

# FELLOWSHIP OF RECONCILIATION

A SHORT HISTORY

## The Overseas Beginnings

The Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) arose within the century of total war. Its birth was almost within sound of the opening guns of World War I.

Two men, in the heartbreak of a peace conference shattered by the last swift forerunners of that conflict, conceived the idea. Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze, pacifist Lutheran chaplain to the Kaiser, and Henry Hodgkin, English Quaker, gripped hands on the platform of Cologne railway station on August 3rd 1914, one day before their countries formally declared war on one another. They vowed not to fight against each other and to support others who took the same decision. They parted, each to work out the implications of that promise.

Henry Hodgkin initiated the Fellowship of Reconciliation at Cambridge with 128 members as 1914 drew to its close. Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze was arrested 27 times during the war but eventually saw the formation of the Versöhnungsbund in Germany.

Members of the Fellowship agreed:

1. That Love, as revealed and interpreted in the life and death of Jesus Christ, involves more than we have yet seen, that it is the only power by which evil can be overcome, and the only sufficient basis for human society;
2. That, in order to establish a world order based on Love, it is incumbent on those who believe in this principle to accept it fully, both for themselves and in their relation to others, and to take the risks involved in doing so in a world which does not as yet accept it;
3. That, therefore, as Christians, we are forbidden to wage war, and that our loyalty to our country, to humanity, to the Church Universal, and to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Master, calls us instead to a life of service for the enthronement of Love in personal, social, commercial and national life.

After the war, in October 1919, fifty men and women from ten countries, including Hodgkin and Siegmund-Schultze, set up the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) at a conference in Bithoven, Holland. Today it has branches in over 40 countries and on all continents and includes adherents of various faiths as well as Christians.

## The Origins of the South African Fellowship

A town in the Free State is named after the heroine of South Africa's oldest peace movement. A courageous English woman, Emily Hobhouse of the Society of Friends (Quakers) crossed the sea to champion the cause of Boer women and children in concentration camps as her peacemaking response to the Anglo-Boer War. Such is the blinding nature of nationalism that a later government, with no conception of her pacifism, ironically named a submarine after her!

Later, after World War I, two British Quakers, William Henry and Harriet Alexander, visited South Africa on a mission to dispossessed Boer farmers with seed to start afresh and with their family Bibles that had been looted by British soldiers during the Anglo-Boer War. Influenced by these two, scattered individuals linked up with the British FOR and one of these, Olive Warner, published a pacifist magazine "The Ambassador" from Johannesburg.

# NON-VIOLENCE

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SECOND QUARTER 1994

You may be receiving this small publication for the first time. It has to do with the South African Fellowship of Reconciliation and its history. Please read it through and respond if you are interested.

## MAKING HISTORY

This quarter of 1994 has been a thriller. After a bumpy ride, but far less bloodshed than there might have been, the great transition has been achieved from an age-old race domination to a shared society.

Even though the unsuspecting crowd cheers the flypast of the instruments of domination and the military men close ranks behind the new President and his Deputies, the achievement is almost without parallel in history and those who worked and suffered for it can rejoice.

Along with "Reconstruction", the word "Reconciliation" is now on the lips of our statesmen and women. South Africa once had a tiny organisation ambitiously named "The Fellowship of Reconciliation" (SAFOR). What role did it play, together with the backing of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) in this almost peaceful transition? Did its specifically pacifist character, its insistence on nonviolence, limit it to a small group with a marginal role? Or did it plant seeds that grew bigger than we realise? How did it relate to the mass movements of oppressed people?

Is the FOR vision and emphasis relevant now? Is it needed to calm the endemic violence in our society, or to counter our national temptation to sell to other countries the very weapons we developed in killing one another? In the past decades of struggle the methods of nonviolence were increasingly used, but often in a spirit of enmity. This greatly reduces its effectiveness, especially to produce an already reconciled situation as the conflict ends. Goodwill towards the opponent is the real spirit of nonviolence. As these methods continue to be used in our country's development do we need a specific movement or organisation to foster this spirit and to promote nonviolence not merely as a strategy but as a way of life and as the way society will function best?

You may be aware that a few groups are testing out the possibility of reviving the South African Fellowship of Reconciliation for this purpose. We already receive a small but high-quality contribution towards nonviolence and peacemaking from the Society of Friends (Quakers). Also there is the Methodist Order of Peacemakers. These are denominational organisations committed to nonviolence. The SAFOR, if reconstituted, would be an inter-faith organisation. It would have international links with more than 40 other similar national and regional bodies through the International FOR. The latter describes itself as "an organisation of people whose faith has led them to commit themselves to nonviolence as a way of life and as a means of personal, social and political change."

## WRITING HISTORY

I am no longer in touch with the nerve centres that supplied this News Letter over the past 14 years. However, I may still be able to supply interested people with the story of the SAFOR spanning the past 50 years. Then we can better assess what

it was, who supported it, what it did or failed to do, why it went into recess, whether it is worth reviving and, if so, what it should now attempt to achieve.

This year in October the IFOR celebrates its 75th anniversary and has suggested that national branches could write up their history. I am not much of a writer or researcher, but I do have the meagre remaining records of the SAFOR, was in it from 1960 and knew some of its past leaders. The Cape Town FOR group has agreed that I should attempt this through Non-Violence News. I have asked the help of Dr Margaret Nash, Mary Elder and Richard Steele in particular, but I also would welcome your help.

