

# an open letter

Dear Mrs Burton

I would be very interested to know what is happening to the Black Sash. I joined about 15 years ago, believing that it was an organisation of level-headed, intelligent women and that it stood for everything that was sound, honest and upright. Every society needs a conscience. We were that, and I felt proud and privileged to belong.

Ten or so years ago in South Africa it was relatively simple to distinguish the good from the evil, the just from the unjust, the true from the false. The Black Sash protested against what was clearly evil, and fought for the rights of the oppressed.

Today, however, we are caught between two ruthlessly cruel and terrifying evils. Anyone who protests against and condemns the one receives applause and approval from the whole world — deservedly so. At the mere mention of the other, there seems to be apologetic discomfort, or a sinister silence.

I attended a Black Sash workshop in Johannesburg during October 1986, in the hope that my confusion would be dispelled. However, this was not to be. It was clear that we all stand united against the evil of apartheid. But there seemed an unwillingness to admit even the existence of any other evil, this horror that has hardly touched our comfortable lives — yet. The tyranny, terror and murder in the townships profoundly affects the lives of the very people for whose rights the Black Sash has striven so valiantly all these years. People seemed to be reluctant to discuss this at all.

I am a nursing sister and I work with sisters who live in Soweto. What they say about life there is mind-bending. They speak only for themselves. They do not make sweeping statements claiming to speak for the nation or for the people. They do not volunteer information, looking for sympathy, understanding or moral support. Their stories vary only in detail.

They all say that one of the worst aspects of life in Soweto is that no one trusts anyone anymore.

They fear the police. Many say the police cause trouble and incite the youngsters, provoking violence and anger. A man I know told me his little brother was shot in the back and killed by the police while hiding from them — in a church.

They all fear the militant black youth, even more than the police. Those who pay their rent live in fear. Those who do not pay their rent live in fear. They speak of knocks on the

door late at night — children demanding compulsory donations for a wounded comrade or for a funeral. They dare not question or give less than R1. One family I heard of had about three or four youths move into their house one weekend. They simply took over, saying they had come to Soweto for a funeral. The family were too afraid to object.

A sister in another ward lost her husband earlier this year. On his way home he was dragged from his car, stoned to death and set alight. He was a young policeman. Then the family lived in dread for the day of his funeral. (I wished I had had the courage to go. We just sent her a tin of biscuits and a card.) I told a young black priest about this and his reaction was 'Oh well, they must expect it!' This attitude shook me rigid.

Would those brave ladies who attend funerals in the townships attend the funeral of a necklace victim? I ask sincerely, not critically. Is not all human life of infinite value and of equal worth?

I know that this violence is the result of apartheid. It was because of the monstrous violence of apartheid that I joined the Black Sash. But I find I cannot 'just understand' the violence. I have always detested the brutal acts of the police, the torture and killings and detentions. But why does it seem to be frowned upon when one expresses outrage and revulsion when people are hacked to death or stoned or burnt alive? Are silence and 'understanding' not simply an appeasement of this new monster, which we dread?

When other people behave in a savagely depraved and cruel way I feel compelled to condemn such acts, utterly. To do anything less, to just 'understand' — or even worse, to make allowances — seems to me to be a subtle, patronising insult not only to the humanity of murderous thugs but an affront to and a betrayal of all decent black people. I believe that selectively disregarding individual suffering because it is 'understandable' makes one an accomplice by default in murder and dementia and in the final destruction of all civilised values. I believe that we need to hold fast to truth, we need to fight duplicity in ourselves and in others, we need to cherish the sanctity of all human life. To do otherwise would be to cease, ourselves, to be wholly human. And history and our children would **not** defend us.

Yours sincerely

Barbara N. Waite



## Mary Burton's reply

The central issue raised in this letter is whether the Black Sash has altered its attitude to the use of violent methods of bringing about change in South Africa. It is a question which has been asked before, and which has given rise to considerable debate within our organisation. It has been argued in the columns of our magazine, where it was the subject of an editorial in November 1984. Discussion at the 1986 National Conference led to the subsequent publication of a policy statement and a working paper on the principles of non-violence.

The fact that the question is being raised again is an indication of the deep concern which is inevitably felt by any organisation working towards the recognition and protection of human rights and liberties. The debate is also evidence of the tensions and anxieties which result from the dramatic increase in levels of violence throughout the country. The question is asked most pointedly because in the past few years the Black Sash has been seen to be working more closely with a number of community organisations. There is the underlying implication that some of these may be, if not responsible for, at least tolerant of, violent tactics.

My understanding is that the leaders of these organisations are committed to seeking non-violent methods of changing South Africa's structures. In mid-January, for example, representatives of the UDF, AZAPO and COSATU called for an end to violence in the townships. My closer contact during the past year with all regions of the Black Sash has convinced me that this commitment also remains true for all our own members. That we are able to explore and contain diverse opinions on particular issues, without sliding away from our basic principles, is part of our strength.

Our advice offices and our fieldworkers receive information about violence and counter-violence, and we continue to have a responsibility to all the people who seek our help. Among those who do so are people who in urban townships or rural communities experience brutal repression of resistance to the policy and practice of apartheid. In some areas where non-violent strategies such as boycotts have had a considerable effect on public opinion, leaders have been harassed and detained. When questions were asked

concerning the use of coercive methods of forcing people to join boycotts or stayaways, the reply sometimes given is: 'The whites are forced to join SADF; we also must conscript people onto our side'. For some years we have actively opposed conscription, and we do not support this version of it, but now the emergency regulations prevent us from voicing our view of compulsory military service.

The curbs on discussion and the organisation of many non-violent tactics create a crucial lacuna in the heart of this debate. We cannot hear the reasoning of those who have grown disillusioned with peaceful methods and turned to armed struggle. Nor can we rely on the wisdom of many of those leaders who might have kept the anger and impatience of their supporters in check, for they have been detained. There are heavy penalties for planning any civil disobedience. Rallies, demonstrations, even a cultural festival are all banned. In the townships funerals became occasions at which people could meet for a public show of support. Members of the Black Sash have attended funerals where we have known those who have died, or their families, or when we have been invited to be there — often because the families believed that our presence might help to ensure a peaceful outcome.

I believe that all the work of the Black Sash, whether it is in the sphere of advice office work or political campaigning, is a peaceful part of the march towards a new South Africa. We have tried to address the problem of violence and its effect on the population, particularly the youth of this country by, for example, holding a seminar in Cape Town and a conflict-resolution meeting in Port Elizabeth. We do reaffirm both our opposition to apartheid and also our absolute commitment to non-violence. We do agree with Dr Allan Boesak that violent tactics dehumanise the perpetrators at the same time as they hurt the victims. It is important that we say so. But I believe this is not enough. We must not withdraw from the struggle for freedom but must instead find ways of contributing to it that do not conflict with our principles. We must demonstrate by our actions that there *are* still other ways to bring about change. But we know that these ways are costly, and that the risks of peaceful but effective action grow steadily greater.