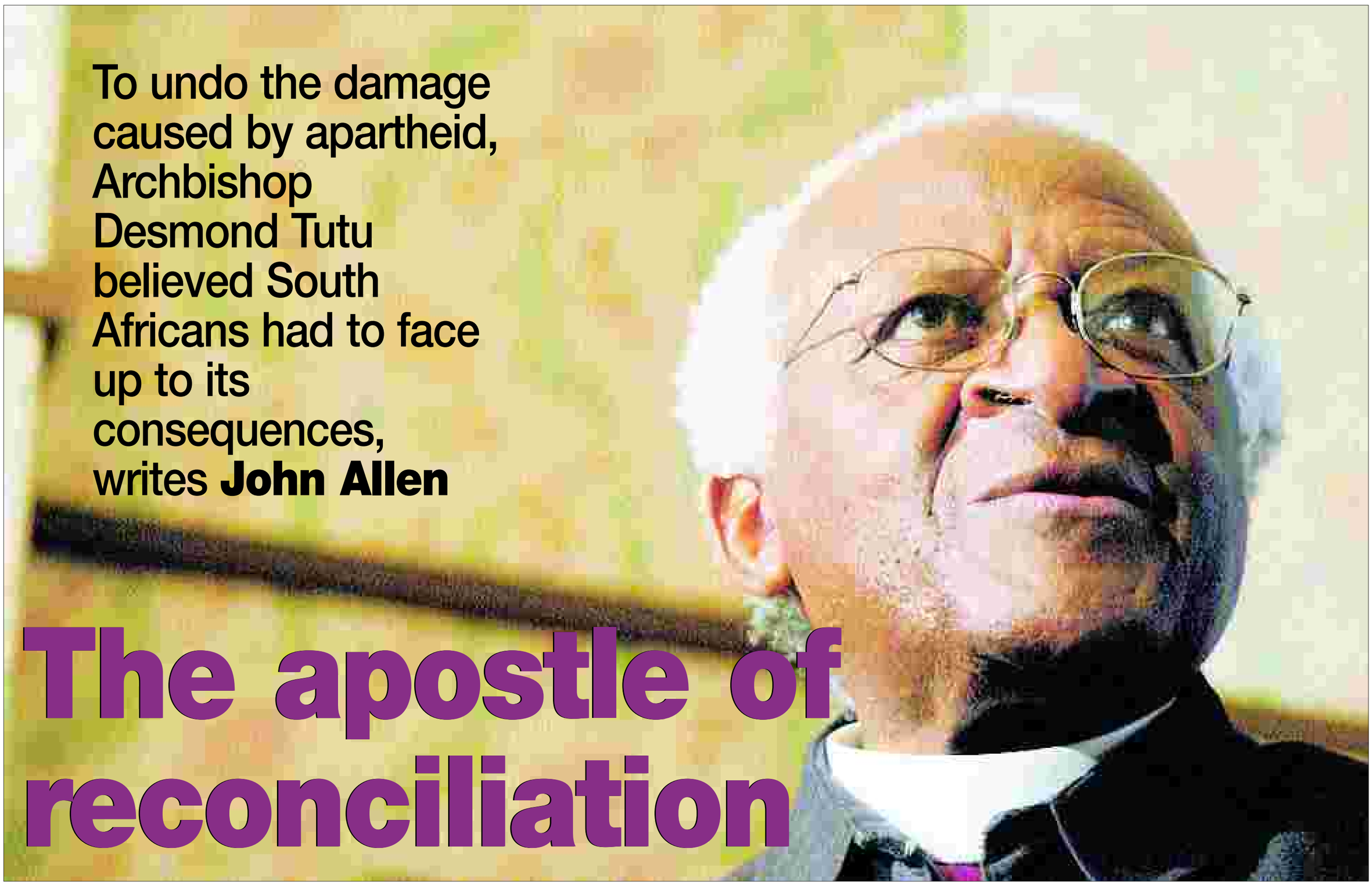
To undo the damage caused by apartheid, Archbishop Desmond Tutu believed South Africans had to face up to its consequences, writes John Allen



The apostle of reconciliation

JOHN Allen explores the relationship between Desmond Tutu and FW de Klerk in his book *Rabble-rouser for Peace*

IN 1987, in a series of presentations to an Anglican church consultation, Desmond Tutu spelled out his vision for reconciliation in South Africa. He likened the country under apartheid to the depiction of the world in the book of *Genesis* after the Fall of Adam and Eve: a place in which harmony had been shattered by sin – alienation, disharmony, and separation. Quoting the Bible, he said the church's calling was to work for the fulfilment of God's vision of "a new Heaven and a new Earth," in which "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid." But this would not be achieved without offending the powerful.

