

APPENDIX A

A MESSAGE TO THE METHODIST PEOPLE

Dear People of God,

Since my return from the World Methodist Conference in Dublin, I have become more deeply aware than ever before that the greatest danger in the life of the Church is that many of its members, through no fault of their own, are out of touch with the reality of our present situation in South Africa. In humility over the past 12 months, I have tried to raise some of these issues. Recent events shocked all of us into realising just how grave the situation is.

Because of my faith in God and confidence in you, I ask that this letter be read in all our Churches on Sunday, the 10th October, 1976.

South Africa stands on the threshold of war or peace. The last three months have seen the outpouring of years of Black frustration, suppression and anger that has burst into manifestations of protests, strikes and peaceful marches, but also violence, death and destruction. The White status quo has in turn allowed their fear, confusion and ignorance of Black suffering and aspirations, to manifest itself in violence, brutality and the detention of those crying out for liberation.

The Word of God warns against those who cry Peace, Peace, when there is no peace (Jer. 6:14). We live at a time when the very stones are crying out for justice and liberation. Therefore, let us beware, for in attempting to give our people hope, we "gloss over" the price that has to be paid. God has spoken of religion as doing justice, living mercy and walking humbly in his ways (Micah 6:8). The charge has a scriptural injunction to proclaim the liberation of all people (Luke 4:18), and let us heed the warning that our fault in this regard will not be overlooked, for judgement begins with the household of God (Peter 4:17).

The power of violence is a self-consuming power - whether it be the power of the gun or the power of the petrol bomb. Within this land people of all races must learn to live together in common respect and equal responsibility and privilege or else together we will each die. But that common accord will not come unless we reason together as equal partners - for two cannot walk together unless they have planned together so to do (Amos 3:3). Either way, as racial groups within this land, we must negotiate our co-existence at the conference table or else we will decide our domination on the battlefield.

Time is running out and the Church of God must raise her voice for justice so that there may be peace. If we fail here, we will not only be disobeying the call of the Lord, to cry aloud and lift up our voices like a trumpet in declaring to our people their transgression (Isiah 58:1), but we will be judged by history to be simply irrelevant.

The Methodist Church has repeatedly stated its unequivocal opposition to all forms of apartheid but we stand today within a new age. There is a new realisation that words of integrity can no longer be separated from action. The Christian faith is not founded on a word, but on the Word made Flesh. In spite of our words over the years, we still manifest within our own structure the apartheid of our South African Society. Indeed, Government and industry, have now taken a lead desegregating hotels, sporting events and offices, but our Churches continue in the main, to reflect stringent segregation.

/God is speaking to us .....

The motivation for refusing to insert the word "peaceful" in the resolution was that there was violence in the situation in Namibia already. Consequently, it was felt that to talk about peace at this point was virtually meaningless.

However, this no more commits the SACC to approval of violence - as some may care to suggest - than the presence of Baptist chaplains in the SA Defence Force commits that church to violence.

Finally, there was that old bogey - the SACC's links with the World Council of Churches. "Contamination by association" is the adage used by politicians when they seek to besmirch the good name of others.

That's exactly the method which was used by at least one Baptist delegate in casting suspicion on the role of the SACC in its endeavours to promote a just and peaceful Christian society. The dye was cast.

The Baptist action is even more dismaying when one remembers that the SACC is seen by Blacks as being one of the few institutions, which includes people of all races, which is relevant to the situation in South Africa today.

However, one must not forget that there were - and still are - voices in the BUSA which believe that observer membership of the SACC, at the very least, should have been maintained, if only to stay in the same courts in which the voice of Black Christian opinion is heard.

That's what the issue was all about in the final analysis - and more's the pity - whether one continued to talk to Black Christians who happen to be "radical" in the South African context.

Or whether to join some other "acceptable" body (the Conservative Christian League, for example) which has the support of Black "moderates".

Just what is meant by "moderates" is anyone's guess. If they are of the ilk of the Blacks to whom the Government has talked, then the answer is simply that such Blacks no longer play a role which is unquestioned by their fellows.

The saddest aspect in all this, however, is the "fracturing" of Christian unity, as the SACC statement on the Baptist withdrawal put it.

It's even more serious than that. For, as I have already indicated, the BUSA tends towards a "Whites only" affair.

If this is how White Christians will react towards fellow-Christians, then one can only shudder as one thinks in terms of the chances of civilised change in Southern Africa.

Why? Simply because the Baptist Union, in essence, is a microcosmic example of the privileged South African society (which also claims Christian commitment, don't forget) of today.