

Religion dividing, not uniting, SA society

Religion contributed to the divisions in South African society instead of playing a cohesive and integrating role, according to the Human Sciences Research Council's report.

The council's religion committee also found that Black church members who were presently apolitical could soon be motivated into political action.

It found that church members who were normally "politically passive" had a stronger identification with the South African Council of Churches than with the Progressive Federal Party.

"It seems that people who are apparently politically uninvolved, due to a pietistic concept of religion, nevertheless have the ability for politically radical action at a later stage," said the report.

The report added that it found that the use of religion depended on the needs of the group. The link between religious values and group interests carried a considerable potential for conflict.

It noted:

"The fact that South Africa is increasingly represented as a polarised society also has an effect at the religious level. The cohesive function which religion is supposed to fulfill comes under increasing pressure when people are forced to take sides in the socio-political debate.

"In general Whites regard religion as a source of stability in a changing world, while Blacks, Coloureds and Indians see

religion as a stimulus towards the improvement of their lot."

The important role that religion played was underlined by the "current debate on the alleged association of Afrikaans churches with apartheid and the prominence given to the theology of liberation in debates on the religion between church and society."

The report stressed: "From research undertaken it appears that the role of religion is considerably more complex than is generally thought and that several of the current concepts concerning it will have to be revised..."

It appeared that a common value system was vital for South African society to accomplish reconciliation between individuals and groups.

The religion committee's report concluded:

- The legitimacy of particular group interests should frequently be tested against shared religious criteria to ease areas of conflict.
- The restriction of religion to the personal sphere, and the inability to relate religious values to other fields of society, prevent religion from making a constructive contribution towards socio-economic unity.
- Religious movements have a special task of building bridges in a polarized society and finding a common vision for a "new South Africa."
- The relation between Church and State calls for urgent attention.

ALTHOUGH unrest had increased since 1976 and had inhibited the tolerance of Whites, the HSRC report concluded that most South Africans believed the country would change considerably during the next 20 years.

Whites expected greater power-sharing with all groups and many — 47 percent of Blacks and 68 percent of Coloureds — foresaw better race relations by 1990.

The report stressed the need to recognise individual rights, which it said had been forsaken in the past for policy of group recognition. Group-based legislation, such as the Group Areas Act and other discriminatory laws, had also given the concept of group rights a negative connotation.

MANY people expected a broadening of the basis of democracy to all race groups and most believed that race relations would improve within the next five years, said the HSRC report.

It noted, however, that lack of contact between the races could cause "conflict and even violence..."

The report noted that the little contact that there was between groups occurred mostly at work or in commerce.

"Contact is limited to formal contact is limited to formal topics ... and there is little or no contact in spontaneous social situations on the basis of equal status," it said.

The report noted that with the opening of sport and entertainment facilities, there would be more spontaneous and informal contact.

THE REPORT said political power should be shared among all race groups in a "plural" society.

The researchers suggested guidelines along which society and government could move to avoid a "conflict" racial situation and stressed time was vital.

"Delays in addressing the issue could have catastrophic consequences," it added.

The report called for the establishment of a democratic political structure, negotiated and participated in by all races, a newly-formed legal system that would not be "suspected" by certain race groups and better communication at all levels of society.

Seven fields were specified where government and other leaders could take action to ameliorate racial tension.