SOUTH AFRICAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

SUBMISSION TO THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

AUGUST 1997

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of submission

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) played an important role in the struggle against the apartheid regime. This submission seeks to outline the prophetic ministry and the actual activities of the Council through those years, to tell of the many attempts by the authorities to silence the Council and curtail its activities, and to make a presentation upon the role of the Council in the, healing and reconstruction of the nation. In this way, we believe, this submission will fulfil the mandate required of us in the request made by the Commission on May 29th 1997.

1.2 Ecumenical resistance to apartheid before the SACC

The SACC was constituted in May 1968. By then the National Party had been governing the country for twenty years and the harsh realities of apartheid were beginning to make themselves felt amongst the vast majority of the people. Church denominations, individually or collectively, had made some representations to the government, and had embarked on programmes to assist the victims of apartheid during those years.

Some individual church leaders had spoken out strongly against apartheid and suffered the consequences of their utterances through recall or banishment to their countries of origin - such as Fr Trevor Huddleston, Fr Cosmas Desmond and Dean Gonville ffrench-Beytagh - or banished and silenced in their own land - such as Chief Albert Luthuli.

It has to be acknowledged, however, that in general the Churches had made little concerted effort to stand together against the regime. Some of the few events that contrast with that generalisation are:

• A 1949 ecumenical conference at which Chief Albert Luthuli spoke and at which a call was made for a franchise vote.

- The 1957 united church stand against proposed government policy to curtail inter-racial worship. The clause was never enacted.
- The Cottesloe Conference of 1960 organised by the World Council of Churches (WCC) to challenge all its South Affican member churches to a united position on the policy of apartheid in response to the Sharpeville massacre. It was after this Conference that the Dutch Reformed Church pulled out of the WCC. It had already withdrawn from participation in the South African ecumenical movement in 1940.
- The formation in 1963 of The Christian Institute (CI) by Dr Beyers Naude and others.

1.3 The beginning of the SACC

There had been ecumenical organisations prior to the May 1968 founding of the SACC. The General Missionary Conference of 1904 was the first of these, followed in 1936 by the Christian Council of South Africa. These were both, by nature and composition, organisations mainly of missionary personnel and expatriate church leadership. /page 2/

The significance of the SACC was that it came at a time, and in line with a world wide similar movement, when the missionary agencies were handing control of the churches they had founded to the indigenous leaders of the different nations.

The founding meeting of the SACC, when the Christian Council of SA changed its name and portions of its constitution to allow for greater participation by indigenous lay and ordained personnel, was attended predominantly by white expatriates. In 1972 the SACC was officially declared to be a "Black" organisation under National Party apartheid government legislation because it's Executive was composed of more black then white members..

The SACC was from that time a legitimate voice of the people of God of this nation and not, as often stated by its opponents, under the control of overseas agitators.

1.4 Purpose of the SACC

The Council of Churches was formed to give visible expression to the unity of the people of God. This expression was known through a common voice on behalf of all Churches and through joint actions to serve the people of the nation in those things that belong to the Gospel.

The right to proclaim that common voice and the determination of what were those things that belong to the Gospel was to bring the Council of Churches into a collision course with the apartheid government throughout the years.

2. PROPHETIC ECUMENICAL STATEMENTS

"Mr Minister (of Law and Order) we must remind you that you are not God. You are just a man. And one day your name shall merely be a faint scribble on the pages of history, while the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, shall live forever..."

Desmond Mpilo Tutu, SACC General Secretary 1978 - 1984

2.1 Over the years the SACC sought to speak the word of God to the South African situation. This was done through Annual Conference and Executive Committee statements. It was also proclaimed through the prophetic preaching and speaking of its successive Presidents, General Secretaries, and members of staff1.

The reports prepared by staff members for the Annual Conference and/or National Executive Committee are statements of faith in the context of the situation of that time in both content and recommendations. During the years the SACC was also a facilitator for or a participant in the preparation of a number of theological statements. Among the most important of these were:

2.2 Message to the people of South Africa - 1968 /Page 3/

The message was received at the inaugural meeting of the SACC. It examined the Gospel's claim upon the loyalty of Christian people in South Africa. It declared that the unity of all people was the will of God and that "separation is the most complete refusal of the truth". It concluded by asking where a Christian's first loyalty lay: "Is it to a subsection of mankind, an ethnic group, a human tradition, a political idea; or to Christ?"