"Often there have been those who have wanted to provide a spurious kind of reconciliation … a crying of 'Peace, peace, where there is no peace', a daubing of the wall with whitewash, a papering over of the cracks instead of dealing with the situation as it demands, seriously facing up to the unpleasantness of it all.

"In South Africa, we have often heard people speaking disapprovingly of what they have called 'confrontation', which they then opposed to 'reconciliation'. In this way… glorious gospel words have fallen into disrepute and have been devalued so that many have come to think that 'reconciliation' meant making peace with evil, immorality, injustice, oppression and viciousness of which they are the victims and, quite rightly, they have rejected such a travesty of the genuine article. How could anyone think that true reconciliation could avoid a proper confrontation?"

Although Tutu developed this statement as a theological rationale for the struggle against apartheid, it also neatly summarised the thinking which underpinned his main preoccupation for the better part of the next two decades.

As apartheid was dismantled, he insisted – initially in the churches, to then-president FW de Klerk, and eventually through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – that if South Africans were to overcome the damage it had caused they had to face up to and work through its consequences. He advocated an explicitly Christian model of achieving reconciliation, involving three separate, successive transactions.

Two of them required action from the perpetrators or beneficiaries of apartheid; the third involved a generous response from its victims. His best-known elucidation of the model was delivered at a national conference of South African church leaders near Rustenburg, north-west of Johannesburg, nine months after former president Nelson Mandela's release.

The conference brought together an unprecedented range of South African churches. In an opening sermon, Tutu made the point that church leaders could not credibly preach reconciliation to the country if they were not reconciled among themselves. For this reconciliation to happen, he said, those responsible for apartheid first had to confess their sin.

In the second transaction, the victims were under a "gospel imperative" to forgive.

In the third, those who had committed wrongs had to make restitution: "If I have stolen your pen, I can't really be contrite when I say, 'Please forgive me', if at the same time I still keep your pen. If I am truly repentant, I will demonstrate this genuine repentance by returning your pen."

His sermon was followed by a moving apology for apartheid from another speaker, Willie Jonker, a theologian from Stellenbosch University, the intellectual heart of Afrikaner nationalism.

The apology, endorsed the next day by the main white Dutch Reformed church, sent ripples through the Reformed Church family and the Afrikaner community.

FROM one side, black and coloured Dutch Reformed churches questioned the sincerity of the white church and Tutu's right to accept the confession; from the other side, a furious former president PW Botha telephoned the church's moderator to protest.

Tutu denied that he had spoken for the conference but said he refused to impose limits on God's grace. He supported his position by quoting an associate of Steve Biko, Malusi Mpumlwana, who had once told him that while being tortured by police he had looked up at his torturers and thought to himself, "These are God's children too, and … they need you to help them recover the humanity they are losing."

Tutu said that the Dutch Reformed confession marked a "quite shattering" moment in the life of the country: "God has brought us to this moment … I speak only for myself. I cannot, when someone says, 'Forgive me,' say 'I do not.'"

The conference approved a long declaration, including an eloquent collective confession of the churches' complicity in apartheid.

Some months later, Tutu asked De Klerk for a private meeting, at which he urged the president to make a formal apology for the suffering which apartheid had caused.

De Klerk replied that his father, a member of one of the first apartheid-era cabinets, had helped to implement apartheid and that his father had not been a vicious man.

Tutu responded that he was saying the policy was vicious, not its perpetrators; but he failed to persuade De Klerk.

Two years later, De Klerk apologised: "It was not our intention to deprive people of their rights and to cause misery," he said, "but eventually apartheid led to that. Insofar as that occurred we deeply regret it … Yes, we say we are sorry."

Tutu thought the apology was qualified and that De Klerk was not yet prepared to admit apartheid was intrinsically evil, but he urged that it be accepted.

"Saying sorry is not an easy thing to do," he said. "We all often hedge our apologies … We should be magnanimous and accept it as a magnanimous act."

The issue would return to haunt their relationship during the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As the evidence of atrocities mounted, the commission turned its attention to the leaders under whom they had occurred.

Tutu was instrumental in calling to account three leaders: Botha, De Klerk and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. He did so not as a dispassionate adjudicator of the law, dispensing justice from Olympian heights to people he had never encountered. He was, rather, an emotional, committed advocate, dealing with people he knew well and willing to bend over backwards to persuade them to make the confessions by which they could appropriate the forgiveness they were being offered.

De Klerk made his first presentation to the TRC before the amnesty hearings of the Vlakplaas commanders Jac Cronje and Dirk Coetzee and their men.

He acknowledged that security forces, frustrated by their incapacity to deal with revolutionary strategies, had developed "unconventional counter-strategies" which were planned on a "need-to-know" basis. But "within my knowledge and experience, they never included the authorisation of assassination, murder, torture, rape, assault or the like".

