

Consultation of S.A. Church Leaders on Racism in South Africa, Hammanskraal
11-15th February, 1980

General remarks.

The Consultation was convened and organised by the South African Council of Churches in response to a resolution of the WCC Executive Committee in Jamaica, in 1979 on the future of the Programme to Combat Racism. In accordance with this resolution the South African member churches had been asked to prepare a report on their evaluation of the PCR, on their participation in the program and on their proposals for the future. In the circular letter inviting them to the Consultation, the South African WCC member churches had been asked to work out a paper on each of the following topics:

- a) describe the denomination historically and statistically. I know that some no longer provide racially determined statistics but please be as detailed and as comprehensive as possible, showing what racism has meant in the life of your church e.g. regarding church leadership positions, remuneration, church appointments, representativeness of church bodies, synods, assemblies, committee trust boards etc.
- b) What your church has done and is doing to combat racism during this decade including your assessment of the Programme to Combat Racism.
- c) What your church intends doing to combat racism in the 1980's.

Apart from the staff of the SACC and from occasional visitors, 32 delegates from South African churches took part in the consultation. According to the remarks of a number of delegates, more people would have attended the meeting, if it would have been possible to send out the invitations earlier. Of the 32 participants 21 were black people (including Coloureds and Indians). Only one of the 32 delegates was a woman.

The staff of the SACC acted as facilitators of the Conference. They were concerned to allow the Consultation to take its course as a gathering for which the church delegates themselves were responsible.

In spite of the delicate problems that were discussed, the fellowship at the Consultation was very good. The morning communion services and the bible studies were of central significance in the Consultation. The texts chosen for the bible studies were the following:

Gal. 3: Freedom from the law (Dr. M. Mokoena)

Eph. 3: We receive grace on behalf of others
(Dr. Charles Villa-Vicencio)

Matt. 13:53-58: God takes man's opposition to his
grace seriously (Dr. Allan Boesak)

The context of the Consultation.

The Silverton Siege

The Consultation took place at a time when the general situation in the Republic of South Africa was tense. On Saturday, two days prior to the beginning of the Consultation, the funeral of Mr. Mafoko, one of the three black young men, who had been involved and killed in the so-called Silverton siege, had taken place in Soweto. According to the newspaper reports approximately 15 000 people had taken part in the funeral. Most of them were young people.

The participants in the funeral openly had honoured the young man who lost his life in the Silverton siege as a liberation fighter, whereas the white people regarded him and his two comrades as terrorists.

When the funeral of Mr. Mafoko took place in Soweto the police intervened with teargas and caused great consternation and bitterness. Eight people had to be brought to the hospital.

The contradictory evaluation of the three black people who had been involved in the Silverton siege as liberation heroes by the black people and as terrorists by the white people, had shown the depth and intensity of the difference of experience between white and black people in South Africa. This difference of experience does not prevail merely in society but separates also white and black Christians. The realisation that white and black Christians in the Republic of South Africa live in different and separate experiential settings was decisive for the whole consultation. How can there be a common understanding of the gospel and a joint response to the gospel if Christians in South Africa are not in a position to share the same experiences and to support one another in their suffering? How can they be together in one church if the white Christians enjoy the privileges of the society in which they live, privileges which arise from the exploitation and oppression of their black brethren.

Parliamentary session: No fundamental change.

Some time before the Consultation in Hammanskraal began, Parliament in Cape Town had resumed its sessions after a long break. From the reports in the newspapers it had become clear that the pace of even the limited changes which had been announced by the government for alleviating the life of black people in urban areas, would be slowed down. Government politicians had announced that the Mixed Marriages Act would not be repealed, nor would the 72 hours limit for black visitors in white urban areas of the Republic be abolished. The Government is anxious to irritate the growing right wing opposition as little as possible and to consolidate its internal power during the breathing space which the diversion of international attention to other parts of the world appears to offer to the Republic of South Africa.

The Iran and the Afganistan crisis temporarily has diverted attention from the Republic of South Africa and the high gold prices benefit the South African economy. The discovery by the police of considerable arms cache to be used by liberation movements within the country arouses alarm in the public. Parliamentary discussions reveal the extent of surveillance to which people who do not support the policy of the Nationalist government, are exposed.

