

South Africa must get a little more playful

AS KEN Owen rightly pointed out in his weekly Sunday sermon, it would be easy to dismiss the massive outpouring of emotion on National Peace Day on September 2 as "a dangerous illusion, as mere frippery" (*Sunday Times*, September 5). But many hearts were touched by the formation of human chains and other activities that added up to a rare display of solidarity.

Sceptics may have scoffed at its value, but there is no doubt that Peace Day succeeded in reinforcing the peace message, elevating public awareness and creating a national "peace" consciousness.

But to what extent the alienated imbibed the peace message is a moot point. By all accounts, South Africa's disaffected black youth are prone to pursue violent solutions to their problems, represent a sizeable proportion of the body politic, and have the capacity to sabotage any peaceful transformation of society.

To what extent National Peace Month consolidated the national healing process is equally uncertain. The yardstick by which its success must be measured is the degree to which its message had any visible impact in the townships. Did its activities – forgive the marketing metaphor – penetrate the target market?

After all, it is pointless aiming peace activities at persons far removed from the violence – at the sofa-bound, safely ensconced in their suburban comfort zones, with their thoughts focused only on activating the television remote control. The relevant questions are: was there any visible decline in the intensity of violence? Did township communities feel any less vulnerable, any less threatened?

The carnage after Peace Day was far from reassuring.

The challenge for peace workers remains. The quest is still for means to span the gulf that divides communities, to create unity between seemingly incompatible enemies, and to make the peace message omnipresent and sustainable.

Hobbling the current national peace programme is its bias towards the "symbolic", an emphasis which tends to trivialise and dilute the influence of peace initiatives. Symbolic activities encourage passivity, can reduce potential participants to bystanders, and use "soft mediums" to transmit their message – hence, peace walks, peace pledges, peace songs, minutes of silence, and the wearing of peace ribbons.

If this distortion is to be corrected, the nature and form of peace efforts need to be revisited. The desperate situation calls for creative solutions – what I would call "synergising", with symbolic and interactive activities dovetailing with each other.

A pioneering concept developing impetus in black townships is the role of sport and music as instruments of peace. Sport and music are widely recognised as universal cultural equalisers and tend to contribute meaningfully to peace efforts where other, more symbolic, activities fail.

The football, arguably, is emerging as the peace mascot of embattled Natal/KwaZulu. In the past three months, at least three pilot soccer projects have been launched in the region,

including an ambitious multi-million-rand coaching programme in Umlazi, Durban's largest formal township.

The status of the soccer ball as an instrument of peace was affirmed in July this year when the community of Malukazi celebrated the signing of a peace pact with a friendly soccer match between the ANC and the IFP. Soccer was the one factor which both sides in the conflict identified as an interest.

The Malukazi soccer tournament was hailed as a first because it brought warring factions together in a fun day aimed at reconciliation. It highlighted the fact that a community polarised into two camps, with slender resources at its disposal, can plan and implement joint projects.

Sports psychologist and author Ken Jennings, who flew from Johannesburg to observe the match, hailed it as a model for other communities to emulate and said South Africans needed to get "a little more playful".

Just as communities need to become active participants in shaping their own social and economic development, so do warring communities need to participate in forging their own ceasefires (with a little discreet intervention to facilitate the process) if peace is to percolate down to grassroots.

In his book *Mind in Sport – Directing Energy Flow into Success*,

Jennings examines the role of sport as an alternative to violence. He observes that sport can break down barriers and transcend the constraints of ideological heterogeneity.

Violence and play are mutually exclusive concepts. The informal atmosphere during friendly, contact sport is conducive to building community relations, not destroying them. As Jennings points out: "A playful context allows for opportunities to build relationships in a natural, non-threatening way."

Play liberates individuals from the confines of political affiliation – of belonging to opposing political parties that are locked into a contest for power. While it would be naive to suggest that sports programmes, on their own, would heal the kind of rift tormenting Natal, it is certainly true that sport emphasises common humanity and shared experience rather than differences.

Reconciliation, by means of participation in sport, takes place on a subterranean level, more intimately and subtly than can be achieved by more symbolic practices. Individuals are not even aware it is happening.

Jennings points to the Springbok cricket tour of the West Indies as an example of how sport has broken more racial barriers in our communities than any speech from a politician. "Sport administrators need to work hard at bonding communities," he says. "Sport should show politicians the way."

Self-conscious attempts to hard-sell peace will not bring about the desired change in attitude. The time has surely arrived for a comprehensive and imaginative package of peace measures, which incorporates both practical and symbolic elements. Only then will the process deliver tangible fruits.

Ed Tillett is a spokesperson for the Inkatha Freedom Party and based at the IFP Information Centre in Durban.

By ED TILLETT