

## **TOLERANCE - WHAT WOULD THE FOUNDERS DO?**

I am writing to offer my dissenting opinion to the recent unveiling of the TOLERANCE sculpture at St Stithians College. First off, let me extend my profound appreciation to the leadership of the St Stithians College for offering this opinion piece a platform. It is a true mark of distinction and excellence when an educational institution honors contrarian views. Secondly, a humble disclaimer – the views expressed herein are those of the author – but I dare say not of the author alone. A recent opinion column in a prominent business news paper described “pockets of mild complaint about the sculpture...” among some at the school, describing it as “...an intolerant rejection of an appeal for tolerance”. I am happy to lend a face to the pockets.

Finally, as is customary in good contests, the presentation of credentials. Unlike many that have opined on the TOLERANCE sculpture and indeed in view of the subject matter, it may come as a disappointment that I am not an art critic. I am not a philosopher and neither am I a religious scholar – credentials that may no doubt have been useful to the debate. My only qualifications in the matter are that I am a parent of three children. I am heavily invested in their future and I have selected St Stithians College as my partner to assist me in shaping and molding the individuals that they are becoming. As such, I care deeply about the wellbeing of my partner in this noble and daunting venture.

To the meat of the discussion. The intention of the TOLERANCE art work in the interest of brevity and to my understanding, is to acknowledge that there are numerous gods and belief systems in the world and secondly to foster the acknowledgement of and respect for those various gods and religions by others that may not be adherents or devotees. To quote the artist Guy Ferrer’s view “A word becomes intelligible because of each letter, each one being indispensable and of equal importance in order to carry out the meaning. In this way, the various cultures and spiritual beliefs of our different societies can live together fraternally and complement each other in the shared hope of a dynamic and reciprocal respect.” Further to quote the view of Mark Read of the Everard Read Gallery and facilitator of the sculpture making its way to South Africa and to St. Stithians, “...it is more important now to believe in your own god, profoundly so, but also to have total tolerance for those who have other gods”.

So why in the world would a reasonable person disagree with this art work being exhibited at St Stithians. To be clear, I have no view on the art itself or the artist and his intentions for his art work. The worship of various gods and everyone’s entitlement to respect for having different beliefs is not in contention here.

What is at issue in my view is the purpose, the intent and indeed the very identity of St. Stithians College. The College Statement of Intent and Purpose states among other things that the college is striving to “live out a Methodist ethos, providing diverse opportunities for our students and staff to honour God, honour others and honour self”. A brief history of the school is instructive here. It was constituted in 1941 through the generous endowment by Albert Collins, a devout Methodist, of funds and property bequeathed for the express purpose of “the establishment of a Methodist Educational School in Johannesburg or its vicinity under the control of the Methodist Church of South Africa”. This endowment and Collins’ wishes are recorded in a Trust Deed. The Trust Deed as amended goes on to state that the trustees’ interpretation of the “true intent of this legacy in relation to the College being a Methodist Education School...is that the College is a church school espousing a Christian Methodist ethos and set of values...”. This same tenet is also enshrined in the Constitution of the College as well as the College Charter. In their wisdom, the leadership of the College distilled these principles into a Statement of Spirituality. The Statement of Spirituality is an attempt, to quote *verbatim* “...to summarise in brief the essence of Christian belief and its expression in the Methodist tradition”. It states among other things, that “Christians ‘believe that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, live in communion with God and in the power of the Holy Spirit, and take their place in the fellowship of Christ’s church.’ (A *Catechism for the use of the people called Methodists*)”.

From my read of the foundational documents above which are part of the College DNA, and to my knowledge, Christian belief stands on the *non-inclusive* principle that there is only one God – not many. A recognition and indeed a celebration of different gods as the TOLERANCE sculpture does would in my view be antithetical to this principle. In the interests of full disclosure, I am not a Methodist. However, for the purposes hereof, what I believe is actually immaterial. These principles were believed fervently by the people who started the College. So fervently did they believe them in fact that they gave of their considerable wealth and largesse so that a school run on these principles could be founded. Furthermore, these principles are publicly available and easily accessible on the College website.

