

THE SOUTH AFRICAN FELLOWSHIP OF RECONCILIATION

A Short History - Continued

7.

FROM BLAXALL TO RECESS 1964 - 1973The Struggle to Survive

"Most of us went to Wilgespruit feeling depressed .. We came away ... feeling extremely hopeful." That's how the outgoing Secretary, Tony Cottam, described the SAFOR Conference, held at Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre on 14th and 15th December 1963, which tried to rebuild the movement after Dr. Blaxall's conviction and resignation.

Notes of the discussion showed how successfully Blaxall had re-directed the SAFOR's attention from international wars to South Africa's racially-based injustices - which had grown apace in the past decade. But as yet members still did not know what to do about it, except pray. No programme of action was in sight. Survival seemed more important. The organisation at that time counted 65 members and 37 associates, with another 40 names untraceable.

Of the dozen people present at Wilgespruit there was one new-comer, the Rev Denis Walker, a Methodist minister on the point of switching to commercial activity. He carried a Minute from the East London group nominating him as Hon Secretary, which seemed to solve the organisational problem. Mary Elder continued as Hon Treasurer from distant Pretoria and the meeting elected in absentia John Shingler - an Estate Agent and City Councillor of East London - as Chairman and John Halliday of Johannesburg as a committee member. The present writer, then also in East London, was subsequently co-opted.

It did not last long. By the end of 1964 John Shingler had resigned and Denis Walker was in Rhodesia where he later emerged as Minister of Education in Ian Smith's UDI government. The Rev Rodney Baumeister, who took his place as Acting Secretary, had moved to Johannesburg.

When Arthur Blaxall's ship had passed through East London en route to the United Kingdom in February 1964 I had tackled him about his continuing on the Council of the IFOR in view of the problem this would create as we tried to re-establish the movement's pacifist credibility. He graciously resigned that position. I met him again in London in 1969, at 78 years of age still concerned about creating a better world, but I noted with regret his signature on a 1970 British Council of Churches study paper which stated: "There can be a just revolution (violence implied - RR) as well as a just war".

From a sense of loyalty to Arthur and all that he had been for the SAFOR I hesitantly agreed, at the request of the two remaining committee members and with the approval of the IFOR, to function as "Chairman-Organiser" until something more solid could be arranged. (What follows is therefore written in the first person.)

Some Activity

One effort made during Denis Walker's time was the publication of a brief leaflet advising churches of the inadequate provision in the Defence Act that would affect any conscientious objectors (CO's) in their ranks. We posted this leaflet to about 5000 ministers of various denominations. Three replies came back, two of them critical of our action!

But later, under the General Secretaryship of Bishop Bill Burnett, the SACC began to take up the CO cause. Church pleas led eventually to an amendment

of the Defence Act in 1971 which meant that Jehovah's Witnesses (the only ones then resisting call-up) would serve a once-only sentence instead of being repeatedly jailed.

At that time I was pioneering the first racially integrated congregation of the Presbyterian Church and was also Secretary of a committee negotiating union between three Presbyterian bodies in South Africa. I was able to give only one regular day per month to SAFOR work. It was a holding operation, waiting for an opportunity to get moving.

The quarterly News Letter was regularly produced and sent, in addition, to some 25 FORs in other countries. When travelling on church business or on holiday I visited groups in Cape Town and Johannesburg, but we largely lost touch with the Indian and African friends of Blaxall's time. They appear to have joined more because of his personal activity in other fields than for any great attraction that the FOR held for them.

### Current Events

On the national scene the Minister of Defence was saying "In times of emergency there is only one place for every South African (white, of course) - behind the butt of a rifle." In September 1966 a national plan for the "compulsory call-up of all able-bodied young South African men" was announced in Parliament and a year later the new Minister of Defence, P W Botha, intimated the extension of military training to women volunteers.

On such issues some group members wrote persistently to the Press, as I also did. But it was mostly reactive; I myself was slowly finding my way from doctrinaire pacifism to nonviolent direct action and did not give much of a lead. Meanwhile the growth of grand apartheid survived the 1966 assassination of its chief architect, Dr H F Verwoerd.