III. Preparation of Conference.

The Conference had been prepared by the SACC at rather short notice. Nevertheless it was organised and planned very well. A considerable number of documents on the PCR, on topics related to racism in South Africa and on the responses of the South African Council of Churches to the PCR during the period 1969 to 1979 were made available to the delegates when the consultation began. In addition the documents prepared by the different churches for the Consultation were distributed.

Several churches had not prepared papers for the Consultation. This may have been due to the fact that the Consultation had been announced at such short notice. The memorandum of the United Congregational Church on the Programme to Combat Racism was of special value and was in part adopted by the Conference as an expression of its views on the PCR.

Since the documents were distributed only at the beginning of the Consultation, the delegates found it difficult to study ~~all the material that had been handed out to~~ them. The discussions during the Consultation revealed a very low level of information on the PCR and on the Special Fund among the representatives of the churches. This may have to be attributed to the distorted information on the PCR in the South African mass media and possibly also to the lack of adequate information from the WCC.

The relationship with the Dutch Reformed Church.

The Consultation has been given considerable press coverage. The D R C had also been invited to the Consultation. Its reponse to the invitation to the effect that it was not prepared to participate in a Consultation initiated by the WCC, was reported by the press. This response caused some agony in the SACC in view of the continuous efforts of the General Secretary, Bishop D. Tutu, to improve relationships with this Church. During the consultation he presented to the plenary a personal statement on the relationship between the SACC and its member churches on the one part and the Dutch Reformed Church on the other. He said that he had worked out this statement after much prayer.

Since the statement was presented for discussion to the plenary, several delegates though agreeing in general with its contents, pointed out that reconciliation with the DRC is not possible without confrontation concerning the crucial issues that are at stake in its relationship with the SACC member churches. They suggested that it was advisable to express this prerequisite of reconciliation in the statement. One of the delegates said: "The reason why the DRC are not here is because they are on the other side of the struggle" - "We as Christians have not only the ministry of reconciliation, but also the ministry of confrontation. We must confront them over the evil system they are supporting.

The Chairman of the Consultation and the General Secretary took account of this plea. The General Secretary, however, felt committed to leave the statement unchanged.

V. A black confessing church.

It appears that the discussion of the statement of Bishop Tutu in the plenary and in groups on the relationship with the SACC contributed, apart from the impact of the Silverton siege and the general situation in the country, to an emphasis on the part of most of the black delegates that was a characteristic feature of the Conference. The South African Churches cannot combat racism before they have not overcome racism in their own ranks and structures. Therefore it is necessary for the sake of reconciliation between the races in the churches to undergo a confrontation between white and black Christians.

The complaints of black Christians about racism in the South African Church were very clearly articulated in a lecture of Dr. A. Goba from the Federal Theological Seminary in Edenvale on the topic: The Church and the problem of Racism in South Africa a black Christian perspective.

Dr. Goba exposed racism as it shows itself in his opinion in the so-called racially integrated churches, especially

in the power structures and the leadership of these churches
in the financial control
in the doctrinal emphasis.

He emphasized that the white Church is under an obligation to repent and to make reparations available to the black Church and to the black community.

Dr. Goba's lecture was delivered on the last evening of the Conference. However the concern he expressed in his lecture came out very clearly already at an early stage of the Consultation in the group discussions and in the plenary. Already during these discussions the concept of a militant black church came to the fore. There were two versions of the concept of "black church". According to the one version the term "black", in this context describes a state of mind, a willingness to share the suffering of the oppressed which can also be found among some whites. In this sense not all black Christians are black and not all white Christians are white. The renewal of the Church can only come through identification with the suffering by following the example of Christ. The term "militant" describes the preparedness to struggle for and suffer on behalf of the oppressed and to carry the cost of confessing justice.

According to the other version of the concept of a "black church" white Christians cannot share the suffering of the black Christians and cannot experience it because of their privileged position. The term black church therefore applies in South Africa to black people in the literal sense, i.e. to people of colour.

In the plenary discussion a black minister warned that these ideas are far removed from the thinking prevailing at the parish level. One would have to be careful not to lose contact with the church members at the level of the local parish. He therefore proposed that this matter be discussed in a meeting of the black delegates. After lengthy discussions a statement emerged from this meeting which was presented to the plenary. No information was given in the plenary on the question which of the two versions of the concept "black church" had been accepted by the meeting of black delegates.