There could be several counter arguments to this dissenting view. For instance, one may argue that the school leadership including the oversight of the superintending Reverend of the Methodist church are fine with the sculpture, who am I not be? My response would be that first and foremost, I have the utmost respect and admiration for the leadership of the College. The high caliber, passion and vision of the College leadership are prime among the reasons why I have partnered Saints for my children’s future. I have full confidence in them. However, that is no reason

for me not to question a decision. That is no reason not to put up my hand and say, I do not agree with this decision. In my view, too many times in South Africa and in Africa, we are afraid to question leadership. We are afraid to challenge the “elders”. We are fearful of speaking out where we dissent, perhaps afraid that our dissent will be conflated with hatred, opposition or disloyalty. I am not afraid to question and neither am I afraid to be wrong if I can be shown to be wrong. Indeed, I would hope that the school is training our children to have the freedom and the confidence to question leaders’ decisions – with respect and decorum.

One could raise the argument that the Saint’s foundational documents, are expansive beyond the narrow position that I have highlighted above. The argument would be made that notwithstanding the tenets above, it is also true that the College welcomes those who are not adherents to the Methodist denomination of the Christian faith. For instance the College Charter’s stated purpose and core principle is Honor God, Honor Self, Honor Others. Within the Honor Self pillar it is expressly stated that “The unique richness of every member of the school community is valued and respected, irrespective of class, gender, race or religion. We allow differences to be recognized within a spirit of humility and acceptance, without compromising the integrity of the College”. I would contend that this is indeed true and not inconsistent with my position. Respecting, valuing and honoring others who are not Methodists or Christians, does not in any way contradict the school’s purpose and intent and neither does it take precedence. In fact I believe it is the invocation of those who adhere to the Christian ethos and values to not only value and respect but indeed to *love* those who are different from them.

This is at the crux of my argument. On almost every platform for discussion of contemporary issues such as faith, race, gender and sexuality, politics and others – the ugly monster of prejudice rears its head. It has become impossible in modern parlance to hold opposing views without arousing the vitriol and hatred of those on the other side of the argument. Ubiquitous social media access has promoted a corrosive “cancel” culture that seeks to shame those with whom we disagree and make their lives miserable. It is common practice to lampoon others as racists, homophobes, sexists, religious fundamentalists and so when we have not even taken the time to engage them or get to know them. The end goal being to get them to abandon their beliefs. I am of the firm view that it is possible to respect, value and in fact love others and yet not agree with or celebrate their particular view points whether on faith, sexuality, race or any other view. There are two equal and opposite errors, to borrow from C.S. Lewis concerning these issues – the first one is to abandon one’s beliefs altogether and to take on board every position in the vain hope that one is promoting tolerance and inclusivity and the second is to

radicalize one's views, believing everyone who does not share one's views however progressive they may seem to them to be the enemy. There is a radical middle, which I implore St. Stithians College to defend and maintain. It is one where principle is upheld and defended steadfastly, while loving those who have a contrary view. This is after all the second most important tenet of the Christian belief on which the Founders wanted their bequest to be established.

In the final analysis, what does all of this matter – one of my children asked me? It matters to me and so I appreciate the opportunity afforded to me by the school leadership to speak out – even if in dissenting. It matters because I want to know what my long-term partner in this journey stands for. It matters because we need to stand for what we believe. I believe throughout history, the struggle for progress of our species in various fields has been led by those who stood on firm on their values and principles. To attempt to accommodate every view, belief and stand point is futile. To borrow from Peter Marshall if we don't stand for anything, we will fall for everything. A business which over time abandons its values and principles is in the long run not viewed favorably by its stakeholders. St. Stithians College is a sought-after educational institution because of its DNA not in spite of it. Many that make up the St. Stithians community have the luxury of optionality, but they choose this great school with its history and ethos. Let us not sacrifice that at the altar of post-modernism. Taking this stand may be viewed as parochial, backward or worse. My counter would be I am better off knowing where the school stands viz the wishes of its founders than contending with the slippery slope of appeasement and inclusiveness.