The Rhodesian Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) that same year led to our small group in that country forming themselves into the Rhodesian Fellowship of Reconciliation to meet the challenge of the civil war precipitated by that declaration. One of their members, Richard Knottenbelt, a teacher, was later (1977) jailed for refusing military service.

Further away the 1968 "Spring of Prague" provided the world with one of its first modern demonstrations of the power of spontaneous, though untrained, nonviolence on a national scale against a ruthless oppressor. This backed up the claims of sociologist Gene Sharp for non-military national defence set out in his 1965 paper "The Political Equivalent of War - Civilian Defence".

Inside South Africa Mr Nana Sita of Pretoria, applying Gandhian satyagraha to resist the Group Areas Act, was jailed thrice (1962, 1963 & 1967). Other isolated cases of similar resistance followed, including Mr Mohammed S Bhana of Pageview, Johannesburg in 1967. They were eventually evicted from their homes, but had stirred consciences that later took action.

### Under Pressure

Those were the days when detention without trial was introduced and the security apparatus sat hard on many organisations.

In 1966 the American FOR supplied me with 1000 copies of a colour picture booklet on Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. I managed to distribute more than 700 to hundreds of individuals before it was banned. In addition to the Montgomery Story it briefly covered Gandhi's campaigns and then explained how to practise nonviolence. (Black & white photos available for interested readers as R3 per copy)

That year the Rev André Trocmé, IFOR's Secretary for Europe, famed for giving refuge in his church to Jews during the Nazi occupation of France, was refused a visa to visit us and to travel through SA to conduct a Church seminar in Lesotho. In 1968 the Anglican Bishop of Damaraland, Robert Mize, and lone Dutch anti-apartheid demonstrator Appolonia Brusse of Johannesburg were deported. Both were members of our Fellowship. But the Government dared not prevent a visit by pacifist Pastor Martin Niemöller, a co-President of the World Council of Churches, in 1966. He asserted in public meetings that racism posed a greater threat to world peace than the East-West ideological conflict.

Those years saw the suspicious death of Albert Luthuli (1967) and the assassination of Martin Luther King (1968). In October 1969 I was given a speaking opportunity and good press coverage in the East London community's colobration of another assassinated nonviolence leader - Gandhi himself.

My mail and movements were under constant Security Police surveillance. They took advantage of the banning of the Defence and Aid Fund in 1966 to have seven men search my home for a full morning. Similar searches of his office had been experienced by Dr. Blaxall. In 1969 they brought a charge against me under the Suppression of Communism Act but withdrew it the day before the trial when it was clear that it could not succeed. Instead my passport was refused when it expired the next year.

#### Another Conference

By the end of 1968 we could count 44 members of whom 8 were black and 26 associate members of whom 6 were black. Despite this decline the Committee, which had not met since my appointment as Chairman-Organiser and consisted now only of Mary Elder and John Halliday both in the PWV area, agreed that we call another national Conference in Johannesburg where most members were concentrated. We met in St. Alban's Church, Ferreirastown in September 1970.

The day before the Conference (3rd September) the WCC's Programme to Combat Racism announced its first grants to various anti-racist organisations including the ANC and PAC. Leading South African churchmen hastened to disassociate themselves from this action and professed their support for non-violent solutions. Naïvely we thought that our opportunity had come.

"Though we did not discuss the (PCR) issue in detail," I wrote in the next News Letter, "it symbolised the fact that the SAFOR is no longer primarily concerned with conscientious objection in past World Wars or in a possible Third World War but rather with non-violent action for reconciliation in our local embryonic war situation."

Fred Moorhouse, prominent in British FOR and now representing the Rhodesian FOR, was present among the twenty participants, as also was Dr. Basil Moore, a Methodist minister soon to be banned and go into exile.

It was a lively meeting. It elected the Rev Cedric Mayson (then Joint Secretary of the Methodist Christian Citizenship Department) as the new Chairman and Vic Silversten, formerly our Hon Auditor, as Secretary/Treasurer. On the new committee were the Rev Jerry Letlabika, Mary Elder, John Halliday and myself as a corresponding member.

I returned to East London much relieved and with hope. But the new committee never met and the News Letter ceased, the new officials being so heavily committed to other priorities.

