



John 13:15

Bishopsbourne • 17 Durban Street • P.O. Box 162 • Grahamstown • 6140 • Tel. (0461) 22500 • Office 23460

The Bishop of Grahamstown

The Rt. Revd. David Russell

Fax No: (0461) 25231

19 February 1990

Pastoral letter to farmers in the Kei Road district

Dear Brothers in Christ

A month has now passed since I met with a good number of you at Mr Syd Knott's farm on 19 January. Since then, on the 1st of February 32 persons were evicted from the Wolseley Estate¹. This has generated a number of reports in the press, which reflect conflicting views and perceptions in relation to the issues involved. I am writing now in the attempt to make certain matters clear. I do so in the hope that this will lead to a process whereby we can get beyond exchanges in the press, and arrange for all those involved in this situation, to meet together and work towards a solution which would be both compassionate and fair, and in keeping with our Christian heritage.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

I am of course aware that the role of the Church in these issues has been resented by many of you. I of course regret this, but feel bound to make clear what I believe to be the appropriate concern of the Church, laid upon us by our Lord. Where there is suffering and pain, where there is a sense of wrong, the Church has a duty to respond with compassion and attempt to give succour to those who are the weak and without legal rights in that situation. We do this in a way which includes a concern for everyone involved. We all know that there will be no lasting peace unless relationships between people and groups are addressed through real sharing and listening on the basis of Christian principles of justice. (Mtt 7:12; Mtt 12:20; Lk 4:18). I therefore beg to differ profoundly with those who are attempting to argue that the eviction of farm labour is a private matter. It is certainly not a private matter. It affects community relationships, and the Church is concerned about such things, and would be failing in her calling if she turned a blind eye to actions which cause great pain to members of the flock.

CHANGES TO THE LAW

I trust that we are all agreed that the present situation regarding the almost total lack of legal rights of farm workers in our country is a matter which needs urgent attention. As things stand, they are not protected by the Labour Relations Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, the Wage Act or the Unemployment Insurance Act. This places farm workers and their dependants in an extremely vulnerable situation. I would like to make a direct appeal to you, to take the initiative in formulating a series of recommendations as to how you believe the present legislation relating to farm labour should be reformed. Such an action on your part would go a long

1. Medical Records of 32 adults and children are on file.

way to build stable relationships between farmer and worker in the region, let alone in our country. It would be so much more meaningful and effective if you were to do this, rather than expecting the Church to take the immediate initiative in this regard. I therefore reiterate that I am making this heart-felt plea to you, to undertake this urgent task.

I wish to assure you however that from my side, I am deeply committed to addressing this issue, and have already corresponded with members of Parliament, and have started preliminary discussions with an economist who is an expert in the field, with the intention of organising a regional consultation later this year, or early next year.

THE NEED TO MEET TOGETHER

It is surely reasonable to argue that the time has now come for us to accept the principle that where the welfare of persons is involved, and in the interests of good and sound relationships, it is an obvious wisdom that the parties need to come together in some form to discuss and work through the issues. I understand that a meeting between yourselves and certain Church representatives did not take place, because you were apparently not ready to allow representatives from the farm labour community to be present. I would like once again to plead with you to reconsider your position on this. This is now the established pattern in the industrial and commercial world, and it is surely only a matter of time before it becomes accepted practice in the agricultural field. I am quite sure that only good can come out of such a practice, and I do ask you to reconsider this in the long-term interests of all involved.

I have sent to Fr Martin Glover, our priest who is working in the parish at Kei Road, a copy of a video 'The Promise of the Veld', about the experience of a well-known farmer, Roly Kingwill. It is a most moving documentary of the journey of a man of courage and integrity, who, not without much inner agonising, came to the point where he began to meet and talk with his farm labour in a new and creative way. I really do commend this video to you, and believe that you too will find it moving and helpful.

FARM WORKERS' FEAR

Having spoken to a number of people who have been involved in various ways with farm workers, or people who once worked on farms, I have become more keenly aware of the extent to which those living on farms fear eviction, and therefore fear you, the farmer. (I am of course speaking generally here). I am not saying that all fear you, but there are many who do. Perhaps you believe this is an inaccurate and unfair description of the reality. I wish that was a correct assessment. I am convinced however that farm workers live with an underlying fear of eviction. Their 'legal vulnerability' makes them totally dependant on the good will of the farmer. The result is an extreme reluctance to share their real feelings. They feel fearfully insecure. This is a deeply unhealthy situation and needs to be addressed and healed.

THE PRESENT TIMES OF RAPID CHANGE

In the past short weeks we have witnessed in our country a quite astounding series of events, which have surely placed us in a new direction of history in our country. Certain realities have been brought home in a new and stark

way. The implications of what has been set in motion will leave none of us unaffected. The challenge has been put before all of us to respond creatively and decisively, so that we can in our different capacities take our own initiatives in helping to build a new South Africa in which all participate and share, under the guiding hand of God our creator.

CONCLUSION

Before I end this pastoral letter to you, I would like to share with you my conviction that Tony and Laura Goodyer have been responding to the needs of the farm workers as Christians. Deeply committed in their faith, they have responded with compassion to the manifest plight of people whose lives have been profoundly disrupted by what has happened to them. I have found myself inspired by their Christian spirit and example. They have been moved by God himself, and it is my prayer and hope that you will all come together in prayer under God to seek his will and his way. It is only as we invite Jesus into every situation, every relationship, that we will enjoy that abundant life which Jesus came to share with all. (Jn 10:10)

God bless you all.

Yours sincerely in Christ

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David Gahamston". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

The Right Revd David Russell