**What is restitution?**

An illustration that may help us better understand restitution is that of a stolen bicycle. Imagine that a man’s bicycle is stolen, which means he now has no transport and cannot get to work, and he loses his job. Without his job, he cannot educate his children or support his family. Perhaps he used that bicycle to run errands for the homebound elderly woman next door, who is also now affected by the loss. Jobless and frustrated, he becomes a drain on his community rather than a resource.

What would restitution look like in this situation? Certainly it is not just returning the bicycle after this damage has been done, although that would be a first step. He is not the only person who has been affected by the crime; his family, his neighbours and his community have also suffered. Now imagine that theft of not only resources such as land, education and money, but also of intangibles such as dignity, safety, self-worth and identity, one’s culture and language, an understanding of one’s rights, a sense of belonging in one’s own country, and so much more. Restitution involves seeking to set right the generational ills of inequality and loss by engaging those who have benefitted from the system, directly or indirectly, in transferring wealth and social capital and reinvesting in communities that still suffer from the past’s grim legacy.

Another analogy is that of a soccer match. Imagine two teams are playing a soccer match, but the pitch is tilted at a 45-degree angle. The side defending the higher ground is able to run up a score of 1000 goals to 0. At a certain point during the match the advantaged team realises that the match is not fair and that the playing field must be levelled. While an important start, the decision to level the playing field is only the beginning of doing justice to the deprived team: after all, the score is still 1000 to 0.

To simply level the score of the match and continue with the game is also not good enough. For the duration of the match the disadvantaged team has had to play uphill, causing the team members to be more exhausted than the team playing downhill and to suffer many injuries. To do justice to both teams, the score should be adjusted to compensate for the disadvantage or the match should be abandoned and replayed on another day.

Restitution within the South African context has not only to do with levelling the playing field. It includes addressing the cumulative advantage some sectors within society enjoyed in order to address the imbalances created by our past. The process of restitution recognises that this is precisely the situation we face in South Africa today. How do we make restitution for not just the tangible but intangible things that were lost under apartheid? This is something we must struggle through together, with both humility and hope.

Whilst not the only communities and groups who can address this question, churches are uniquely situated to deal with it in South Africa at this time. We are a deeply religious nation, yet our faith has been profoundly compromised by the political climate sustained for several generations. The church remains intensely segregated, which results in a continuing segregation of resources which is self-perpetuating. Through restitution, we seek to make Christians aware of their complicity with unjust systems, engage them in ways to relate afresh to their neighbours and to begin rectifying the situation. Through this a model can be created that will capture the imagination of the country, Christian and non-Christian alike, bringing about transformation.