Of those times John Halliday writes: "It was a difficult transition from the concept that we should not use violence - in particular, arms - in defence of our own position, to realising that we had a situation of injustice imposed upon our neighbours by ourselves through representatives. I remember

Clifford Welch (minister of the Central Congregational Church, Johannesburg) working very hard to persuade his (white) congregation to come out with him to Soweto to see what was going on. The trouble was that what was going on was a formalised extension of a situation that had been in existence for the lifetime of his congregation and it was very difficult to get anyone to see it as something that needed attention. Those who were slowly realising the injustice of the situation felt themselves terribly isolated, lone voices with a task that seemed beyond them. Most others refused to see because to see would involve change that would be hard work and costly."

#### Into Recess

The 1963 Wilgespruit Conference had noted that the emergence of the Christian Institute (CI) was a measure of the failure of the SAFOR to do its reconciling job among the churches and to touch the Afrikaner people. So in 1973 I suggested to the remnants of the committee that the honest thing to do was to go into recess in favour of the CI. It had elements of non-violence in its thinking and many of us were already in its membership. Cedric Mayson conducted a poll among members and all responses were in favour of this move.

By 1976 Cedric was Editor of the CI's monthly publication Pro Veritate, and I was pushed into the Chair of its National Council just before it was banned in October 1977. This banning meant that all our records, which had been lodged with the CI "for safe keeping", disappeared into the maw of the Security Police at John Vorster Square. Despite efforts on my part they were never recovered.

In those days we did not know what to do about bannings, deportations, visa and passport refusals and other administrative injustices, let alone the larger social wrongs. Ten years had rolled by and we had learned very little, done less, and in the end not survived.

Fortunately the International FOR had not forgotten South Africa and in the next decade we were to learn from their international experts that any injustice could be effectively overcome by persistent nonviolent direct action. Which at last was what the scattered remnant began to do.

Next Issue: The Role of the IFOR in South Africa's Struggle. (Part I, 1974-1983)

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A Short History - Continued

11.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL F.O.R. IN SOUTH AFRICA'S STRUGGLEPart I : 1974-1982The End of the Christian Institute

The Christian Institute (CI) was the contact organisation in South Africa after the SAFOR went into recess, but it was under severe pressure from the Government. First it was declared an "affected organisation" in May 1975 which meant that it could no longer legally receive funding from outside the country. Instead of hurting the CI, this actually threw it back on its own resources, engaged its staff more effectively with its membership and about doubled its financial support from within South Africa.

So when the next group of organisations was ripe for banning, following the death of Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko at the hands of the Security Police, the CI was included. It was the only one of the 18 organisations then banned which had any white members. Its General Secretary, Dr Beyers Naudé, was banned along with Cedric Mayson and five other whites prominent in liberation efforts. Its monthly publication Pro Veritate was also banned. That was the 19th of October 1977.

With just a month's experience as Chairman of the CI's National Council, I considered simply calling the next meeting of its Executive Committee due on 5th November and taking the consequences. I drew up an agenda on which the first major item of business was the banning of the CI and prepared to send a copy of this to the Security Police to obviate any suspicion of secrecy.

Then I consulted a sympathetic Senior Counsel. I was told that the Act under which I would be prosecuted now stipulated a mandatory sentence of one year (a maximum of ten), that judges were interpreting this to mean that the one year could not be suspended and that I would probably get two years. It would be a token action for which I would get anything but a token sentence.

It is one of the major regrets of my life that I funked it. With subsequent experience of court appearances, and of the caution lawyers exercise in respect of their clients, I realise that the imprisonment of a minister of the Presbyterian Church for such clear civil disobedience would have created a major dilemma for the State. They would have found a way to shorten or even eliminate the incarceration. Also imprisonment might have turned the tide against the whole banning process, the tide of national affairs having already turned on 16th June the previous year. As it was, we had to wait a decade for the defiance of banning to begin.

IFOR to the Rescue

With the CI gone, the IFOR asked me to be their "Contact Person" in South Africa, gave constant encouragement and proceeded to offer us, at their expense, the expertise of remarkable visitors from overseas.

The first was Uli Henes, the IFOR's staffperson with special responsibility for Africa. He paid two visits in the late 1970s and kept in touch with me over years as our efforts developed. In 1980 he distributed world wide 60,000 labels to which a key could be attached for posting to South African embassies. The label quoted Isaiah 42:7 "Bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" and called for the release of people detained under security legislation.

