



THE CHURCH AND THE FREEDOM CHARTER



1988 marks the thirty-third year since the adoption of the Freedom Charter, by the Congress of the People, in Kliptown, near Johannesburg.

It was adopted by the ANC as its programme of action a year later. It was also adopted by the SACP as its short-term goal.

The National Executive Committee of the ANC declared 1980 as "The Year of the Charter". The newspapers inside South Africa soon commemorated the year by publishing millions copies of the Freedom Charter, and since the formation of the UDF in 1983, hundreds of women, residents, students, civic and other organisations have adopted the Freedom Charter as their programme of action, so as to realise the objectives of our National Democratic Struggle.

In this issue of "PHAKAMANI", we re-publish a theological critique of the Freedom Charter by one of our prominent church leaders in South Africa, after a brief background. At the end of the critique, we pose questions that will help you discuss the Freedom Charter. In our next issue, we hope to produce a message on the Freedom Charter by another prominent South African figure. We will also attempt to look at the Freedom Charter and the social teachings of the church.

BACKGROUND OF THE FREEDOM CHARTER

"If you could make the laws what would you do? How would you set about making South Africa a happy place for the people who live in it?"

These were the questions asked of hundreds of thousands of South Africans in an 18-month campaign which ended in the Freedom Charter and the Congress of the People.

The Congress of the People (Freedom Charter) Campaign was launched in March 1954 by the Congress Alliance, African National Congress, South African Indian Congress, the South African Coloured People's Organisation and the South African Congress of Democrats (Whites). Over 200 organisations attended a conference in Tongaat near Durban to plan the Campaign. The National Action Council (NAC) was elected to run the campaign.

The first task of the NAC was to make the whole country aware of the congress of the People. "This can only be done through the greatest possible campaign of printed material side by side with a string of hundreds meetings, house canvasses and group

discussions.

Every demand made by the people at these gatherings, however small the matter, must be recorded and collected for consideration by

the Congress of the People for inclusion into the Freedom Charter. In this way it will become the charter of the People, the content of which has its source in their own homes, factories, mines and reserves." Through the collecting of the demands of the people for the Freedom Charter thousands of people would begin to see what kind of society they wanted to live in.

The campaign was divided into three phases:

1. "To make the Congress of the People known and understood throughout the country, draw in all possible organisations, recruit the first 5000 volunteers and set up provincial committees."

The volunteers were educated through a series of lectures before the meetings were organised. National sub-committees were set up to look into the conditions facing mineworkers, farm-labourers, domestic servants, bantustan residents, factory workers and youth to present them with the plans for the campaign. Thousands of pamphlets were sent out, with the most important



question- "What do you mean by freedom?"

2. The second phase of the campaign was to establish a network of 2000 local Congress of the People's Committees, gather demands, in writing, for the Freedom Charter, increase the number of Freedom Volunteers and start preparing for the congress, 26th June 1955. People across the country were also urged to elect their delegates to the Congress of the People.

The campaign was set back by the bannings which removed layer after layer of leadership. But the campaign went ahead with the people coming forward to fill the gap left by the bannings.

The demands for the Freedom Charter were flooding into the NAC offices. "... on sheets of torn paper from school exercise books, on little dog-eared scraps of paper, on slips torn from the Congress of the People's leaflets."

A journalist described the happenings just before the Congress of the People: "And now, we are on the eve of the meeting of the Congress of people where the Freedom Charter will be discussed and debated. All the signs now are that this will be for and away the greatest such gathering ever in our country."

Almost every group of people who got together to formulate their demands, neighbours in a suburb, workers in a shop or factory, farmers, peasant... have been electing delegates to speak for them at the CONGRESS OF THE PEOPLE.

3. The third phase was the

Congress of the People. It was held on the 26th June 1955. There were 3000 delegates and 2000 observers. It was a historic day. A day that people had been waiting for, for 18 months. Each clause of the Freedom Charter was read out, explained, debated and accepted by the people. At the end of the day delegates took home the Freedom Charter drawn up from the peoples of South Africa's demands. The next few months were spent in holding report back meetings, house meetings, and meetings in organisations. The people who had sent their demands had to know what had happened at the Congress of The People.