It is highly significant that this discussion on the concept of a "black church" developed in a consultation in which most of the delegates were members of the racially integrated churches who have been in the forefront of the protest against a racist policy in South Africa. One can scarcely avoid a comparison with the situation in churches which are organised along racial lines in separate churches for white and black Christians or even in separate churches for each black ethnic or tribal group. Possibly the complaint in the black churches of the denominations which are organised in this way (especially the churches of Dutch Reformed and of Lutheran tradition) that they are dominated by whites, is not as pronounced in the "integrated" churches, though the financial dependency on money from white churches or congregations might be very great. However, against the background of this impression one has to consider the advantage the so-called "integrated" churches have. Here the white churches and church representatives at least have the opportunity of becoming acquainted with and shocked by the agony black Christians experience from encountering the hidden racism prevailing among their white fellow Christians. This experience is far more difficult to be made by white people in the churches which are divided along racial lines.

I. The WCC - Programme to Combat Racism.

The priorities assigned by the delegates in the discussions to the different crucial issues are highly significant. They were less concerned about the WCC Programme to Combat Racism than about racism in the South African context. Furthermore they devoted less attention to general observations on racism in South Africa, than to racism in the context of the Church.

Nevertheless the WCC Programme to Combat Racism did receive consideration during the Consultation. After sufficient information had been given, the criticism of the white delegates of the PCR was far more moderate than one could have expected.

The plenary accepted the most important sections of the memorandum of the UCCSA on the PCR. It worked out several proposals with regard to the role that the WCC could play in the future, e.g. assistance in mediation between rival liberation movements operating from outside the country.

I. Violence in the 1980ies

A marked characteristic of the Consultation was the way in which the issue of the struggle for justice peace and reconciliation by violent or non-violent means was evaluated in the context of the real situation as it exists today in the Republic of South Africa. The main question was not how one can avoid violence in South Africa, but how the Church can contribute towards minimizing the violence that already occurs. There was a clear though shocking realisation, that the scene for violence in the 1980ies has already been set.

VIII. Withdrawal from co-operation with the state.

In several instances the Consultation touched the resolution taken by the 1979 National Conference on withdrawal from cooperation with the state. This was especially the case with the Mixed Marriages Legislation. It was suggested that the South African churches should demand abolition of this legislation and that ministers should not serve as marriage officers as long as this legislation is in force. Furthermore it was suggested that church members and church representatives should be on the spot whenever a resettlement is announced and demonstrate by their physical presence their condemnation of and resistance to the removal of people.

IX. Little attention to the tactical changes in the racial policy of South Africa.
The Consultation devoted little attention to the tactical changes in the racist policy of the Republic of South Africa by which the government tries to create the impression that racism in South Africa is dead. One had the impression that the dangers inherent in these deceptive changes are not yet sufficiently realized.

X. The roots of modern racism.

The Consultation did not have an opportunity for considering the roots of modern Western racism. It is suggested that some consideration of a historical nature is necessary if racism is to be fought effectively e.g. the isolation of Christians in Western Europe through the Moslem belt from Christians of other colour in other parts of the world, the resulting identification of being white with being Christian, the transfer of the crusading spirit in the struggle against the Moslems to the struggle of the Colonial powers against indigenous people of different colour. It is suggested that some historical perspective of the roots of racism and of the background of slavery since the 16th Century would be helpful

VI. Dr. Allan Boesak's evaluation of the discussions.

The evaluation of the discussions by Dr. Allan Boesak was a climax in the Consultation.

The main emphases in his address were the following

1. Racism exists not only in South African society, but also in the South African churches.

The Church has become part and parcel of a racist society. The first priority is to be given to combating racism in the Church.

In the Church control rests primarily in hands of white people.

2. What does the Church do to combat racism in the social, political and economic context?

3. The structures of the Church.

It will not suffice to put black persons into positions of leadership, if the structures of the Church remain as they are at present

4. What kind of black people should be given positions of leadership?

5. What kind of action can the Church implement in combating racism.
Reference to proposals on the affirmative action or withdrawal from cooperation with the state.

6. Preparation for the role of the Church in the violence of the 1980ies.

7. The redistribution of wealth. The economic problem.

The main question is not: How do people use their money?, but: How do they get that money?