"If you think something ought to be done, you should do it yourself," said Will Warren, an English Quaker, who was the next to be sponsored and sent by the IFOR. He arrived at Jan Smuts Airport in November 1978 on a one-way ticket with all his luggage in a rucksack. He was 72 and without medical assistance had just survived a heart attack - hence the one-way ticket!

Will had spent the six years since his retirement working almost solo in Londonderry, N. Ireland, and had a story to tell of remarkable interventions in that country's violent conflicts. (See "Will Warren - a Scrapbook" compiled by John Lampon and published by Quaker Home Service, London 1983).

While sharing his experiences and understanding of nonviolence with groups in South Africa he had a further two heart attacks. As he lay recovering in the J.G. Strydom Hospital I was inspired by his commitment to move onto the pavement with the evicted Naidu family in an action that, in early 1979, turned the tide against the Group Areas Act (described in Non-Violence News, First Quarter 1994). Will returned to the United Kingdom but died within a year.

Dorothy Cotton, a close associate of Dr Martin Luther King in the US Civil Rights movement, was IFOR's next offer of help made in October 1979, to be sponsored also by the Roman Catholic Church. A visa refusal in February 1980 stopped her visit.

Dr Hildegard Goss-Mayr, then Travelling Secretary for the IFOR and its representative at the Vatican, probably had the greatest influence in promoting nonviolent action for liberation in South Africa.

She grew up in Austria, through the German occupation and the War, followed by ten years of Russian occupation. In the 1950s she pioneered East-West contact between Christians in Europe. In the 60s and 70s she and her husband Jean Goss worked throughout Latin America developing nonviolent actions and highly effective organisations among the poor to overcome injustice and exploitation.

In 1976 the "Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Rhodesia", on the initiative of Bishop Lamont, tried to set up for John and Hildegard an intensive training programme in active nonviolence as a contribution to the effort to obtain liberation by peaceful means. However the deal was not struck. The guerilla war that followed cost 25,000 lives and precipitated the exodus of 60% of the white population.

A humble and gentle person, her low profile enabled Hildegard to pay visits to South Africa in 1978 and 1980. She was hosted and supported by the Catholic Church of which she is part. With convincing illustrations from her experience in South America, particularly Brazil, she inspired church activists around the country and also gave us a model training programme for engaging in nonviolent direct action on almost any issue of injustice or violence (See "Notes for a Workshop on Active Nonviolence" obtainable from the IFOR, Alkmaar, Netherlands). Hildegard is now Honorary President of the IFOR.

Here and there people began to put her programme into action, such as people resisting squatter camp demolitions in Cape Town and a Johannesburg group of seven who landed in court for resisting the removal of Indian and Coloured people from Pageview in 1979. Slowly we were learning and acting.

And then Eric Bechman came from Germany in mid 1981. This young man's seminars engaged with the growing revolt among high school pupils in disadvantaged communities. Some of these young people led later actions that helped towards a comparatively peaceful transition in South Africa. Eric also gave us ideas and tools for planning and strategy in nonviolent social actions.

### Engaging with our Struggle

All this input meshed helpfully with the developing struggle in our country. For example, in May 1978 a "Seminar on War and Peace" was organised in Cape Town involving among others Prof Paul Hare, co-author of "Nonviolent Direct Action" (Corpus Books 1968), Dr Allan Boesak, later to lead the United Democratic Front which initiated wide-scale non-violent resistance to apartheid, and Dr James Moulder who had an early influence on the Conscientious Objection movement.

Following the 1977 banning of the CI and the Black Consciousness organisations, the Programme to Combat Racism of the World Council of Churches put out a paper entitled "South Africa's Hope - What Price Now?" in which nonviolence was described as a failed policy which should be replaced with a theology of the "just revolution". The cautious response of the SACC was to set up a "Study Commission on Violence and Non-Violence".

By the end of 1978 I was convening this Commission and had a mandate to drop the argument about the relative morals and merits of violence and non-violence in favour of simply reporting and promoting instances of nonviolent direct action. From this arose the quarterly news letter Non-Violence News which is carrying this present history. It never had a wide circulation but did go to several persons who are now in the Government of the land.

