

A four-cent debt

For more than a year Father David Russell of King Williams Town has been trying to obtain adequate maintenance grants for families at Dimbaza, which is one of the resettlement towns in the Ciskei. The people there are suffering and Father Russell, having failed to achieve any alleviation of their plight through his personal approaches to the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development, has now decided to try to live himself on R5 a month for six months. During June he will live on rations worth R2,58 a month. He says that, even so, his suffering can in no way equal the suffering of the women in Dimbaza. He has clothing, a comfortable bed and started the six months in good health. Also his six months will come to an end; their hunger is endless. He is denying himself the use of hot water because the women cannot afford the fuel to heat water for washing in. His cooking pot already has a hole in the side but R5 a month cannot allow him to buy a new one so he must be careful not to fill it above the level of the hole and he must seal the hole as best he can with thick porridge. The letters we print below tell why he feels called to offer himself in this way. His sacrifice must not be in vain.

13th April, 1972.

The Hon. Mr. A. J. Raubenheimer,
Department of Bantu Administration and
Development,
Houses of Parliament,
Cape Town.

Dear Sir,

I wish to thank you and the Secretary for the Department for giving me over an hour of your time yesterday morning to discuss the problems of Dimbaza Resettlement Township.

However, I am left with a feeling of disappointment and helplessness at your firm refusal to allow a woman, at long last able to obtain a Maintenance Grant of only R2,50 per month, to continue with rations worth R2,55 per month. The majority of women I have spoken to were never told that this would be the case when they applied for the grant. I fail to see how this can be justified on Christian grounds. Again, to give just one more example, how can we support in terms of our Christian Creed a pension of only R5,00 per month to an African and R38,00 per month (just raised to R41) for a White?

I had hoped that it would be sufficient to draw your attention to the pathetic facts by means of private correspondence. I have trusted that by appealing to Christian principles mutually shared and acknowledge, that those who have the power, might be touched and have acted, but the response has been negative.

I am truly appalled, and am tempted to react with virulent denunciation. I believe that

would be legitimate, but I do not feel called to do it. I am at a loss for words. I am weary of meeting suffering daily; weary of making approaches to the authorities which seem to achieve nothing. However I will not give up: so I will try a new approach which I hope might bear more fruit than words alone. For the next 6 months I will try to live on R5 per month myself. This is the amount an African old age pensioner is expected to live on. Each month I will send an open letter to the Minister as Head of the Department, explaining from personal experience how it feels to live on this.

It is my prayer that in this small way, I may reach the hearts of those who have power to remedy what is surely an intolerable situation which challenges our Christian consciences.

I believe it right to share with fellow white South Africans the facts which constitute the daily struggle of their fellow men. We whites have been protected from seeing what we do with our power and what we fail to do. Surely then I do some small service in trying to help peel away that barrier which blinds us from Christ in need. For me to be silent and do nothing would therefore be more culpable than the very ignorance of this unholy discrimination which I believe cannot be in accordance with the will of God.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely in Christ's Service.

D. P. H. Russell.

15th May, 1972.

Dear Mrs. Sinclair,

I enclose a copy of my letter Mr. M. C. Botha dated 15.5.72. I hope you can find a sympathetic editor to carry it.

I also enclose a copy of my first month's budget — 14th April to 14th May. You will notice that I went into debt to the extent of 4 cents. It was obviously a bit rash to buy so much golden syrup, but it helped the bread go down. I was also extravagant enough to buy a pint of fresh milk for 8 cents on the day I started this diet. Needless to say there will be no more fresh milk for me until October 15th when I'll be free again.

I will also have to think twice before buying another postage stamp during the five months

that remain; I have managed to let some friends and family know that they must send me stamps if they want to hear from me.

I realise I am cheating a bit in doing this, because people at Dimbaza earning R5 a month and less cannot depend on stamps from others. Maybe stamps seem the least important item on my budget, but in fact they are something of a literal lifeline for so many people struggling to keep contact with breadwinners far away for months and months on end. For the first time in my life I realise how a vital little postage stamp can pose a real financial problem.

