

International Anti-Apartheid Movements in South Africa's Freedom Struggle :
Lessons for Today

Churches and the South Africa Liberation Struggle **Sue Britton**

The Church is in the business of liberation, of transformation. And so it was to be expected that the churches would have a role to play in the struggle for the liberation of South Africa, and for its transformation from an unjust, oppressive system based on race to a free, non-racial democracy.

And so they did - both inside the country and outside. In such a short time it is impossible to do justice to the role of the churches. But if we listen carefully to all the speakers at this conference, we will find churches and individual Christians deeply involved in many of the initiatives of solidarity discussed here.

So I simply want to tell you a few brief stories, cameos to whet your appetite and perhaps to stimulate interest in research and writing on the role of the churches in our struggle for liberation.

Let me start with Germany and Switzerland.

After the banning in October 1977 of the Black Women's Federation - among many other organizations - churchwomen in Germany in solidarity started organizing a boycott of South African food products. Ursula Trautwein and Marie-Luise Stohr called it the "policy of the shopping bag". Women would stand outside food stores with placards reading: "I don't buy apples from South Africa". And when other shoppers asked them why, they gave them information about what was happening here and engaged them in discussion about the evils of apartheid.

The famous apple boycott in Germany became the forerunner of boycott movements across many countries, and led to the boycott movement against German and Swiss banks doing business with the South African regime, thereby propping up the apartheid system. By the late 70s and through the 80s ordinary church members in both Germany and Switzerland were buying a few shares in these banks for as little as DM50, giving them the right as shareholders to speak at meetings. And they did. Critical shareholders persisted in making speeches and asking the embarrassing and difficult questions, drawing the attention of the media and the clients of the banks to the role the banks were playing. Friends and neighbours and members of the congregations would be asked: "Why do you have an account in the Deutsche Bank when it supports the apartheid economy?" Meanwhile church colleagues stood in picket lines outside the banks.

The churches' pickets had another very specific purpose - to give publicity to the people in prison and being detained without trial, being tortured and being killed. So one placard would say: "I'm standing here for Nelson Mandela," another: "I'm standing here for Walter Sisulu," another: "I'm standing here for Steve Biko." and another: "I'm standing here for Frank Chikane." And the names became familiar to everyone, as the press photographs of the picket lines spread the word.

Every two years a great gathering of Protestant Church activists was held - and indeed still is today, although some of the issues have changed. This Kirchentag, or "Church Day", held over several days in one of the large German cities, brought together many thousands of church activists to share their successes and failures, and to be inspired anew for their struggles for justice in solidarity with many third-world countries and on many issues affecting the poorest and most marginalized in their own society.

There was always a South Africa Day, when prominent church people from South Africa were invited to come and share the latest news, information and analysis, and to encourage their German comrades to continue the campaigns. This was also of course a wonderful encouragement for those South Africans who could attend, many from exile. Just knowing how many church people in Europe were supporting the struggle in such practical ways made coming back into the country, or continuing the lonely life in exile, much easier - it helped give hope that there was light at the end of the dark tunnel.

Partnerships were formed between church agencies here and in Europe. One such partnership between the Evangelische Akademie Bad Boll, in Germany, and Diakonia here in Durban resulted in several joint conferences and 'South Africa Weeks' in Germany in the late 80s, when South African churchpeople and activists in particular fields such as education and labour were taken to Germany to meet their counterparts, activists from the anti-apartheid movement and members of the exiled liberation movement. These encounters made a great impact on all who took part.

From Europe to England, and another personal story.

On the tenth anniversary of the Soweto uprising a church activist in Coventry organized an event in the ruins of the famous Coventry Cathedral, destroyed by German bombs during World War II. Schools from throughout the city brought groups of pupils to sit, sing, recite poetry or just be there. At times during the day the ruins were full of young people and at others there were just a few sitting in a huge circle in the sunshine, focussing on the situation in South Africa. As a result of that event, Ann Farr met South African people who were passing through or who were studying at the university. Through one of them, she met Helen and Theo Kotze, Methodist minister and his wife, in exile from South Africa.

where Theo had been with Beyers Naudé in the Christian Institute, also banned in 1977.

When they got to know each other better, Ann asked what she more she could do to help the South African cause. Helen and Theo introduced her to the scheme for getting money secretly to the families of South African political prisoners. As a result, Ann involved a large group of local church members in what she discovered much later was the International Defence and Aid Fund, which Horst Kleinschmidt has already spoken about. This amazing and successful scheme depended on many, many ordinary people - most of them church people - regularly and faithfully being channels for money to be sent to individuals in South Africa.

