

THE WORLD CONFERENCE ON RELIGION AND PEACE SOUTH AFRICAN CHAPTER

1. Introduction

The 1980's was a period which saw various community formations escalating their opposition to the apartheid regime. Many of the activist and religious figures involved in these formations experienced a grassroots solidarity with each other across religious lines and saw the need to overcome the negative impact which Group Areas had on religious communities where racial lines often overlapped with religious lines. Hindus, for example, were seldom exposed to Christians as neighbours, Muslims to African Traditionalists, or White Christians to Muslims or Hindus. The formation of the South African chapter of an international interfaith organisation, the World Conference on Religion and Peace, (WCRP), in 1984 served to provide a forum to deepen this solidarity and to explore the theological diversity, which comes along with it. In many ways, WCRP came to symbolise the commitment of a number of religious people to transcend their own community barriers and to reach out to others through interfaith involvement in the struggle against apartheid.

The South African chapter of the then Geneva-based WCRP was initiated by three South Africans who at the request of Archbishop Desmond Tutu attended the Interfaith Colloquium on Apartheid convened by, Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, whom many regard as the father of the international solidarity movement against apartheid, in 1984. The organisation's opposition to Christian triumphalism, commitment to dialogue within the framework of resistance to apartheid and opposition to religious syncretism were some of the factors which facilitated its acceptance among progressive religious figures in all communities. More important was its commitment to unite religious people in the struggle against apartheid.

The organisation located itself among those "conducting dialogue around practical matters" such as justice and peace, sharing the conviction that "doctrines divide but humanity unites" [G. Lubbe, *Believers in the Struggle for Justice and Peace* (Johannesburg: World Conference on Religion and Peace. 1988), 16]. WCRP, furthermore, did not view itself as "an exercise in abstract interfaith dialogue focusing merely on the analysis of religious concepts or customs [...] but proceeds from joint commitment to the struggle for justice and peace in South Africa." [J. N. J. Kritzinger, 'Introduction', in *Believers in the Struggle for Justice and*

Peace. Johannesburg: World Conference on Religion and Peace, 1988), 1-2].

WCRP soon emerged as **/pp1-2/** the South African forum for inter-religious dialogue between religious leaders who were also committed to the struggle for justice. Through its regular forums it also supplied believers with a theological appreciation of the other.

We are, therefore, not a "faith community", much less a "collective of faith communities. Rather we are an organisation of progressive individuals and a few organisations drawn from various faith groups. a collective made up of those who join it by accepting its basic tenets and its commitment to striving for peace and Justice.

2. What did we do about the injustices in our land?

While WCRP has always been more than the sum total of our very small membership and limited activities we would nevertheless refer to these in order to offer a glimpse of the witness which we bore against apartheid, often in the name of our religious communities and sadly, rarely with the wholehearted support of their leadership structures. Even more painfully, we bore witness against apartheid, not because of the religious communities where we conic from and from where we sought nourishment, but despite being dismissed and even ostracised by the "official representatives".

From its inception WCRP was determined to be another vehicle for the acceleration of justice for our people. With an initiator and Patron such as Desmond Tutu it was inevitable that we attracted into our leadership and structures individuals who - both in their WCRP capacities as well as in other capacities - left significant footprints in the struggle of our people for liberation. These individuals include the following:

- Rev Dr Gerrie Lubbe, our founding president who served for the first ten years was a Dutch Reformed minister who was consistently maligned in the Afrikaans press and in DRC circles for his role in fostering inter-religious solidarity against apartheid.
- Ayusaf Akhalwaya an activist in both WCRP and the ANC who lost his life at the age of 22 when a booby trapped hand grenade exploded in his hand a mere two months before the unbanning of the liberation movements and the release of Mandela, and only one year after his marriage.
- Yasmin Sooka, our current President, a lawyer in the Hindu Community.

- Maulana Dr Farid Esack and Minister Ebrahim Rasool MEC who served for a number years as our Vice-President and Secretary-General respectively, Both were in the forefront of leading the Muslim community in the struggle against apartheid
- Dr Franz Auerbach, a current Vice President, a founder of Jews for Social Justice and leading human rights activist and educationist in the Jewish community.
- Bishop Dr Stanley Mogoba. another founding member who served our executive in the early years and is a former Moderator of the Methodist Church.

The following are but a few of the activities which we undertook to strengthen inter-religious solidarity, against apartheid and to break down the barriers of religious intolerance.

- Organising the Annual Desmond Tutu Peace Lecture to honour the Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town for being the Nobel Peace Prize Winner in 1984. The first lecture, to have been delivered by Tutu himself in September 1985, was banned by the State as "the police had reason to apprehend that the safety, of members of the public and their property will be seriously endangered by a gathering being organised by....the SA chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace...." The state also refused visas to six of nine international religious leaders in the WCRP (International) delegation who had planned to attend the first lecture.

One of the aims of instituting this lecture was to remind "All people of faith to put into practice those sanctions and traditions of justice and peace which are inherent in their respective religions". During more than a decade we learnt to work together for common goals while respecting one another's different beliefs and practices. In line with this view we invited representatives of the various faiths to deliver the Desmond Tutu Peace Lectures. There have been Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim speakers, and in 1996 His Holiness the Dalai Lama addressed us. Many of the speakers who have delivered the Peace Lecture have been eminent persons within and beyond their own religious traditions.