The Convocation of this Commission gave me opportunity to touch the main centres of the country with seminars based on what Hildegard and Eric had taught us. It also put me in a position to co-ordinate the support of the churches for young men going to jail rather than serve in the SA Defence Force (That story appears in more detail in Non-Violence News, First Quarter 1994). Here again the IFOR was totally supportive, providing data on CO legislation round the world and news of emerging struggles in countries still at that time refusing recognition to COs (such as Switzerland, Spain and the then USSR.)

IFOR's publicity given to the imprisonment of objector Charles Yeats resulted in thousands of letters being sent to him, all of which had to be read by the officer in charge of the Detention Barracks. This officer paid a midnight visit to Yeats in his cell to tell him how deeply the letters had moved him.

IFOR's quarterly magazine, IFOR Report, also found its way to several key persons in the liberation movements. They may not have shared its total commitment to nonviolence, but could pick up ideas for effective action from its columns. Its issues of March 1978 and July 1979 were totally devoted to the South African situation, and those of October 1980, December 1985 and April 1988 were largely so devoted.

### Changing the Basis

The original basis of the IFOR has already been referred to. The SAFOR basis read as follows:

The Fellowship of Reconciliation is a body of Christian people who, without binding themselves to an exact form of words, affirm:-

That Love, as revealed in the life and death of Jesus Christ, is the supreme power by which evil can be overcome, and the only sufficient basis for human society.

That, therefore, they find themselves unable to take part in any war but that loyalty to country, humanity, the Church Universal and to Jesus Christ, calls them to a life of service for the enthronement of Love in personal, social, commercial, national and international life.

The SAFOR enrolled as Associates those persons in sympathy with its aims who nevertheless could not make this affirmation. Several persons of Hindu belief were so associated and also some who did not see themselves as thorough-going pacifists.

By 1963 the American FOR had suggested that the specifically Christian basis should be widened to include other faiths. After years of discussion and consultation with national branches the IFOR Council decided that IFOR would in the future welcome not only Christians but pacifists of other religious traditions. National branches were still free to decide whether to retain the specifically Christian basis (as is the case, for example, with the English FOR), to adopt the inter-faith position or to constitute themselves on the basis of another specific belief.

The Jewish Peace Fellowship had already grown up within the FOR in the United States. The Vietnam War revealed how effective Buddhists were when committed to nonviolent action and a Buddhist Peace Fellowship was founded within the Fellowship of Reconciliation. It now exists in Australia, the USA, Asia and Europe. In Bangladesh the IFOR branch named Samprocti welcomes Moslems, Hindus and Christians. Several African groups include members of various faiths and a Muslim Peace Fellowship has recently been founded in the United States.

By 1977 the IFOR described itself as

a transnational religious community committed to nonviolence as a principle of life for a world community of peace and liberation. Our vision is rooted in the various traditions of faith from which we are drawn. We include Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Gandhians as well as those of non-traditional convictions.

The IFOR currently describes itself as

an international, spiritually-based movement of women and men committed to active nonviolence as a way of life and as a means of personal, social and political change.

#### A New Advance

Two of South Africa's early conscientious objectors were Baptists, Richard Steele and his cousin Peter Moll. Their patient resistance succeeded in changing the mind of the Chief of the SA Defence Force on the CO issue. When they came out of Detention Barracks early in 1981 I found money for them both to go overseas for some training and experience in nonviolence. Once there, their expenses were met and all arrangements made by the IFOR and its local branches.

Peter spent six months in Latin America, mostly in Brazil. Richard, after a spell with him in Brazil, went to the USA and Europe for an extended period of intense discovery and confirmation of the beliefs that had made him refuse to do military service. He returned to South Africa in 1983.

At this time I was minister of St. Antony's United Church in Pageview, Johannesburg. Inspired by its Scriptural emphasis on nonviolence and the accompanying direct action of several of its members, Anita Kromberg, another of its number, began work as an IFOR staffperson in South Africa in February 1983. She was later joined by Richard Steele.

In a simple Quaker service in 1986 these two committed their lives to each other, to God and to the South African community. The rest of the story belongs to them.