There were some ironies about the task. Ann points out that she had to go to the local Post Office for postal orders and to the local Barclays Bank for money orders. But this was hard to do, as they were boycotting Barclays Bank at the time for being involved in supporting the apartheid system - but they had to use them because they were the bank with branches in South Africa!

Ann and all the others who took part were very proud to have been part of such an amazing scheme when they finally found out how big and successful it had been.

The churches in the United Kingdom and Ireland were also involved in many other ways: in prayer, in raising awareness, in protest meetings and actions, in organizing boycotts, in networking through the anti-apartheid movement.

The third story I want to tell you is about a programme that proved to be the trigger for real change in thousands of lives and which was formative in helping to change the attitude of many influential white Christians, particularly in the Dutch Reformed Church which supported apartheid both theologically and in practice.

Beyers Naudé used to say: "It's no good just telling someone they are wrong. They have to see for themselves." Oom Bey had to see for himself by witnessing the conditions in the mine hostels, by visiting a country where black and white lived together, that apartheid was indefensible. His living witness has since been widely documented. Less well-known is that for more than thirty years Beyers and Ilse Naudé together, from their home, ran a programme that created opportunities for other South Africans, and people from overseas, to see for themselves.

This programme, the Christian Fellowship Trust, gave study grants to people, especially from the Dutch Reformed Church, so they could break out of their isolation and find the strength and support to challenge the theology of apartheid.

From the first contact made in the Netherlands and the first reception committee set up in London in 1963 with Anglican priest Robin van der Plank, and the first Church Welcome Committee chaired by Canon Norman Gilmore, down through the years when Germany and Switzerland with Pastor Leni Altwegg were included, with Gert von Manen in the Netherlands, the visits went on. .

The exposures to life beyond apartheid had a profound impact on the hundreds of grantees that Beyers and Ilse enabled to travel. For black grantees it was usually affirming and uplifting. For white grantees, especially Afrikaners, it was often a shattering experience.

Beyers Naudé understood what it was to be isolated, plunged into turmoil, and to emerge transformed. He said: "It was an objective of the programme to create an inner struggle in people, to make them become part of a small group of ministers who would wish to see how they could change the outlook of the whole DRC church. We realised it would create tremendous problems for them but - if we didn't do it there would be no meaningful change ... So we said, let us do this and accompany them emotionally."

Beyers had the courage, compassion and wisdom to accompany people emotionally on a journey beyond bigotry and oppression, no matter where they started from. Through the Christian Fellowship Trust, this commitment to breaking barriers touched thousands of lives, of people of all faiths.

There is so much more to talk of.

We could talk of the World Council of Churches in Geneva and its Programme to Combat Racism set up in 1969, with its awareness-raising around the situation in South Africa and its special fund to support the liberation struggle, with Anglican priest Barney Pitso, and with "Prexy" Nesbitt here with us at this conference from the USA.

We could talk of the churches in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, the USA, who collected money from thousands of ordinary Christians, members of local congregations, and with that money funded project after project of churches and NGOs in South Africa working for freedom and a just society.

We could talk of the role of the churches here in supporting those who refused to serve in the white apartheid army, and the churches in Europe through the Committee on South African War Resisters and War Resisters International who supported the young war resisters who went into exile. We could talk of the church-supported End Conscription Campaign, which effectively mobilized thousands of young white people and their families against the apartheid regime.

We could talk of the solidarity of the churches in Latin America, in the Philippines and in other parts of Africa and Asia, as they shared their own struggle for liberation against oppressive regimes - and through exchange programmes such as the Theology Exchange Programme shared inspiration and courage with us.

We could talk of the way the church in South Africa became the only open space left for organizing, as repression increased through the 80s, and of how it became a place where trade unions and activist organizations of many kinds could meet and organize with some protection.

We could talk of the struggles within the churches, abroad and here, against conservative theology and practice that sought to distance Christianity from involvement in the real issues and the real suffering of their members. And we could talk of the unique theology that developed here out of our struggle, the Kairos theology, which then became a benchmark for Christianity across the world.

And we could talk of more great people of faith who became beacons of the struggle:

- of Desmond Tutu, the loving, passionate prophet
- of Denis Hurley, the gentle, strong rebel
- of Trevor Huddleston, the troublesome priest
- of Frank Chikane, the sacrificial activist
- of Michael Lapsley, the wounded healer
- of Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, of Sheena Duncan, of Albert Nolan ...

of hundreds of thousands of extraordinary women and men across the world as well as in South Africa who understood that their membership of the worldwide Church called them to a solidarity of action with all people, and particularly with all who suffer or who are oppressed in any way, for whom the apartheid regime was a heretical contradiction of everything Christianity stands for, and who gave themselves to put their faith into action.

So I say, as we said then, Viva liberation, Viva justice, Viva the Church!