by the police. He assessed the conditions of detention and buoyed them up with the message of national and international solidarity. At the end of his visit he prayed together with the jailed.

Last year on Freedom Day, celebrated on April 27th (a public holiday to commemorate the first post-apartheid elections in South Africa), Bishop Rubin Phillip had expressed following concerns: “There was a time when our country was a light to the world. But that light has grown so dim that there is a real danger of it being extinguished altogether. Today, millions of our people live in shacks in life threatening conditions, constantly at risk of fire and disease because they have no electricity or sanitation, while we build stadiums, casinos and theme parks.”

Once again it becomes evident that local conflicts can have a global impact: building stadiums for the Football World Cup 2010 is not only a question of how financial priorities are set – “bread or games”, so to say. The world public, as tourists inside the country or as media audience, should get the impression of a clean and safe South Africa. Illegal shack settlements like Kennedy Road would “disturb the idyll”. Additionally, the political grass roots movement of the residents, which has already established a national network and forms another oppositional force to the powerful ANC, would disturb the picture.



There would be much more to say with regard to Rubin Phillips' work in the public arena concerning South Africa's pressing political issues, to his role as conflict mediator, his open criticism of corruption in public administration and his commitment to HIV/Aids programs, which he also initiated. Setting an example, he underwent an HIV-test himself.

But I would not do justice to Bishop Rubin Phillip if I did not mention his commitment to the thronged people of Zimbabwe:

Bishop Rubin Phillip represents the interests of the people of Zimbabwe who are violently oppressed by the government and suffer from naked misery. Since 2002, he uses the power of his post and his charisma to publicise injustices, to name the perpetrators and to support the victims.

He uses his mitre and authority to influence politics, for example on international conferences and meetings. As long as he is allowed to, he visits Zimbabwe; he sends envoys that collect photographs as pieces of evidence of torture and violence committed against members of the political opposition in order to present and to distribute it to the public. Furthermore, Phillip supports and promotes a solidarity-alliance of civil society actors advocating against the "quiet diplomacy" between the governments and for the Zimbabwean people. As I mentioned before, Bishop Rubin Phillip claimed international recognition when he, in April 2008, obtained a court order preventing the unloading of arms in the port of Durban from a Chinese vessel destined for the dictator in Zimbabwe. What a headline: "Arm in arm – against arms"! A priest from Zimbabwe writes on this: "No one will ever forget that – at a time, when the Church of Zimbabwe obeyed to the dictatorial regime that has lost every sense for the inviolability of life, and when most churches in South Africa tried to rationalize the suffering imposed by the government, Bishop Rubin stood up defending the sanctity of life."

Today we honour Bishop Rubin Phillip for his commitment to the people of South Africa and Zimbabwe and for his faithful dedication to justice and peace by awarding him the Bremen Peace Prize of the Threshold Foundation.

Congratulations!