2.3 Study Project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society - 1972

This series of books examined the economic, educational, legal, social and political implications of what it means to be Christian in South Africa. It was a first attempt to present a picture of an alternative society to that being forged by the apartheid government.

The series was the joint activity of the SACC and the Christian Institute.

2.4 The Resolution on Conscientious Objection - 1974

The 1974 Annual Conference passed a resolution asking its member churches to "challenge all their members to consider ... whether Christ's call to take up the cross and follow him in identifying with the oppressed, does not, in our situation, involve becoming conscientious objectors" The resolution also questioned the appointment of chaplains to the South African military forces especially in relation

to similar chaplaincy services offered from the Churches to those "at present in exile under arms."

2.5 Non co-operation - 1979

At the 1979 National Conference a resolution was passed that recognised the suffering of the people and in "confessing that this suffering has been greatly increased by the Churches failure to act in the past" suggested that "South African Churches are under and obligation to withdraw as far as that is possible from cooperation with the State in all those areas in the ordering of our society where the law violates the justice of God."

2.6 Declaration of apartheid as a heresy - 1982

Apartheid was declared a heresy in a statement by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1982. This was a concept that lay behind much of the SACC work and witness.

2.7 Call to prayer for the end to unjust rule - 1985

The 1985 Annual Conference received a Theological Rationale from an ecumenical group on praying for the end of unjust rule in South Africa. The Conference referred it to member churches for consideration. The rationale suggested that the church has prayed for the authorities over the years to no avail. The time has now come, therefore, to pray that "God in His Grace may remove ... the tyrannical structures of oppression

2.8 The Lusaka Statement - 1987

The WCC convened a Conference in Lusaka attended by representatives of Churches from South Africa and other nations and of the liberation movements. The result was the Lusaka Statement taking the Churches another step along the road of confrontation with the apartheid government.

In part it stated "While remaining committed to peaceful change we recognise that the /Page 4/ nature of the South African regime which wages war on its own inhabitants and neighbours compels the movements to the use of force along with other means to end oppression. We call upon the churches and the international community to seek ways to give this affirmation practical effect in the struggle for liberation in the region

The SACC National Conference of that year accepted the statement despite fierce opposition from some of the delegates.

2.9 Disinvestment - 1988

The National Conference of 1988 resolved "To express our belief that disinvestment and similar economic pressures are now called for as peaceful and effective means of putting pressure on the South African government to bring about those fundamental changes this country needs.

2.10 The Road to Damascus - Kairos and Conversion - 1989

The Kairos Document was an initiative of the Institute for Contextual Theology. It is listed here as a most important international and ecumenical statement of its time that received the support of many persons associated with the SACC. It examined a State Theology which maintained the status quo and a Church Theology based on tradition, and went on to suggest the need for a Prophetic Theology.

2.11 The prophetic warnings

The SACC and its members have a record of appealing to the government for action to deal with urgent issues throughout the years. These are on record from the letters to the then Prime Minister, B J Vorster, following his response to the Message to the People of South Africa through to the warnings by the then SACC General Secretary, Frank Chikane, of what seemed inevitable in Bisho in 1993.

2.12 It is noticeable from even the short list above that the statements changed in nature and content as the years passed by. This is due to the emergence and influence of Black Consciousness and of Black Theology later denoted under the more general term of Liberation Theology. The Rev Frank Chikane, a former General Secretary of the SACC, says "I still regard the black theology debate as the most important theological debate ever to have taken place in South African"2

It is also noticeable that, although many SACC persons participated in their creation and dissemination, the statements were not the creation of the SACC as such which was, as an organisation of member church representatives, constrained to balance the varied views of those member churches.

3. SACC ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMMES

"Affirming the Gospel which is relevant to all areas of life and understanding the SACC recognises salvation to be a broad-based reality which offers deliverance from every kind of individual and structural form of captivity and oppression."

