

TO understand the role of the churches in South African society has always been important, for without this understanding one cannot really grasp the political realities of this country. This is especially true of the Dutch Reformed Churches (NGK).

To understand the situation within the Dutch Reformed Churches, however, one would have to look at it from the underside, the viewpoint of the black Dutch Reformed person.

The NGK family consists of four churches, divided along ethnic and racial lines: The white NGK, the "coloured" Sendingkerk (mission church), the "Indian" Reformed Church in Africa and the African Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (NGKA).

Although these churches share the same confessional basis and dogma, they are completely separate, with separate structures, separate synods and separate training facilities.

Yet this does not make them fully independent churches. Each year the white NGK provides a staggering sum for "mission work", and this dependency on white funds is one of the strongest ties that binds the black "daughter churches" to the white "mother church".

Also the white church provides ministers who serve in the black churches, who get paid through white funds, who are, in fact, "sent" by the white NGK for any length of time.

Most of these ministers, moreover, still call themselves "missionaries" and most of them remain members of the white NGK even while becoming members of the black churches.

This does not mean that

The sins of the church are the sins of the whites

Pl. Aspects: Conscience, Power, etc.

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there are non-racial congregations in these churches. White and black church members rarely meet, and then only on special occasions (with, as we saw in the Press, the gracious permission of the Minister for Racial Relations if this meeting is to be held in a white area).

Platform

Structurally, the common platform of these churches is the Federal Council of the Dutch Reformed Churches which meets once every four years, has a purely advisory function and can take no binding decision for the churches represented there.

For many years now the financial situation, the dominant position of the whites within the black

churches (for they have always occupied the positions of power in these churches) and the low level of political consciousness in the black NGKs have assured the white church of at least silent acquiescence and sometimes open support.

And why not? The white "missionaries" were, and most of them still are Nationalists who believed in their Government, who believed in Afrikaner Nationalism as God's gift to darkest Africa and, finally, who believed in the theology of the "volk" as expounded by the white NGK.

And once again, why not? This is how they were brought up, this is the theology they were taught in their white seminaries and, most of all, who in the black churches challenged them?

The few who did could be easily ignored, written off as lone voices agitating on the fringe, or threatened into silence. Knowing the role religion and the church play in the lives of millions of black people, the black NGKs became important for the success of Government plans.

Because apartheid has always been more than mere political philosophy — it is also a religious conviction — it needed a moral base, provided by the church. It needed the assurance of God's approval, again provided by the church. It also needed to believe that the blacks (for whose sake this policy was devised) accepted the policy.

The silence of the black NGK was sufficient to supply the illusion to fit the need. We have reason to

believe that this strong point has now become an Achilles heel for the Government and, consequently, for the white NGK.

The last few years have made it clear that the black churches have come into their own. As never before, they are now articulating their people's hurt and suffering, their fears and aspirations and the deep anger at a policy that debases and humiliates them.

Challenge

Unhesitatingly black spokesmen for the black churches are challenging the white NGK on:

● Its support and uncritical acceptance of Government policy and actions.

● The fact that the white church is essentially a "volkskerk" whose loyalty is primarily to the cause of the Afrikaner and the National Party.

● Its theology, which not only accommodates but justifies Government policy as God-given, and in accord with Scripture and the reformed tradition.

Moreover, what about its link with the secret Apartheid Broederbond, of which no less than 10 per cent of white NGK ministers are members?

question arises: How many of the whites in the black churches, who preach in black pulpits, who teach our children and young people and who have the numbers to outvote blacks in their own synods, belong to this organisation?

Can these very people who devise and plan and scheme against the liberation of black people now speak for them on national and international church platforms?

This is one of the reasons why white leadership is being challenged and white control of black churches in administration, ecumenical affairs and in theological institutions is being rejected.

Furthermore, blacks realise more and more that their dependency on white money is no accident. It is a direct result of the gross economic injustices maintained by the white Government — the very Government the white church (and whites within the black churches) aid and abet so faithfully.

Change

Economic justice, we realise, does not mean that the whites should be willing to give more for mission. Rather, it should mean that the basic economic policies of their Government should be changed so that the black people could survive.

It is the most important fact that the Dutch Reformed Churches recognise the oppression of their people by white racism, and

mislead their people in this respect.

Many tend to blame "outside agitators" (until lately this was the now-banned Christian Institute) who are "behind" all this. Recently even the Dutch churches were blamed for trying to "drive a wedge between mother and daughter churches".

But the reasons for the obstreperousness of the black churches are simple and the intelligent observer not blinded by emotion or ideology will recognise this.

● The last ten years or so have seen profound and rapid changes in the black community. These changes are seen not so much in tangible political structures, but in a new political consciousness.

Christians in the black churches come to church with a highly sensitised political consciousness, and they weigh the political value of all institutions, including the church.

● While their white colleagues preach and go home, or vote in synod and go to their white areas to hear applause from other white people, blacks have to return to their black communities.

Account

They have to give account of themselves and of the stand of their church vis-à-vis these crucial and inescapable problems. They have a sense of responsibility and accountability to the black community that white "missionaries" never have.

● Also, blacks have become tired of being associated with an "apartheid church". Because of the close links with the white NGK they have lost credibility in the black community.

Although all churches in South Africa are infected with the cancer of racism, it is true that the white NGK does carry a special responsibility with regard to the political situation in this country.

It is the most important fact that the Dutch Reformed Churches recognise the oppression of their people by white racism, and

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A coloured man explains what the term is all about.

they realise that to acquiesce would constitute an act of unfaithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ they seek to serve and are called to proclaim.

Contrary to the belief of their white brothers, they know that it is impossible to reconcile either Scripture or the Reformed tradition with the existence of apartheid.

These are the new realities in the Dutch Reformed Churches. The question must be asked: Is everything lost? Are there not people within the white NGK who recognise the situation for what it is?

Truly not all white dominions accept the status quo and there must be people who are gravely concerned about this rapidly deteriorating situation.

I daresay there are. But where are these people? Why are so many of them willing to speak about these things in private, while only a precious few have the courage to state publicly where they stand?

This gives rise to another pressing question: When the crunch comes, on whose side will they be?

Then there are those who have openly voiced concern, and yet it seems that they still are not fully acceptable to the black community in the churches.

A fundamental point should be made here: It is not merely a certain concern that we ask, it is the quality and the range (or depth) of this concern that is important.

Question

Are these white dominions and professors prepared to identify themselves with the suffering and the oppression of black people and actively to resist the policies and institutions responsible for this suffering?

We don't ask them to be against apartheid. The question is whether they are willing to identify with what