

Citation for Michael Lapsley, honorary graduand, Rhodes University, 2020

By Paul Maylam

Thirty years ago, in late April 1990, Michael Lapsley went through an unimaginably horrendous, gruesome experience. Sitting at his home in Harare he opened an envelope posted from South Africa containing two religious magazines and, fatefully, also a parcel bomb, sent by the apartheid regime to kill him, as it had killed others, like Ruth First and Jeanette Schoon, in the same way. This was a life-threatening and life-changing moment for Michael Lapsley. The bomb took away his two hands and an eye, but he survived – indeed, has more than survived.

Why had he become a target? He grew up in New Zealand, one of seven children, born into a loving Christian family. He trained for the Anglican ministry in Australia, joining the Society of the Sacred Mission, taking the vow of poverty, celibacy and obedience, and in 1973 being sent by the Society to South Africa; there taking up the position of chaplain at what were then the University of Natal and the University of Durban-Westville, and soon being appointed as the national university chaplain, requiring him to travel to various campuses where he would speak out against the detention, torture and killing of students.

Having become particularly outspoken against the apartheid state after the 1976 Soweto uprising he was expelled from South Africa, then being sent by his order to Lesotho, where Desmond Tutu was the bishop. There he joined the ANC, believing its vision for South Africa embodied the gospel message of liberation – at the same time abandoning pacifism and supporting the ANC's armed struggle campaign. This earned him the disapproval of the Anglican Church, which effectively banished him from Lesotho, leading him to move to Zimbabwe where he became involved in ANC structures, making him a target of the South African security apparatus and necessitating police protection for him.

Then came the parcel bomb – three months after the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Mandela – developments which seemingly reduced the need for vigilance and protection for activists like Michael. With the bomb came immediate, excruciating pain, a sense of utter helplessness, and then eight months in hospital – the first in Zimbabwe and seven in Australia. Might it not have been better to be dead, he thought to himself. But overwhelmed by the messages of love, support and prayer from across the world, and feeling God's presence, he found inner strength. Moreover there were no major internal injuries, his mind was still clear, and his tongue intact.

Importantly, too, he stopped seeing himself as a victim, but rather as the victor. The real victims were the perpetrators who sent the bomb. In 1996

Michael testified at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, hoping the perpetrators would be identified, but this was not to be.

In the meantime there was the arduous process of managing the disability – once out of hospital the formidable challenge of managing simple tasks – prosthetic aids enabled him to type and drive a car, but it was very difficult, for instance, to undo the button of his shirt.

In 1991 he returned to South Africa for a brief visit and was invited by Archbishop Tutu to serve as a priest in the Cape Town diocese. Back permanently in South Africa the following year he soon became the chaplain of Cape Town's Trauma Centre for Victims of Violence and Torture – a field in which he has continued to work till this day. This was a major transition for him – from freedom-fighter to healer.

This work led to the founding, in 1998, of the Institute for Healing of Memories, based in Cape Town, and currently directed by Michael. The Institute conducts workshops at which people can tell their individual stories and work through their traumatic experiences – experiences of apartheid repression, child abuse, marital abuse, poverty, violence, HIV/AIDS – the effects of such experiences explored at an emotional, psychological and spiritual level.

Father Michael has conducted such workshops across the world – in Rwanda in 1998 for survivors of the 1994 genocide; in northern Uganda for survivors of atrocities committed by the so-called Lord's Resistance Army which had specialised in cutting off the limbs of its victims, giving this workshop a special meaning for Michael. There have been other workshops in Australia, Zimbabwe, and the US, and many in South Africa.

For Father Michael this work has been particularly enriching: 'it's impossible', he says, 'to overestimate the gifts that have come my way through the Healing of Memories work that I do'. With this comes the realisation as to how he became involved in this particular ministry – 'it was the bombing that made that possible', he says.

A central unifying strand of his life has been his faith – this has informed his healing ministry. He calls on victims to be freed from hatred that can poison them. As victims heal they cease to be passive and become active agents again. As a healer Father Michael works to free people from being imprisoned in their past.

For his contribution to both liberation and healing Father Michael has received numerous awards: New Zealand's Queen's Service Medal; the Order of the Disa from the Western Cape government; a Living Heroes Award from the Program for Torture Victims in Los Angeles; a Living Legends Award from the city of Johannesburg; and honorary doctorates bestowed on him in Australia, the

UK, the US and South Africa. He is vice-president of the South African Council of Churches, and honorary consul for New Zealand in Cape Town.

Nelson Mandela once said of Michael Lapsley that his 'life is part of the tapestry of the many long journeys and struggles of our people'. Archbishop Tutu has expressed his 'awe and admiration' for Father Michael, saying that 'although he was broken physically, he has become the most whole person I know, truly a wounded healer'. Helen Clark, the former prime minister of New Zealand, has said his 'story will inspire suffering people across the globe who long for freedom and hope'.

Inspirational indeed – today we honour Michael Lapsley for his courage in the fight for freedom and for the brave fight against his own infirmity; a healer who has drawn upon his own harrowing experience to dedicate three decades of his life to helping others overcome their own traumas and agonies so that they can be freed from hatred and made whole.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on Michael Lapsley the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.