This year we celebrate the thirty-third anniversary of the drawing up of the Freedom Charter. We remember the people's desire for a new South Africa. We also remember that this vision for South Africa has not been realised yet. Finally, we commit ourselves to continuing working for this new South Africa.

THE FREEDOM CHARTER; A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

Thirty years ago a humble town called Kliptown, hosted one of the most significant political events in South Africa. One can write volumes on what came to be known as the "Congress of the People" exclusivist national convention of 1908-9, the "Congress of the People" was a shining example of democracy at work. The CONGRESS WAS OPEN TO ALL those who subscribed to the values of a free, united, just, and non-racial society. It

is now generally acknowledged that the "Congress of the People" was the culmination of a struggle against white conquest, economic exploitation and political domination. The historic Assembly at Kliptown crowned its deliberations by producing the first anti-imperialist people's document in South Africa- the Freedom Charter. This document has continued to be the rallying point for all freedom-loving patriots who have an interest in the destruction of Apartheid.

What has the Freedom Charter to do with the Church today? A lot! For one thing, many participants in the Congress of the People were professed christians. For another, all progressive Christian Churches condemn apartheid as evil, heretical, as well as theological untenable. Modern theological scholarship is acutely aware that those who are committed to the struggle for total liberation must address them-

"As long as there is a Minister who thinks he is God, we (the Church) have work to do. It doesn't matter if they ban us, throw us in jail, say we've been inspired by I don't know who, we will continue to have work to do in this country as long as Apartheid exists. I want to say to Vlok" Who do you think you are? Whose line must the Church toe in South Africa?"

Dr. Allan Boesak



selves to the social, economic and political structures of the society in which they live. The Freedom Charter provides a broad based progressive forum for those who are committed to self-determination for the majority of the people. Nothing could be more Christian than waging a struggle for freedom.

At the theoretical or ideological level it is imperative for the Christians in South Africa to understand how apartheid serves the interests of monopoly capital and international imperialism. Through the Freedom Charter, thousands of people from all social classes and strata declared their opinion for a social order which would facilitate a fairer distribution and sharing of natural as well as other resources. They also wanted to create conditions where the PEOPLE SHALL GOVERN, where they will create and control their sovereign and independent countries. They committed themselves to a society wherein all bonafide South Africans would enjoy full citizen rights.

The Freedom Charter puts the human person right in the centre of the universe. It takes democracy quite seriously. That is why it is a people's document. The interests of the people are paramount. Some ultra-leftists have criticised the Charter for not being dogmatic or doctrine enough. As we know, the Congress of the People was preceded by a series of intensive and candid consultations. On the practical level, the Charter can teach the church much even about

itself. In the process of consulting, the Freedom volunteers learned a lot from simple folks. They built up a formidable network of genuine communication and mutual respect between themselves and the people.

Finally, there is the unprecedented resurgence of interest in the Freedom Charter today. This could be seen as an offshoot of the Free Mandela Campaign. One would hope that the interest goes far deeper. Apartheid as a policy or political philosophy is barren and discredited. People are searching for alternative models of society. The church cannot stand idly by if it wishes to promote the struggle for liberation and human dignity. Without any fear of contradiction it can be said that the Freedom Charter is compatible with Christianity. The least that the Church can do is to encourage its adherents to study the Freedom Charter and to enter into the debate surrounding the Charter, particularly during this 33rd anniversary of its birth. Not only is the Freedom Charter theologically sound, it forms a basis for a new society where all South Africans will have the right to be fully human.

DISCUSSIONS QUESTIONS

Once you have read the Freedom Charter

1. Discuss the differences/similarities between South Africa today and the South Africa envisaged by the Freedom Charter.

2. Where there are differences, discuss whether what is happening now or that is envisaged by the Freedom

Charter is more Christian.

3. Discuss if any clauses of the Freedom Charter could be considered un-Christian.

4. Discuss how your parish, order, organisation, school etc, could take up the Freedom Charter as an issue.

5. Do you think the church should be influenced by the clauses of the Freedom Charter?

If yes, why?

If no, why not?

If yes, how?



"The greatest threat to public safety in South Africa is this government ... If it is revolutionary to say I am working for a non-racial, democratic South Africa, then, yes, I am (a revolutionary)."

Archbishop Desmond Tutu



«Congress of the People» Klip-town, 1955.