

An Experiment in Christian Living

By THE REVEREND ROBERT ROBERTSON

Five years ago, at my suggestion, the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa inaugurated a pilot multi-racial congregation in East London with the object of testing the possibilities and discovering the difficulties of totally integrated church life.

My purpose in proposing this arose from the difficulty experienced in achieving any kind of permanent acceptance of non-European Christians in congregations which, through design or by chance, have become exclusively European. Though technically any non-White Presbyterian is entitled to attend, join and take part in all the activities of any of our European congregations the number of instances where this actually happens in South Africa is infinitesimally small, if not nil. It is so not because of language, culture or distance, but because of the pressure of the so-called "South African way of life"—which I would rather describe as a "way of death."

To break through this artificial barrier in the church one could of course try to force the issue in a particular congregation; but I doubt if one would find non-European Christians, with all their courtesy and unwillingness to cause offence to other people, who would be the guinea pigs in what would almost certainly result in a rumpus. Nor would the result achieved be the kind of reconciliation for which Christians strive. So we felt that the best way would be to run a pilot scheme which would demonstrate in practical terms that the races can worship together and share congregational life. Our aim is not to propose total integration for any church, but to encourage a natural openness and acceptance of folk of any race who can share in and benefit from participation in the congregation concerned.

The North End Presbyterian Church, as it is called, now has about 50 members and associate members of whom half are European, about thirty per cent Africans and the remainder Coloured. Services are conducted in English though we use a specially prepared tri-lingual hymn book. Women's Association and Youth Fellowship each have about 20 members and the Sunday School enrolled over 70 children this year. Each of these organisations is equally representative of the various races of our city. In addition members visit one another's homes each fortnight for home services.

For five years we have engaged in all the normal activities of Presbyterian congregations without notable difficulty and have had in addition the enrichment of each other's fellowship and the ministry of preachers of all races. So we consider that the pilot scheme has fulfilled

its main purpose, though it is not yet self-supporting as a congregation.

At one stage we were involved in negotiations with two other Presbyterian congregations in East London, one a congregation of Coloured folk and the other of Europeans. Our hope was that they would agree to amalgamate with us in a kind of federal arrangement. On the Coloured side the proposal succeeded and it failed by only one vote when first considered by the European congregation. Thereafter, however, reaction set in and it was heavily defeated in a second vote on the European side. We have gone ahead in joining up with the Coloured congregation in what we hope may also provide an example of the linking up of two congregations across racial divisions.

People ask me how we manage to operate under South African laws. There is no prohibition on the races worshipping together in any place, except in a proclaimed African area where other races require permits to enter and seldom get them. A congregation like ours could operate in any church in this city. The main reason why we chose the North End is for its centrality and already mixed racial character. No one feels on strange ground coming there.

One area where the laws of the country hinder us is that we cannot yet get permission for non-Africans to attend home services in Duncan Village, East London's African township.

Other points at which the law could affect us are: (1) If we were to hold services *mainly* for Africans then in terms of a 1937 enactment we would require ministerial permission. (2) The Minister of Bantu Affairs could issue a notice, provided he had the concurrence of the City Council, in terms of the so-called "Church Clause" that the attendance of Africans at our services must cease. (3) If we started to teach academic subjects in Sunday School we would require registration under the Bantu Education Act. (4) If we run public entertainment open to all races we require a permit.

Meeting together in a congregation like this has brought more forcibly to our notice the need to think out what Christianity means in other areas of life than simply the "Church" sphere. People of different races getting together and belonging as Christians is easy enough in church, but what about employment and business, what about civic affairs, what about politics?

A single lady, a member of our congregation, has domestic employment which affords her a room to live in (but no food) and a wage of R4.00 per month. There are probably a few little ex-

tras in the way of clothing, etc. but her cash income is R4.00 per month. Of this she has been contributing 10c. per week (43c. per month) to church funds on a purely voluntary basis. She could contribute one cent if she wished and remain a member. At the end of last year a single sentence in our monthly news-letter conveyed the suggestion that as costs were rising (sometimes salaries too!), and this rise in costs affected the church also, members might consider a slight increase in their giving. In response she put hers up to 15c. per week (65c. per month) i.e. 18 per cent of her miserable cash income. Now I receive a free house and R128 per month. (I could have R158 if I wanted it) and this gets printed every quarter in our news-letter. It makes me think that I might be a more generous giver, but it also makes me think hard what Christians can do now to start closing the gap of their ridiculous disparity in wages before waiting until the whole wage structure throughout the country is changed.

In the realm of politics, a preoccupation for every South African, we have found ourselves, if anything, much less concerned to discuss political matters than we expected, though we have never tried to dodge or suppress political discussion. *While none of us is quite happy with apartheid* I think we all realise that our congregation's existence is not intended as a protest against a political system. It is in obedience to Christ's command that we love one another that we gather, and as we put that love into effect we believe that out of it will grow a better understanding of how to act in the political as well as other fields where the races find themselves in tension, mutually estranged or unjustly treated.

As far as I know this is the only congregation of its specific kind in the country though I would be very glad to learn of the existence of others.

● Continued from page 1

and it seems incredible that they were meant to be taken seriously. A Minister of State spoke of "full-blooded non-whites"; this bill would put an end to "creeping integration"; "It has become evident" he said "that there are people who are evidently satisfied to make no distinction between white and non-white."

The Minister stated that this bill was introduced to "close the loopholes in the law" which had resulted in successful applications for reclassification. Here is another blatant example of how, when the demands of justice do not accord with the policies of the Nationalist government, then the remedy is easy — change the law.



One must not forget that in numerous churches, particularly in the Cape, the races worship and take communion together, as they have done for centuries, in what is in fact the *more traditional* South African way of life, and they do so in far greater numbers than in our case. However I understand that their meeting is not nearly so frequent or definite when it comes to the organisation of congregational life or social activities together.

Our services are held at 10 Park Street at 7 p.m. on Sundays and any interested persons in East London, or passing through, are welcome to join us.

● Vervolg van bladsy 1

dis ongelooflik dat mens veronderstel word om hulle ernstig op te neem. 'n Kabinets Minister het gepraat van „volbloed nie-blankes”; en die wetsontwerp sal 'n ent maak aan „sluipende integrasie.” Hy het bygevoeg dat „daar mense is wat tevrede is om geen verskil te maak tussen blank en nie-blank nie.”

Die Minister het gesê die wetsontwerp word ingedien met die doel om skuiwergate in die wet, wat tot suksesvolle herklassifikasie gelei het, toe te stop. Hier is nog 'n flagrante voorbeeld van hoe, as regmagtige versoeke nie strook met Nasionale Party beleid nie, die oplossing so maklik is — verander net die wette!