



Remembering the Ecumenical Struggle against Apartheid

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AT THE HEIGHT OF THE CHURCH-STATE STRUGGLE IN SOUTH AFRICA, PRESIDENT A.P. W. Botha announced a judicial commission to put the anti-apartheid South African Council of Churches (SACC) on trial. After two years of intensive investigation of the SACC's affairs, the Eloff Commission of inquiry, named for the Supreme Court judge who presided, held its tribunals in 1982. Desmond Tutu was at the time general secretary of the SACC and I was its president, so he and I had to present the evidence-in-chief on behalf of the council.¹ I was cross-examined for more than twenty hours, and no matter how just our cause, it was impossible not to feel somewhat intimidated.

Then something happened that changed that power equation. A sudden stir in the public gallery heralded a new group of visitors. Coming into the room were representatives of the World Council of Churches, the Archbishop of Canterbury,

¹Tutu's "The Divine Intention" and Storey's "Here We Stand," published by SACC in 1982, contain their opening statements to the Eloff Commission.

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Thanks to a world family of committed Christians and the solidarity of the ecumenical alliance in the struggle against South African apartheid, nowhere in the world has the Christian witness been used more powerfully by God to bring an end to a national evil.

the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the National Council of Churches in the United States, and other ecumenical bodies and world communions. Suddenly, the awesome power of Botha's apartheid state shrank: the church of God from around the world had come to stand with its brothers and sisters in South Africa. Those of us involved in the struggle found new strength, certain that in the power of God, we would overcome.

The effectiveness of the church struggle against apartheid in South Africa was shaped by its ecumenical character and by the strong bonds forged between the anti-apartheid churches in South Africa and the world church community. Had we sought to take on the regime as separate denominations, or if we had not had the support of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the world communions, the collapse of apartheid might still be years away.

The story of the WCC is intertwined from the very beginning with the anti-apartheid struggle. The year 1948 that launched the WCC in Amsterdam also saw the coming to power of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Only twelve years into its life, after the Sharpeville massacre, the WCC engaged the South African churches with both solidarity and challenge. At the Cottesloe Conference in 1960, eighty English- and Afrikaans-speaking church leaders met under WCC leadership, and this group roundly rejected the government's policies. Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, outraged that even his own Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) seemed to be doubting apartheid, whipped them back into line, but that conference resulted in the DRC "exiling" one of its ministers, Beyers Naude, who would be a thorn in Verwoerd's flesh, and those who would follow him. It also determined the forces that would oppose each other for the next thirty years: the apartheid regime/DRC alliance on one side, and on the other the "multi-racial" churches (in what became the SACC) and the world ecumenical family. In the next five years, the political leadership of the struggle would be decimated, with both Nelson Mandela of the African National Congress (ANC) and Robert Sobukwe of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in prison. Much would depend on church opposition.

In 1968, the SACC and Beyers Naude's new Christian Institute issued the *Message to the People of South Africa*, a powerful biblical denunciation of apartheid as a false god. Prime Minister B. J. Vorster threatened action against "politicians in church clothing" and lost no time in drawing attention to the racial inequities within some of the churches opposing him.

Those churches who decided to make a stand against apartheid were conscious of the imperfection of their witness. The major three denominations—Anglican, Methodist and Roman Catholic—while multi-racial in constituency (80% black, 20% white), were largely segregated and still led by whites. White and black clergy were often paid differently; most white members quietly supported the segregationist policies of their government while black laity, disenfranchised in the country, were disempowered in their churches.

It was the WCC that kept the pressure on its member churches in South

Africa to sharpen their opposition. The Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) played this role, and in 1970, when the WCC announced its PCR grants to liberation movements seeking the overthrow of apartheid, the pressure intensified. This decision by the world church actively to support what most white South Africans regarded as terrorist organizations caused a furor that almost split the multi-racial churches. Denominational debates in 1970 drew sharp lines between black and white church leaders, and between clergy and laity—but in the end, the denominations held together, largely because of the lead given by the SACC. Under General Secretary John Rees, the SACC acknowledged the right of the WCC to make its grants, indicated that it could not follow that route, but committed itself to a path of “justice and reconciliation” in each of its member denominations, to correct their internal injustices, and establish a united, non-violent opposition front. He also launched the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid South Africa (SPROCAS), which was the first attempt to harness the expertise of South Africa’s progressive scholars to begin to write blueprints for an apartheid-free future. Some of those who contributed to the many studies SPROCAS produced—on human rights, health, the legal system, education, etc.—later became household names in the transformation process. Others, like economist Professor Rick Turner, died at the hands of security police assassins.

From 1970, the credibility of church resistance to apartheid in South Africa would depend on our working together, and the litmus test to earn government hatred was membership in the WCC and SACC. The state-controlled South African Broadcasting Corporation demonized these bodies, and the annual announcement of WCC humanitarian grants to the ANC and PAC was invariably a signal for the intensification of the church-state war of words. Another site of struggle was the annual conference of the SACC, where debates about conscientious objection to military service, the illegitimacy of the regime, the justification of civil disobedience, and arguments for sanctions and divestment also upped the ante.