How does the Church respond to a situation in a society which differs from that of the parable of the good Samaritan, in that the Church finds itself in a situation in which the robbers are still on the scene and are busy committing robbery.

XII. Continuation Committee.

A variety of measures were suggested in the different groups with a view to combating racism and bringing about changes within the period of the next twelve months.

The Consultation appointed a Continuation Committee which has the task to work out proposals for a plan of action for the member churches during the next twelve months and to monitor the changes that are to be achieved.

XIII. Evaluation.

The contribution of the Consultation lies not so much in its evaluation of the Programme to Combat Racism as in its evaluation of the Church in South Africa. To white Christians, especially to those who regard the churches as the spearhead in the struggle against racism and injustice and oppression, the message of the Consultation must come as a shock. This message is the following: Even those churches in South Africa, which are very articulate in condemning racism, cannot effectively combat racism, since they themselves are racist.

The Consultation possibly may contribute to some action being undertaken by the South African churches to eliminate some of the manifestations of racism that were exposed during the Consultation. It is, however, doubtful whether sufficient awareness exists of the roots of racism itself. Which factors in the history and tradition of Western churches have contributed towards the sickness that is described as racism? Does the same sickness not manifest itself also in other distortions of the gospel in the life of the Church, such as the tacit acceptance of militarism, the subservient role of women, the faith in an uncontrolled technology, the emphasis on ruthless competition in education, the reliance on an exploitative free enterprise system in the economy and an ambivalent understanding of man's role and responsibility in God's creation? Are these symptoms which appear to be interdependent and which usually occur in close association with racism not also a danger to the black church, as long as the root of the distortion of the gospel and of the concept of the Church that underlies them, is not taken account of?

Apparently no unanimity was reached at the Consultation on the interpretation of the concept of a black militant confessing church. According to the one version this black church in South Africa can comprise only black people, since the white people cannot in the present political social and economic dispensation share in the suffering of black people and therefore cannot relate this experience to the gospel.

According to the other version "being black" in this context describes a condition of mind, a preparedness to identify and share the suffering of black people. According to this version there are white people who can be considered as black Christians and who should not be excluded from a black militant confessing church.

Both versions agree in the insight that the Church can only ^{be} renewed by identifying with the oppressed in the name of Christ and by being prepared to be militant, i.e. to struggle and suffer with them. In this way the Church becomes a militant Church.

During the Consultation the question was raised whether it is possible to legislate the emergence of a black confessing church. Underlying this question were doubts whether it is possible to arrive at a confessing church by pressure.

No clarity was reached during the Consultation on the question where the black militant confessing church is to be found. A black minister from Soweto had warned that the ideas expressed at the Consultation would not be understood by the local parishes. One therefore, has to raise the question whether the existing black congregations in the different denomination represent the black militant confessing church. One could also ask whether the black church delegates at the Consultation are representatives of this militant black confessing church. Are they prepared to relinquish the present structures of the Church to which they belong and to accept the insecurity of a church which, if it would fulfil its purpose, would possibly have, to be active in the Republic of South Africa as an underground Church.

In this context it is necessary to refer to a remark made by a black delegate on the funeral of the three black people who had been killed in the Silverton siege. He maintained that no church had been prepared to make its buildings in Soweto available for the funeral services of these three young black people.

The Consultation gave a far more positive interpretation and evaluation to the WCC Programme to Combat Racism, including the Special Fund, than could have been expected. It stated that the Special Fund had great symbolic value at its inception. At the same time it intimated that a careful assessment is necessary whether this symbolic value is still the same at the beginning of the 1980ies. The people who made this remark were thinking of the rivalries that exist between the different liberation movements and that makes it difficult to decide which of these movements should be selected for support. In view of such rivalries the Consultation recommended that the WCC should assist in mediating between rival liberation movements

opposing the South African political system from outside the country.

