



Dear Fellow South African,

I was recently sent a photo that featured on the popular #ImStaying Facebook thread. Two women are seated side by side at a bus stop somewhere in Cape Town. One is white, elderly and frail, and rests her head on the shoulder of the younger black woman.

This simple image, of these two women sitting there with their hands locked tightly, resonated deeply with me as we approach Reconciliation Day on 16 December.

It brought to mind the powerful words of Steve Bantu Biko that captured our aspirations for a new country: “In time we shall be in a position to bestow on South Africa the greatest possible gift – a more human face.”

Such a scene, of kindness and compassion, and of two people simply being human, would have been unthinkable in South Africa just over three decades ago.

Under that most insidious manifestation of petty apartheid, the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act, only the white woman would have been allowed to sit at that bus-stop, or travel on the bus. A black woman holding a white woman’s hand would have been met with disapproval from the city’s white residents.

It is often difficult to explain to the younger generation of South Africans, who were born to freedom, that apartheid was both brutal and extraordinarily petty. It is difficult to explain the lengths to which the regime would go to keep the races

apart, from banning interracial relationships, to creating separate bus stops, entrances to buildings, public toilets, to even segregating beaches.

On Reconciliation Day each year, we reflect on how far we have come in advancing national reconciliation. It is important that we deal decisively with the obstacles to reconciliation, among them the high levels of inequality in our country and the persistence of racist attitudes and practices.

But it is equally important to acknowledge just how vastly different our country is today to what it was 26 years ago. For every negative story of racism that makes the news, there are countless other positive stories of racial integration, communities living in harmony and social cohesion that do not generate headlines.

Many of these can be found on the same #ImStaying thread. They are simple, everyday stories of South Africans living and working alongside each other, being friends, and helping each other.

We know that divisions of race and class remain very real in South Africa, but these stories do show that race relations in our country are not as toxic as we are often led to believe.

Last year's National Reconciliation Barometer, which is published by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, noted that the optimism of respondents regarding racial unity was the highest since the inception of the study.

It also found that the majority of respondents believed race relations have improved since 1994.

It is noteworthy that most South Africans report they would like to interact more often with people from other race groups but cite language and confidence as the two greatest barriers.

This is ahead of other perceived factors such as lack of common ground, anxiety, or negative prior experiences.

It is obvious that true reconciliation is impossible unless we overcome the social and economic inequalities that persist in our society. It is only when the playing fields of opportunity are levelled and the lives of all South Africans improve that social cohesion will be strengthened.

But we should at the same time not discount the important gestures in our everyday interactions that demonstrate our commitment to reconciliation between the races; and breaking language barriers is perhaps among the most important of them.

Reconciliation is a weighty concept, and there may be many who are unsure as to what they can actually do to advance racial reconciliation. We may feel reticent to take the first step or to reach out, for fear of being judged or even rejected.

On this Reconciliation Day, I call on each of our citizens to think of the simple things they could do to reach out across the racial divide in their everyday lives. One way of doing this is to learn another South African language.

By trying to learn the language of your friend, your colleague, your neighbour or the people you interact with daily in public places, you go beyond just demonstrating cross-cultural understanding. You open up the space for real communication.

We need to find ways to reach beyond our social and professional circles, to appreciate other people's points of view. Through sporting, cultural and religious activities, we can find ways to interact with fellow South Africans from a diversity of backgrounds.

We should recognise that in addition to the fundamental changes we need to make in the structure of our economy and society, reconciliation can be built through our every-day activities. Madiba saw this in sport, for example, and demonstrated its great potential for nation-building. He said: "Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to unite in a way that little else does."

Our response to the coronavirus pandemic has shown that we are at our best when we extend hands of solidarity and compassion to one another.

Now, as we rebuild our society, let us place this spirit of generosity at the centre of our national character.

I wish you all a joyful and a meaningful Reconciliation Day.

With best regards,

*Cyril Ramaphosa*