Dr Wolfram Kistner, Head of the SACC Division of Justice and Reconciliation - 1983

3.1 The Council has, throughout its history, had three main thrust to its activities. These relate to justice issues, development of skills and community projects, and theological reflection and proclamation for mission.

3.2.1 Justice Issues

The Council did not only speak out on matters of injustice and the violation of human rights. It provided, through its Division of Justice and Reconciliation, practical assistance to the oppressed including emergency aid, legal assistance and acts of solidarity to communities faced with removal, practical support to the families of those killed in detention or on the streets of our towns and townships, ensuring supportive attendance at trials, assistance to some of those in hiding or in need of leaving the country, and the provision of places of shelter for those fearing for their lives.

3.2.2 Caring discipleship

Of special mention is the Dependants' Conference (DC). This initiative to give support to the families of those detained, provide legal aid for those charged with apartheid "crimes", assist those detained with educational and study needs, and ensure families could visit their incarcerated loved ones. DC was an ecumenical programme already in its early stages of development when the SACC was formed. It became a very important aspect of the Council's activities throughout the apartheid era and was the source of much comfort and practical help to those who suffered at the hands of that system. Cowley House, a rest house in Cape Town for family members visiting prisoners on Robben Island was part of this initiative to assist detainees and their families.

3.3.1 Inter Church Aid and development assistance

Development projects figured high on the SACC agenda. It encouraged and supported development projects especially among those communities which suffered as a direct result of the apartheid system. Water systems, pre-schools, gardening programmes, schools for typing and other practical skills, knitting and sewing activities and many other community self support projects were given much needed assistance.

3.3.2 African Bursary Fund (ABF)

This specific development assistance programme helped many thousands of people in South Africa. It provided financial and pastoral support at all levels of education. Many present leaders of the nation in political, social, economic and educational life are among those who benefited from the programme.

3.4 Faith and Mission

The SACC is a Council of Churches and its activities based on Biblical imperatives. This division of work assisted in theological research and joint programmes of evangelism and united witness.

3.5 Other Programmes:

- Home and Family Life to proclaim family values in a time of separation /Page 6/
- The 'Asingeni' fund, with allowance for discretionary use by the General Secretary for the aid of victims of apartheid, including the cost of funerals, etc.
- Ecumenical Press Agency and the Ecunews news service to tell the true version of what was happening in South Africa.
- Women's Desk and Ecumenical Youth Project to assist in the special needs of these particular groups.
- Ecumenical Visitors' Programme to assist overseas visitors from global partner organisations to see the real South Africa and take part in SACC activities.
- Victims of Apartheid to supply practical assistance to the many who suffered.
- Emergency Relief for refugees and in emerg ency natural disaster situations.
- Choir Resource Unit to assist choirs and to convene a number of competitions in this important area of church life.
- the "Ombudsman~' to examine consumer problems and investigate possible fraud situations -even in the SACC itself.
- The SACC also took part in the Detainees' Parent's Support Committee, the Free the Children Campaign
- The initiative to form the National Co-ordinating. Committee for the Repatriation of South African Exiles (NCCR), along with the Catholic Bishops' Conference and representatives of the liberation movements 1991

3.5 Prayer and worship

No account of SACC activities can be complete without mention of the daily prayers and the often held worship services many of which celebrated the Eucharist. These expressed in a formal way the basic foundation of faith and gospel values of the SACC witness.

3.6. Programme to Combat Racism (PCR)

In 1970 the WCC decided to establish Programme to Combat Racism. Although this was not an initiative of the SACC or any of its member churches the Programme had an effect on the life and witness of the Council and its member churches. Many perceived, and indeed still perceive the SACC to be a branch of

the WCC. This is not so. As has been said, the SACC is a Council of South African Churches, some of which may belong also in their own right to the WCC. Although the PCR was not an SACC project and many Church leaders protested against the Programme when it was eventually announced, there is no doubt that it had a profound effect on the Churches in making them acutely aware of the discriminatory society in which we lived. There is also no doubt that the PCR was an acceptable programme to many within the SACC. No WCC member Church, despite government demands, withdrew from the WCC because of the PCR.