In 1972 the government acted against the Christian Institute and the multi-racial University Christian Movement, declaring them “affected organisations.”² In 1973, the Congress on Mission and Evangelism, a collaboration between SACC and Africa Enterprise, brought conservative evangelicals into confrontation with black and white anti-apartheid activists, conscientising some of the evangelicals into the struggle.

From the mid-’70s on, church-state relations were consistently hostile. South Africa’s invasion of Angola in 1975—secretly supported by the USA’s Central Intelligence Agency—brought the conscientious objection debate to the boil, and the first white objectors began to serve the draconian six-year prison sentences for refusal to serve in the apartheid army. The June 1976 black youth revolt in Soweto, and the consequent killing of some 600 young people, saw the launching of the

²The “Affected Organisations Act” was designed to paralyze opposition groups, without directly closing them down, by cutting off the foreign funding upon which most such groups relied.

SACC's Asingeni Relief Fund, a vehicle for world financial support which would funnel millions of dollars into the struggle—and would also ensure the later persecution of John Rees.³ He began Asingeni as a relief fund for the families of Soweto youths shot by the police or detained without trial. It expanded to cover the massive legal fees for events like the inquest into Steve Biko's death and the defense of scores of activists accused of "terrorism" or treason.⁴ By far the largest financial support came from Lutheran sources in West Germany and Scandinavia.

Ecumenical solidarity involved not only the SACC churches but also the Roman Catholic Church, through the South African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC). Led by people like Archbishops Denis Hurley, George Daniel, and Wilfred Napier, and Father Smangaliso Mktashwa,⁵ the SACBC worked hand in hand with the SACC throughout this period. This cooperation was powerfully demonstrated in 1984, when Catholic Archbishop George Daniel and I led an ecumenical delegation to the United Nations, the U. S. State Department, and the foreign ministries of the United Kingdom and Europe, protesting the South African regime's forced removal policy. So effective was this journey, that Prime Minister P. W. Botha found his first-ever European tour sabotaged—instead of listening to his explanations of the "reforming" of apartheid, the media confronted him everywhere with embarrassing questions about the forced removal of 3.5 million people from their ancestral homes.

The 1980s saw a further intensification of the struggle, with the issue of sanctions topping the list of controversies. By this time, Desmond Tutu had decided to call for "diplomatic, cultural, sporting, and economic pressure"⁶ on South Africa, and his passport was withdrawn as a consequence. Momentum for the isolation of the apartheid state was now virtually unstoppable, however. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared apartheid a heresy and expelled its South African DRC members and Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, an act of international recognition that gave the sanctions campaign an enormous boost. The American banks now delivered a crucial blow to apartheid, refusing to roll over loans servicing South Africa's national debt.

Meanwhile, a new revolt—this time in every major black township in South Africa—was threatening to make the country "ungovernable." The "Release Mandela" campaign brought marches on Pollsmoor Prison, where he was now held, and confrontations between demonstrators and police were producing mass funerals each weekend. Because churches were most often the site of meetings and

³Some years after leaving the SACC, Rees was charged and found guilty of defrauding that body by channeling Asingeni money into a number of family accounts. It was never proved that he had enriched himself in any way, and it remains a moot point whether he was using those accounts for secret support of underground liberation movement members. His trial took place at the same time as the Eloff Commission tribunals.

⁴At least three provincial premiers in the new South Africa were assisted at the time: Patrick Lekota (Free State), Tokyo Sexwale (Gauteng), and Popo Molefe (North West Province).

⁵Now a member of parliament and Deputy Minister of National Education.

⁶There was a five-year prison sentence for anyone found guilty of undermining the economy of the country. Tutu had to choose his words with great care.

protests, many were invaded and smashed by security forces. Numerous clergy were detained with other activists, without trial.

Another ecumenical action at this time was the National Initiative for Reconciliation (NIR), sponsored by Africa Enterprise.⁷ NIR earned the wrath of P. W. Botha by calling a national “prayaway” — when all South Africans were invited to stay away from work to pray for justice and reconciliation. Millions did, and in spite of threats, the day had a powerful impact.

This same year, 1985, saw the issuing of the *Kairos Document*, and the furor over the “prayers to end unjust rule.” *Kairos* emanated mainly out of the Institute for Contextual Theology; it critiqued not only those churches supporting the apartheid ideology but also the “liberal,” multi-racial churches for their failure to offer a more radical resistance. Also, *Kairos* was seen as providing theological reinforcement for the use of violence to overthrow the regime. Whatever criticisms there were of the theology of *Kairos*, and of some of its conclusions, it was heard as a clarion cry for more committed action by Christians against the regime. It remains the most significant black theological initiative of those days.

