

Faith leaders can shape perceptions

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INLSA Support: Bishop Joe Seoka at a memorial service for Lonmin miners. Faith leaders can bridge chasms of misunderstanding, says the writer. Picture: Phill Magakoe

For many countries, the need for nation branding on the world stage has become a major imperative in recent years. Whether stimulated by the need to pursue individual national objectives of trade and investment, or to support specific tourism promotion initiatives, positioning a country's brand has never been more important.

With the backdrop of the recent events in Marikana that have projected our country in a bad light, it is crucial that all of us, including members and leaders of various faith persuasions, ask ourselves what role we are playing to position SA as a country which can still attract much needed investments from all over the world.

Positioning a country for investment purposes among others requires the active participation and support of all those decision-makers, opinion-formers and leaders in the country who are committed to spreading the positive word. This does not for a minute mean denial of the negative.

South Africa is a unique, progressive and caring nation that is open for business and ready to welcome the world to its shores. It needs consistent and constant messaging through a range of powerful global platforms, delivered by voices of authority, trust and knowledge, in order to reach the hearts and minds of those who need to change their perceptions.

In the world of global business, corporations would take the approach of focusing solely on their strengths to take attention away from any perceived weaknesses, however in the case of nation branding, a country brand is about positioning it in the best possible light while acknowledging that it has its own unique strengths and weaknesses. This is when unified voices of authority and trust come into their own when working to position SA's nation brand on the global stage, and none more so than the voices of the country's faith leaders.

There is a definitive role to be played by SA's faith leaders in terms of contributing to the positioning of SA to the world and helping to shape perceptions of the country in the hearts and minds of diverse global audiences. Such a nation branding role would reflect the

important and unique roles played by SA's faith leaders in national life and also reflect a distinctly different perspective from the corporate or government voice in positioning the country on the global stage.

Faith leaders have the capacity to recognise the intrinsic, unique features of our country's essential character and to differentiate it from every other country in the world. Through its rich traditions, the diversity of its people, its powerful history and heritage and its unique natural resources, SA has a unique story to tell.

Faith-based organisations and leaders have a powerful, non-partisan voice with which to convey good-news stories as well as bad news that have the capacity to express and amplify South Africa's nation-brand in a non-commercial way, but focus on the planet and people. This in turn will dovetail with other complementary national branding initiatives seeking to percolate good-news stories.

Another important role to be played by SA's faith leaders in positioning the country globally is to promote a spirit of inclusivity and openness between faith institutions and the international press and broadcast media. This will certainly improve relationships and the way that the country is portrayed in the global media environment. Faith leaders are well positioned to stimulate positive and meaningful dialogue in the media which support unifying nation brand themes and keep pushing country values that support South Africa's strategic nation building position in the global marketplace.

The voices and messages of the country's faith leaders ensure that accurate news and positive images of the country are proactively portrayed to enhance and support the overall national strategic positioning, while at the same time avoiding blatant distortions, manipulation or attempts to control press and media relationships, as in the fear of the secrecy bill.

Finally, faith leaders can assume an important ambassadorial role as that of enablers and facilitators. Through a process of advocacy and thought leadership, they can become a trusted and authoritative voice, spreading powerful news and messages about South Africa when travelling and participating in events across the world. They can shape more informed perceptions of the country on the part of overseas visitors and delegations of foreign faith leaders, providing accurate news, images and updates on new, progressive developments in the country. In turn, those visiting the country will take back to their own nations and peoples an informed perception of SA as a nation on the move in the global marketplace.

However, it must be recognised that with a more proactive role on the part of faith leaders in the positioning of South Africa, there comes social responsibility.

South Africa's image in the global marketplace can also be negatively influenced by domestic issues and events that garner the wrong kind of global media and public attention, for example with the recent Marikana mine conflict.

This story was carried for many days around the world by a plethora of global media outlets, all reflecting poorly on South Africa's image through their coverage of the tragic situation that unfolded. There was an opportunity missed by the country's faith-based leaders, with the exception of a few from the SACC and other churches, to publicly show the world that they can play an active role in helping to reduce conflict and address the critical needs of society

through a multicultural and interreligious approach that espouses religious tolerance and a shared concern for humanity.

Enlightened faith leaders and scholars of all faiths have a key role to play in situations such as the Marikana mine conflict.

Their advocacy and wisdom can influence political leaders and ordinary citizens alike. Their teaching and guidance can inspire people to new levels of responsibility, commitment and public service, and by their example, they can promote interfaith dialogue and bridge the chasms of ignorance and misunderstanding.

This is as much a factor in the process of successful nation building and the dispelling of uninformed perceptions of SA in the global marketplace, as any other marketing campaign or media exercise devised to encourage visitors and investment.

At the end of the day we have to answer the question on whether faith-based organisations have critically engaged with South Africa over the last 20 years to cement the fundamentals that can create sustainable stability necessary for investments to keep flowing, as well as flourishing, for the benefit of the poorest of the poor. Let's play our part in holding up SA as a beacon of hope for the downtrodden all over the world.

<http://www.iol.co.za/the-star/faith-leaders-can-shape-perceptions-1.1409659>