Neither did he or his colleagues "directly or indirectly ever suggest, order or authorise any such action".

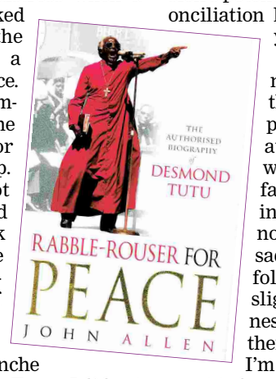
WHEN he gave evidence a second time, the confessions of the Security Branch's commanders and underlings had changed the landscape.

In an oral submission, he reiterated his apology for apartheid of 1993 but added: "Many things happened which were not authorised, not intended and of which we were not aware. The recent information of atrocities I find as shocking and as abhorrent as anybody else."

At that point, De Klerk dug in. Under extensive cross-examination, he rejected "with every fibre of energy which I have" the contention that his government had presided over systematic, state-sanctioned violence.

Replying to a statement by Tutu that the abuses hardly constituted aberrations when they continued for so long and involved such senior figures, he questioned the veracity of applicants for amnesty who said their actions had been authorised from above.

The next day, Tutu's face crumpled in distress when a journalist asked him about the hearing at a news conference. Composing himself, he said he had hoped for statesmanship. He could not comprehend how De Klerk could insist he had been unaware of atrocities.



"There was an avalanche of information. To say I did not know … I find that hard to understand. I have to get to say that I sat there and I was close to tears. I feel sorry for him. I am devastated. [For him] to make an impassioned apology … and then to negate it. All that is required is to say that 'we believed in this policy but it is a policy that brought about all of this suffering. It is a policy that killed people. Not by accident, deliberately. It was planned.'"

The commission's frustration at failing either to pin responsibility for violations of human rights on De Klerk, or to engage him in Tutu's effort to find a white leader to accept accountability for atrocities, was displayed in the embarrassing weakness of its finding against him.

FW de Klerk acknowledged in his autobiography that the TRC badly damaged his image. After its main report was published, a newspaper headlined his presence at a meeting of the State Security Council in 1984 at which an education minister wanted two teachers in the Eastern Cape town of Cradock "removed".

Fifteen months later the teachers were among four people murdered by the police. De Klerk told the newspaper the intention had been that the teachers should be transferred to another town.

The writer, exploring the damage that the clash between Tutu and De Klerk did to their relationship, asked De Klerk what had gone through his mind when he heard of the deaths of the teachers.

Did he ever think, there's something wrong here? De Klerk's answer, given Tutu's willingness to encourage "flickering flames" – a phrase he used to defend Madikizela-Mandela's widely-derided apology in front of the TRC – might have enhanced the commission's potential to promote reconciliation had it come eight years earlier.

"De Klerk: I never knew about this and I was never part of any policies authorising it. But where maybe I failed was not asking more questions, not going on a crusade about things… following up on a slight uncomfortableness you feel here and there … In my case, I'm not saying I didn't want to know.

"But I do think, with the advantage of hindsight, that I was at times maybe not strong enough on following up on my instincts. But that doesn't take away from the fact that at no time was any decision taken of which I was part, where I felt, 'This is actually authorising assassination or cold-blooded murder'.

"And I remember distinctly one incident, which I didn't write about [in the autobiography] and therefore will not identify, where I, at a function, got extremely upset, because what I heard was meaning that there had been what in my [judgement] would mean unacceptable behaviour. And I exploded in front of three of the top security people in South Africa."

John Allen: Is this in the eighties?

De Klerk: Yes. And they took me aside and on their words of honour they assured me that my suspicions on that particular occasion were unfounded.

Allen: Do you recall generally what the nature of the issue was? That people had been killed?

De Klerk: Ja [Yes], there were deaths involved. And on their word of honour [they] assured me … and it was people I had respect for.

■ John Allen, managing editor of the African news website, *AllAfrica.com*, has reported on and worked with Tutu for 30 years.

He met Tutu shortly after the Soweto uprising of 1976, when he was appointed religion correspondent of *The Star*. After Tutu was appointed Archbishop of Cape Town, Allen was appointed his press secretary, and later served as director of media liaison at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and as Tutu's research assistant at Emory University, Atlanta, in the United States. From 2000 to 2004, Allen was director of communications at Trinity Church, Wall Street, in New York, where he was on the streets below the World Trade Centre during the attacks of September 11, 2001. He returned to South Africa in 2004 to write the biography.

***Rabble-rouser for Peace's* international launch will take place in Cape Town on Thursday, September 28. The recommended selling price is R245. Tomorrow, read in *The Independent on Saturday* how Tutu tried to make PW Botha remember his own mother's internment in a British concentration camp to get Botha to stop the forced removals of black South Africans from the urban areas.**