3.7 Conferences, a Convocation, Protests and special occasions

The SACC arranged, through its various divisions, many conferences and workshops for representatives of its member churches and others to meet. Reports of these are contained in the SACC archives. Among special note of these and other events are: /Page 7/

- Mission and Evangelism Conference 1973
- The many solidarity services and protests held in support of communities suffering through forced removals. These began in 1977 and continued for many years.
- March by Church leaders of Johannesburg May 1980 to protest at detention of former President and General Secretary of the SACC, the Rev John Thorne.
- Pilgrimage of Hope for young people to Israel, France and Switzerland in 1981.
- A speech by Mr Popo Molefe at the 1981 National Conference in which he suggested the need for a united democratic movement to stand against the government. This was the first such public mention of the idea which led later to the formation of the United Democratic Front.
- The granting of the Nobel Peace Prize to Bishop Desmond Tutu, then General Secretary of the SACC, in 1984.
- Protest in Cape Town by 25 Church Leaders and more than 100 clergy Feb 29 1988
- Convocation of Churches in May 1988 at which the Standing for the Truth Campaign was launched.
- Participation in and support for the Mass Democratic Movement and the Defiance Campaigns of the late 1980's.
- Church leader, later including religious leaders of other faiths, interventions in the period of transition.

4. GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO INHIBIT SACC WORK AND WITNESS

"Cut it out"

4.1 The publication of the Message to the People of South Africa in 1968 brought the SACC into confrontation with the government. From that time the SACC, as with other organisations which stood against the apartheid regime, suffered harassment, abuse, surveillance, and much worse at the hands of government agencies. The apartheid government claimed to be a Christian government and presumably found it impossible, therefore, to close the SACC as a church organisation. It did, however, use other means to try to silence the Council's voice.

2. The Eloff Commission

The government established a Commission of Enquiry into the SACC under the chair of Justice C F Eloff in 1981. The Commission was aimed at harming the SACC and curtailing much of its activities. It took a lot of time and energy but, in fact, vindicated the Council and its theological basis in its conclusions.

4.3 Police raids

The SACC offices were often the target of raids by security police. In 1985 use was made of Defence Force personnel to surround Khotso House, the headquarters of the SACC and other organisations. That day was marked later by the announcement of a State of Emergency.

4.4 Detentions, torture and death /Page 8/

Many members of staff and persons associated with the SACC through committees, activities and commitment to its causes were detained. Of these some suffered torture. Some also died in mysterious circumstances.

4.5 Demonising in state controlled media

The media was used to discredit the SACC and its officers. Numerous examples of this are available from coverage of the Eloff Commission to specific extracts of statements used in news reporting, and from current affairs comments to the use, as at the time of the Nobel Peace award to Bishop Tutu, of people of its own choice, in this case Bishop Mokoena, to speak the words the government wished the population to hear.

4.6 Khotso House Bomb

On August 31 1988 Khotso House was destroyed by a bomb. The then Minister of Law and Order and Chief of Security Police who at that time made statements about ensuring full investigations are now, we note, asking for this Commission to give them amnesty for responsibility the bombing. We look forward to knowing the full story and where the order actually originated.

4.7 Poisoning of the General Secretary

Sinister attempts were made on the life of the Rev Frank Chikane, the then General Secretary of the SACC, during 1989. Rev Chikane's luggage was contaminated with poison whilst in transit through what was then Jan Smuts Airport. This too has been shown to have been an act of agents of the state.

5. THE SACC AND ITS CONSTITUENCY

"It was always an uncomfortable relationship... one that the Churches could not escape from but it was always uncomfortable. That is the essence of a prophetic relationship"

Bishop Peter Storey, President of the SACC 1980 to 1983

5.1 In recent years the SACC has grown in membership. This is due mainly to the applications received from churches and church groups that were not members during the apartheid years for reasons they will possibly present in their own submissions.

Every General Secretary will attest to the support the Council received from the leaders of its member churches. This is not to say, however, that this support was endorsed by all the members of the churches in either thought or deed. The churches were a reflection of the society with a membership of radicals on the one hand, reactionaries on the other, and the vast majority reflecting neither one or the other.

The SACC was supported in statements by its member churches. It was supported in its actions by individual members and small groups among those churches who were committed to the struggle against apartheid and willing to act accordingly.