Margaret Nash has pointed out the need to explore what interaction there was in our history between the Western pacifism of the FOR and the indigenous Indian and African nonviolence of Gandhi and Luthuli in bringing the country to the happier outcome we now have. You may be able to contribute information on this and on some of the persons and events that will feature in the story I try to write.

My hope is to produce a brief embryonic history in the next four issues, as follows:

- 1994 Second Quarter: The Origins of the IFOR (1914-1919)  
and of the SAFOR (1942-1951)
- 1994 Third Quarter : The Times of Arthur Blaxall (1952-1963)
- 1994 Fourth Quarter: From Blaxall to Recess (1963-1973)
- 1995 First Quarter: IFOR's Role in SA's Struggle (1974-1992)

For the first section, which forms the remainder of this News Letter, I have drawn on the few existing accounts of our history. The following three will be based more on my personal experience of the organisation together with data from news letters, press cuttings and reports. Please write to me if you have anything to add (or to correct) and together we may be able to produce a fuller and more interesting story.

#### ARE YOU WITH US?

This issue is being sent to:

- present subscribers to Non-Violence News
- some of its former recipients who I think may be interested
- the new contacts we have in the Durban and Cape Town groups
- other past and present recipients of the IFOR bi-monthly magazine "IFOR Report" now known as "Reconciliation International"
- some churches and organisations that may have an interest.

IF YOU WISH TO RECEIVE THE FOLLOWING THREE ISSUES then, since I am not subsidised, I need a financial contribution from you.

R10 will be sufficient, by cheque or postal order payable to "R Robertson". Or just send 22x 45c postage stamps if that is easier. A receipt will only be sent if you ask for it. Please give your name and address clearly with your payment.

PLEASE DO THIS NOW. I do not promise you the next issue plus a gentle reminder as happened last year!

You can also help me by sending names and addresses of others you think would be interested in receiving this.

When John Mellor and Rufus Jones, Quakers of international renown, visited South Africa in 1938 they found a few peace groups in existence such as the Peace and Arbitration Society of Cape Town. Their visit and the wide reading of the newly published "War and the Christian" by Canon Charles E Raven and "Testament of Youth" by Vera Brittain roused considerable Peace sentiment.

It seems that the first specifically FOR Group was initiated in Grahamstown in 1942 by the Rev James Elder and his wife Ella. Jimmy Elder, a retired headmaster who then entered the ministry of the Presbyterian Church, was a man of gentle and guileless character and Ella was a public-spirited woman of great determination.

John Mellor again visited South Africa in 1948 and, with the help of Dr. and Mrs Muir Grieve of Cape Town, organised a national branch which called itself the South African Fellowship of Reconciliation (SAFOR). The Grieves were Congregationalists, and Muir had a close affinity with the Quakers. His work on cancer had taken him to India and his great concerns were education and the relief of hunger. He died in December 1993 at 92 years of age.

Ella Elder was Secretary of the SAFOR until 1960 and her daughter Mary was later its Treasurer. Mary Butler of Cradock, an aunt to the author Guy Butler, sent out a roneoed news letter ambitiously entitled "Reconciliation in South Africa", and groups sprang up in Cape Town, Pretoria, Durban, Port Elizabeth and Pietermaritzburg, as well as the Grahamstown group. One also functioned intermittently in Johannesburg.

What did these groups do? It seems that little in the way of concerted action was possible. During the Second World War they opposed the attempt of the Netherlands Government to conscript its citizens resident in South Africa. Shortly after the war they organised a tour by Muriel Lester, a friend of Gandhi and an outstanding example and exponent of non-violence, who was the first IFOR official to visit this country. She addressed public meetings and preached in churches to enthusiastic audiences, though she met some opposition from ex-servicemen when she spoke at the University of Cape Town. An Anglican clergyman, the Rev Arthur Blaxall who was not at that time a member of the SAFOR, used his influence and important contacts to promote her tour.

This tour appears to have raised the issue whether the SAFOR should concern itself with race discrimination and the social injustices of South Africa and not simply with international peace, disarmament and conscientious objection. Some members felt that race issues were already in the hands of larger organisations with greater resources and that the SAFOR's special mission was world peace and local resistance to conscription - though conscription had not been applied during World War II. To discuss politics might divide the groups.

Local politics at that time involved such events as the enactment of the 1946 Indian Land Tenure Act by the Smuts Government. Indian National Congress resistance to this drew on the satyagraha tradition that Mahatma Gandhi had developed while in this country at the beginning of the century. The Rev Michael Scott, at some stage in his life certainly a member of the FOR, joined that resistance and served a three month sentence for trespassing on Durban's municipal property. There is no evidence as to whether the SAFOR supported him in this action.

As the horrors of war began to fade so the interest in international peace issues dwindled and the SAFOR groups lost members. The real issue for pacifists in South Africa, namely peacemaking and reconciliation on home ground, remained to be faced and it was Arthur Blaxall who enabled the movement to begin that task.

Next Issue: The Times of Arthur Blaxall (1952-1963)