The controversy around “prayers to end unjust rule” was one of the few moments of division in the ecumenical anti-apartheid struggle, with the SACC in Johannesburg and the Western Cape Council of Churches — a regional council based in Cape Town — and some major church leaders at odds over what kind of prayers should be prayed on the ninth anniversary of the June 16 uprising. National denominational leaders (including myself) got ourselves in a knot about this, too, giving the press a field day, with dramatic headlines announcing a “split” in the anti-apartheid front. There was no such thing, but the controversy did highlight different shades of theological thinking in the struggle and a measure of competition, especially in the Cape Province, as to who would be seen as the most radical opponents of apartheid. This inner struggle, which surfaced from time to time, was not unrelated to the issue of foreign funding. For some, it became a matter of importance to demonstrate in international funding circles that they were out front in opposition to the regime.

In 1986, representatives of the world church produced the Lusaka Document, giving qualified support to the armed struggle. This document was overwhelmingly adopted by the SACC’s National Conference, although SACC’s own strategy remained a non-violent one.

The climax of the church-state struggle came in 1988. By this time the United Democratic Front (UDF), an alliance of more than 600 anti-apartheid organizations, had become the powerful internal wing of the banned African National Congress. When the UDF itself was banned, together with a support group for detainees and a black consciousness organization,⁸ church leaders marched on parliament in protest and were arrested. Not long after, Botha’s secret police struck

⁷Africa Enterprise is a para-church evangelistic program, led by Michael Cassidy, with mainly conservative evangelical backing, but with some links into the anti-apartheid camp.

⁸The Detainees’ Parents Support Committee and the Azanian People’s Organisation were banned. Banning meant that an organization was illegal and membership thereof became a crime.

their most vicious blow: they planted a massive bomb in the basement of SACC headquarters, Khotso House, completely destroying the building. We now know that Police Minister Adriaan Vlok held a celebratory barbecue with the hit-squad members later on the day of the explosion. At the time, however, his police arrested a left-wing activist, accusing her of planting the bomb.

This blow, designed to put the SACC out of business, failed. Instead, SACC staffers were marshaled as they arrived at the scene of the disaster and steered to the Central Methodist Mission nearby, where they held morning prayers at the usual time in the CMM chapel! For the next year they were housed in a number of church buildings around the city, while the world Christian community rallied to help secure a new Khotso House. Neither the Eloff Commission nor the Khotso House bomb could stop the witness of God's church in South Africa.

In 1989, with Namibian independence and the resignation of Botha, it was determined that massive pressure should be put on the incoming President, F. W. de Klerk, from the moment he took office. The power of a police state to suppress opposition was tested in two massive marches, the first of 30,000 people in Cape Town, led by Desmond Tutu, now Archbishop of Cape Town, and the second of 25,000 people in Johannesburg, led by SACC General Secretary Frank Chikane and Johannesburg church leaders. In both cases, threats to stop the marches and arrest their leaders were defied, and for the first time, the usual heavy police presence faded away. The breakthrough had come.

In November of 1990, at what became known as the Rustenberg Conference,⁹ churches who had been divided from one another met for the first time since 1960. In a remarkable catharsis, the DRC confessed its guilt in supporting apartheid, followed by the pentecostal movement, which admitted to ignoring the struggle, as well as the multi-racial churches, who acknowledged that although they had opposed apartheid they had not lived the alternative with enough faithfulness. The Rustenberg Declaration set the stage for the establishment of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is at present seeking to heal the nation's past.

De Klerk's famous speech of February 2, 1990, releasing Mandela and unbanning the liberation movements, set the stage for a new phase in ecumenical action. The first priority was to help some 30,000 exiles come home, and SACC was entrusted with this task. Then, as violence between competing political forces grew in the run-up to the coming democratic elections, a major priority was to contain this violence. The National Peace Accord, brokered by church leaders who had only recently found one another at Rustenberg, and some business leaders, forced political parties to accept a stringent code of conduct, and hundreds of peace committees and more than 25,000 trained monitors—many of them from the churches—began to bring some hope.

Election day, April 27, 1994, was a day of miracles, but not the kind that drop out of the sky. It was fitting that an ecumenical monitoring team, made up of

⁹Rustenberg is a farming town about 100 km from Johannesburg.

people who had assisted in working for peace, joined the National Peace Accord, United Nations, Commonwealth, and European Community monitors at the voting stations on that day. They need not have worried—the day was the most peaceful in months.

One further task lay ahead, however. Problems with vote counting brought a crisis that required a massive intervention by people who would be trusted by all the political parties: around midnight my phone rang and I was asked by the Electoral Commission to gather 800 “church people” by the next morning, if possible, because “these are the only people the parties will agree upon.” In the end, a chain of telephone callers got 1200 volunteers, who were given a crash course in the new vote-counting rules and dispatched to more than 800 localities across South Africa to ensure the success of the election.

When Nelson Mandela was sworn in as South Africa’s first democratically elected President, an era of protest and resistance came to an end, and the time of nation-building had begun. The churches had failed often in their witness, but, thanks to a world family of praying, committed Christians and the solidarity of the SACC/SACBC alliance, nowhere in the world had that witness been used more powerfully by God to bring an end to a national evil. ⊕