Yours sincerely,

D. P. H. Russel.

MY BUDGET FOR R5 PER MONTH

APRIL 14 TO MAY 14, 1972

	Cents
Maize Meal — 2,5 kg	19
Samp — 1,25 kg	10
Kupugani Soup — 1½ pkts.	30
Bread — 7½ loaves	67½
Pronutro — 2 pkts.	36
Margarine — 500 g	22
Milk — 30 ozs. (1 pt.)	52
Coffee — 375 g	50
Sugar — 1½ kg	24½
Salt	5
Golden Syrup — 500 g	14
Peanut Butter — ½ jar	10
Vitamin Tablets	34
Fuel	90
Matches	3
Soap	7
Toothpaste	15
Postage stamp	5
Church giving	10

R5,04

15th May, 1972.

The Hon. Mr. M. C. Botha.

Dear Sir,

In my letter of April 13 to the Deputy Minister, the Hon. A. J. Raubenheimer, I said I would be writing a monthly open letter to you as head of the Department, explaining from personal experience what it feels like to live on R5 a month, for six months.

I am assuming the Deputy Minister shared with you the full contents of that letter; so I will not try to explain again what has moved me to act this way, after trying in vain for so long to have conditions in resettlement townships like Dimbaza effectively remedied.

My R5 a month confines me to 16½ cents a day. I have juggled as best as I can with these cents and half-cents, and the following is the result: Daily: Maize meal 1 cent (4 dessertspoons), bread or samp 2½ cents, Kupugani soup 1 cent, milk 1½ cents (8 teaspoons), coffee 1½ cents (4 teaspoons), sugar 1 cent (8 teaspoons), peanut butter or syrup 1 cent, vitamin tablet 1 cent, fuel 3 cents, salt, matches, soap, toothpaste, stamps, Church giving (all) 1 cent. Total: 16½ cents.

The values and amounts above are approximate; some are a fraction more, some less. One thing is definite, there are only 16 cents a day for "living".

I am aware that it may seem rather absurd for me to write to you, a senior Cabinet Minister, about teaspoons of soup and dessertspoons of maize meal, but alas, the pathetic truth is that the lives of thousands (millions) in this wealthy country of ours revolve around these mean amounts, and less. Moreover it is you, Sir, who is the man most responsible for these lives.

At the outset of this six months on R5 per month. I wish to emphasise this vital difference between myself and a person at Dimbaza living on the same amount. Most fundamental are the psychological differences.

I set out with an object, a purpose, with some hope, and above all with a knowledge that my journey is not only voluntary but temporary. If I was to become desperate, I know that I have friends that would immediately supply my need. For those at Dimbaza, their condition is a way of life, without purpose

or hope of escape, and with no assurance of support from others.

My position is as different from theirs as hope from hopelessness; so I am keenly aware that my knowledge of what their condition really feels like is very limited indeed.

Furthermore, at the level of material needs there is a marked contrast. I start off with sufficient clothes, furniture, utensils — they do not; and there is manifestly no room for clothes and furniture (let alone decent food) on 16 cents a day.

Mention of this last point will help you to understand why I was so shocked when I discovered that people must choose between rations or a maintenance grant. They cannot have both. Yet the combined value is not much over R5. The monthly rations alone for an adult are as follows: Maize Meal (20 lbs.) 70 cents, mealies (8 lbs.) 26 cents, beans 5 lbs.) 78 cents, margarine (1 lb.) 28 cents, skim milk (2 lb.) 54 cents, salt (½ lb.) 2 cents. Total: R2,58 a month.

I am astonished at the refusal to have these adequately improved. Hundreds of families are completely dependent on this. In another attempt to have something done — as an active plea on their behalf — I plan to live on these rations myself for the month of June.

I am going to invited fellow White South Africans to join with me in this, even if only for a week or two (if the whole month proves too grim or impractical). It should give us some inkling of what is being done to our fellow citizens.

I am going to ask them to write open letters to you, Sir, describing their experience and commenting as they feel moved.

It is because I believe we have certain Christian beliefs in common that I still have hope. I may not be able to reach your heart, but God can. I pray for you daily, and also for myself, because I need him just as much.

Yours sincerely in Christ's service,

D. P. H. Russell.