5.2 Acting on its own

There were occasions when the Council felt it necessary to act as an entity in its own right, sometimes on the agreement of its constituency and sometimes because it faced a /Page 9/ need that the member churches were not answering.

The public statements, often made in response to questions, of the then General Secretary, Bishop Desmond Tutu, in the period 1978 to 1984 received much media coverage. This was a cause of concern to some church leaders. By decision of the National Executive in 1980, in response to a call for nothing to be stated without prior approval from member churches, it was agreed to allow the General Secretary to speak on behalf of the Council as he deemed necessary. This allowed the freedom of a particular prophetic ministry.

5.3 Regional Offices

The SACC formed 23 regional offices. This is a large number. Many of these were formed for the express purpose of serving those in need of the ministry of Dependant's Conference. Field workers were placed in the different areas to ensure care for the detained and their families. This was unfortunately recognised to be necessary by the SACC as many local churches within those areas were not willing to deal with Dependant's Conference issues.

This source of great disappointment for staff members must be tempered also with recognition of those individual pastors and lay persons who were willing to assist and became deeply involved. Regional staff and local committee members, living and working in isolation from the central office and its source of fellowship and assistance suffered a great deal of harassment.

5.4 Challenges to the constituency

The SACC, by its very nature and theological basis, challenged the churches, both leaders and members.

The ecumenical theological challenge of living the gospel within the context of the day was constantly presented to member churches and their representatives. Ecumenical items for discussion and decision making were placed before the church courts.

Leaders and local clergy were invited to attend solidarity services for communities undergoing forced removals, to participate in services for those in detention, to take part in protests and to march in acts of defiance against the government.

5.5 Challenging the SACC

The member churches challenged the SACC to take time over issues and not rush into decision making and, therefore, be pro-active rather than reactive.

The member churches also challenged the SACC as an organisation to continually give theological reflection to its activities and to ensure competent administration practices.

5.6 The Dutch Reformed Church

The White Dutch Reformed Church withdrew from the predecessor of the SACC in 1940 over the issue of the use of Afrikaans. Many efforts were made to maintain dialogue but it had to be recognised again and again that theological differences were great. We rejoice in their present status of observer member as from 1994.

Two of the DRC family "daughter churches", the Sending Kerk and the NG Kerk in Afrika both joined the SACC in 1976 and played a significant role in it's activities. /Page 10/

5.6 Global partners

The story of the SACC can not be told without regard to the important relationships, practical support, and ever present solidarity of the overseas partners and sponsors. This is evidenced in the financial backing, in the many international church leaders and laity who sought, and still seek, to visit South Africa to express their concerns and share their own experiences, and especially in the many who came to bear witness to the international reputation of the SACC and its General Secretary at the Eloff Commission of 1982.

The SACC places on record before this Commission its gratitude to that constituency.

6. COMMENTS FROM THE HISTORY

The SACC played a significant role in the struggle against apartheid within the country. That is a well known fact borne out by its history. At the same time a reflection upon that history indicates areas of weakness:

- The SACC was re-active rather than pro-active in its operation. This allowed the government to set the agenda rather than the SACC and its constituency.
- For this same reason many of the plans made for positive programmes were not followed through as time was diverted to other things.
- This is also reflected in the lack of programmes to prepare members of churches and the nation at large for the development of a democratic nation of one people. Energy was spent on the present situations as identified and although we had forecast the end of apartheid we were surprised when it did happen and not prepared for activities in the healing and reconstruction of the nation.
- The SACC did not carry the churches with it sufficiently for there to have been a completely united church stand against apartheid which could have challenged the government more strongly and possibly shortened the period of oppression.
- The SACC did not do enough to seek out the victims of apartheid but relied, in the main, for people to come to it for assistance and aid. This left some alone and neglected at a time of great need.
- The history indicates that the SACC served the practical needs of the people with much greater attention than the spiritual. The legacy leaves us with our present situation of a people in a spiritual and moral malaise.

For all of these and any other lack in true service to God and the people the SACC expresses its deep regret.

It is with these lessons in mind that we face the future and look to the role of the SACC in the future of South Africa.