With a view to the future development in the Republic of South Africa during the 1980ies, the Consultation was aware that the scene for violence has already been set. It therefore was more concerned about minimizing violence than about advocating non-violence in an absolute sense. Nevertheless the Consultation emphasised non-violent methods as the more excellent means to obtain real peace and justice. It accepted the following principle that is outlined in the memorandum of the United Congregational Church: "The Church cannot reduce its commitment to combat racism and to bring about a more just society, but it will fail in its healing and reconciling role unless it advocates change by concrete non-violent methods. Not to do so, is to leave the field open to military methods." (Appendix)

Towards the end of the section of the memorandum of the United Congregational Church of South Africa which the Consultation adopted as an expression of its own stand attention is drawn to the attitude of young black people towards the Church: "In Southern Africa today, the Church is called to live the more excellent way it preaches: nothing less will make it an alternative society. Unless this happens, the Church will lose its credibility amongst black young people, many of whom have already left the Church disillusioned"

In reflecting on the question where the militant black confessing church is to be found one can easily arrive at the conclusion that the people who at present could be regarded as the most authentic representatives of a militant black confessing church are Christians to be found in the restless young black generation and also in marginal groups of young people in white society who are engaged in creating an awareness among the people at grassroot level of the factors and forces of oppression in the Republic of South Africa and of whom very few would be represented in official church conferences. It appears that there are numerous Christians in this young generation of South Africans who cherish high expectations towards the Church, but who very easily could resort to Marxism, if these expectations were disappointed. Are the South African churches willing to grant scope to the energy, the initiative and the preparedness to suffer, prevailing among these young Christians. A positive response to this challenge appears to be decisive for the future of the Church in South Africa during the next few years.

APPENDIX.

6. CONCLUSION:

- (a) The Task Force recommends that the United Congrega-
tional Church of Southern Africa remains a member of the
World Council of Churches for the reasons given by the
1970 Assembly (see Appendix A) and reiterated in one
form or another at almost every subsequent Assembly.
- (b) That in the light of the proposal made by the
General Secretary of the W.C.C., namely, "that in the
course of the year there should be set up a process
of consultation on how the Churches might be involved
in combatting racism in the 1980's as we review what
has been done during ten years of the F.C.R.", it is
recommended that the following concerns should be
brought to the attention of the World Council of
Churches:
- (i) Desperate people frequently resort to violence
in the struggle for liberation because they
believe there is no other way of overthrowing
an oppressive system maintained by violence.
This results in an escalation of violence as
those in power strengthen their own violent
response, for which they are usually far better
equipped than any liberation force. The
ordinary person is then caught in the cross-
fire, as in Zimbabwe to-day.
- (ii) Since 1969 when the Programme to Combat Racism
was launched, the situation has shifted in
Southern Africa. The conflict is no longer,
solely, between White controlled racist
regimes and Black-forces-of-liberation.
Increasingly, Blacks are fighting Blacks in
a civil war situation where the issues are
often conflicting political ideologies or
a struggle for power, rather than liberation.
- (iii) Violent revolutions in Africa during the past
ten years have not always resulted in more
freedom for the liberated. The promise of
a democratic government voted into power in
a free election is not fulfilled, and in its
place a one-party dictatorship emerges, often
with catastrophic results, as in Uganda.

6. (b) (iv) The Church cannot reduce its commitment to combat racism and to bring about a more just society, but it will fail in its healing and reconciling role unless it advocates change by concrete non-violent means. Not to do so is to leave the field open to military methods.

The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa urges the W.C.C. to consider again the statement made by its former General Secretary Dr. Carson Blake, in a letter addressed to the German Churches at the time of the inauguration of the Programme to Combat Racism. He wrote:-

"Violence and the counter-violence it produces are not the best way to obtain real peace or true justice; non-violent methods are at all times to be exalted as the more excellent means to obtain these goods and that even when violence is being used the first task of the Christian Church is to encourage people at the first opportunity to leave the battlefield and seek the conference table.

- (v) Without prescribing how its grants should be used, we would urge the W.C.C. in making further grants to Liberation Movements to ensure that intensive dialogue takes place. The Church should have something to say about the more excellent way, even when violence is already being used.

In proposing the above suggestions for the consideration of the W.C.C., the Task Force would point out to the Assembly that much bitterness amongst Black Christians, who are the victims of institutional violence, has been caused by the ineffectiveness of repeated calls to bring about change by non-violent means. A call to non-violent action by the Church will only be heeded if it is accompanied by effective action to combat racism and injustice. In Southern Africa to-day, the Church is called to live the more excellent way it preaches; nothing less will make it an ALTERNATIVE SOCIETY. Unless this happens, the Church will lose its credibility amongst Black young people, many of whom have already left the Church disillusioned.