7. THE ROLE OF THE SACC IN THE FUTURE OF THE NATION

"We are free today because the Church was tortured alongside of us, they never abandoned us. Do not abandon us now. Together we will change the quality of life of our people. We will continue to celebrate our victory."

Mr Tokyo Sexwale, Premier Gauteng Province, to the SACC National Conference

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Never again must forces of division and oppression rule in our land. Never again must people be judged by the colour of their skin, by their gender or choice of creed. The Council joined the struggle against apartheid because it believes that all people are equal before God. It now commits itself to the service of God and people to ensure a free society where all will have the opportunity to attain their potential and all shall live as people of dignity in one family under God

7.1 Biblical imperatives

Four biblical imperatives have been identified by the Council as essential elements of it's work and witness:

- Reconciliation and Unity
- Caring and enabling
- Prophetic witness
- Discipling and teaching

With these as the theological basis of its programmes and activities the Council believes it is called to be involved in a number of areas of national life.

7.2 The healing of the nation Following the traumas of colonialism and apartheid we face the urgent need of reconciliation and healing. This is a task for which the church is well equipped with its network of churches reaching into all corners and covering all groups of people throughout the land and with its basic message and foundation of the love of God known in the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ. Special Services of Reconciliation and programmes to heal the memories of the past have already been held in some parts of the country as symbols of the new covenant between us all in South Africa. Such services and programmes will continue. They are, however, symbols of an ongoing need for the church to bring its people together as one to face the truth of the divided past, that affected the church as it did other areas of society, and in unity as the people of God to repent, forgive, reconcile and heal.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a public act of seeking for truth and beginning the process of healing. The life of the Commission is drawing to a close. The Church and all religious groupings are challenged to continue the task for the sake of our unity as one people under God.

7.3 The option for the poor

The scourge of poverty is among us and many of our fellow citizens suffer under its continued oppression. The SACC is among those who have committed in public programmes to do everything in our power to eradicate poverty in our midst.

This means the SACC will monitor the economic strategies and programmes of our nation, challenge the rich of this nation and the world concerning the poor, run programmes of emergency assistance and help develop self reliance projects, and continue to press for the needs of the poor in society. The Council will give special attention to the needs of women and the young and this especially in the rural areas of our land where they remain among the forgotten children /Page 12/ of God.

7.4 The prophetic word

None can escape the judgement of the word of God. The SACC is constrained to proclaim that word to ensure that it is not lost in the clamour of the contests for power and persuasion in the economic, social and political courts of our time.

That word is a challenge to the morality of our nation, to the violence and corruption in our midst, to the decision making processes as we create a new democracy, and to the ways in which we live out our daily lives with one another. as one people of one nation. The Council is committed to proclaiming the rule of God.

7.5 To be equipped

The word is not enough in proclamation. It is required of us to equip the people of God to be who they are, develop the skills of life, and reach for potential as disciples of the Lord in responsibility for one another. The Council aims to ensure its own competency in its activities, to assist the church to play its part in society, and to encourage the spirit of learning and striving for excellence in society.

7.6 Relations with the government

The history of the SACC is of opposition and confrontation with the government. The SACC stood alongside the liberation movements that now share in the governing of the country. This changes the matter of relationship with government.

The SACC has used the phrase "critical solidarity" to describe this new relationship. A position in which Council maintains its own independence to. work alongside or to criticise the government in its words and deeds.

- The SACC believes it is necessary to constantly remind the government of the demands of the poor and the marginalised.
- The churches have long been involved in education and health issues and believes it is important for the government to recognise that fact and draw the churches not only into the debate on the future of these areas of society but to be involved in the management and practical running of them once again.
- The Council will monitor the practice of religious freedom, challenging the government to not only allow such freedoms but to encourage and support the important expression of religious values in the whole of society.

South African Council of Churches

Submitted by the General Secretary

Dr B H Bam

August 1997

Notes

1. See, for example "Outside the Camp" a collection of writings by Wolfram Kistner published by the SACC 1988, "Hope and Suffering" sermons and speeches of Desmond Tutu published by Skotaville Publishers in 1983, and "No Life of My Own" by Frank Chikane published by Skotaville in 1988

2 Interview with C Villa-Vicencio April 1993