- Campaigning against the Dutch Reformed Church for declaring Islam a false religion. We recognized the potential which the relevant synodical resolution had to create Muslim-Christian tension, particularly in the Western Cape where Muslim-Christian solidarity was a significant feature of the struggle against apartheid. We also noted that the mover of the resolution was an army chaplain who complained bitterly at the 'insidious effect of the Muslim role in the liberation struggle. /pp.2-3/

- Recognizing the multi-faceted nature of oppression and the long-term ravages to our land and people by apartheid and patriarchy we also consistently organised around environmental issues and regularly addressed the role which religion plays in the oppression of women.
- In 1987, under the leadership of Desmond Tutu, for many, years one of our International Presidents, we took a delegation of local and international religious leaders to Lusaka for a joint consultation with the ANC in exile on "Religious Communities in a Post-apartheid South Africa".
- Hosting a number of national consultations with religious leaders and activists to bring as many of them as possible on board the journey into the new South Africa. As afraid and suspicious as they were of the breaking of a new dawn, so many were also of each other. In May 1988 we organised a consultation in Soweto on the subject of "Believers in the Struggle for Justice and Peace". Subsequently, in the wake of the momentous changes occurring in South Africa, Albie Sachs in May 1990 called for a national conference of religious leaders to discuss the future of religion-state relations in a post-apartheid South Africa. It was in response to this call that WCRP hosted a major conference titled "Believers in the Future" While the conference itself was valuable in articulating the concerns and hopes of religious people in a new South Africa, its most significant outcome was the decision to respond positively to a call by Albie Sachs for the drawing up of a "religious charter which would encapsulate the rights expected by religious people." What followed was the most remarkable consultative process which religion in South Africa had ever witnessed and experienced. A WCRP workshop comprising of twenty five representatives from different religious groups met in June 1992 and produced an initial draft based on feedback from a number of regional inter-faith and single faith conferences. For a further six months, the draft was widely circulated and debated in synagogues, mosques, churches, temples, universities, colleges and in WCRP seminars.

This process culminated in a National Inter-Faith Conference held in Pretoria in November 1992. It was attended by one hundred and fifty representatives of diverse religious communities throughout the country and the "Declaration on Religious Rights and Responsibilities" was adopted after three days of debate. The preamble to the declaration acknowledged the diversity of religious commitments, expressed regret about the way "religion has been used to contribute to the oppression, exploitation and suffering of people", paid homage to "the courageous role played by many religious people in upholding human dignity, justice and peace in the face of repression and division", and **/pp.4-5/** expressed its belief that religious communities "can play a role in redressing past injustices and the

reconstruction of society." The declaration itself affirmed freedom of conscience including the freedom of accepting or changing religious affiliation, the equality of all religious communities before the law, the right to religious education, access to public media, to recognition of systems of customary law, the propagation of teachings and the observance of holy days.

At an international level, WCRP International consistently, supported the call for sanctions against apartheid and utilised its structures in 35 countries as well as its role as a Category 2 United Nations affiliated organisation to lobby for support to the liberation movements. Meetings were held with various government officials from Heads of State or government and pressure groups in countries ranging from Japan to the USA to pressurise these countries to throw in their lot with the oppressed masses of South Africa.

We believe that in the years during which there was a repressive climate in South Africa, the existence of WCRP helped to strengthen religious opponents of apartheid by showing solidarity across the boundaries of individual faiths. It is common knowledge that there were both supporters and opponents of apartheid in all faith communities. The solidarity which religiously inspired activists found in WCRP gave them much needed moral support at a time when a number of them were being persecuted by the State and marginalized by their own religious leaderships.

WCRP's active opposition to human rights violations may, be summarised as follows:

- • In the South African context, bringing the four major faiths together in a single organisation constituted deliberate and visible crossing of then almost sacrosanct race barriers, as well as demonstrating that people of faith can co-operate while adhering to different religions. We were involved in the growing movement of moral condemnation of apartheid by giving voice to this condemnation on an inter-faith basis in South Africa, and also on occasion joining with other religious constituencies in the condemnation of attempts to co-opt sectors of the oppressed as willing partners in their own oppression such as the 1988 municipal elections.

3. What did we not do to confront the scourge of apartheid?

Given the explicit location of the organisation within the context of a larger struggle against apartheid, WCRP never sought to bring those religious structures who implicitly or explicitly identified with the apartheid regime

into the organisation. We have however, always recognised the **/pp. 4-5/** significance of mainstream religious organisations who lay claim to greater representativity of the various faith communities in the lives of our people. These include the Jewish Board of Deputies, the Muslim Judicial Council, the Hindu Maha Saba, the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference and the South African Council of Churches. We have therefore, consistently endeavoured to involve them in our work or to secure active support from them. While these bodies participated in some of the major national events organised by WCRP in 1990 and beyond, with the exception of the SACC, they did not offer the organisation any formal institutional support during the years of apartheid. Instead, it was left to a handful of individuals among them and a few progressive organisations such as Jews for Social Justice, the Lenasia-based Via Christi community, the Institute for Contextual Theology and the Call of Islam (who were often marginalized or ignored by, the mainstream organisations) to redeem the name of their communities in the struggle for justice and freedom. In the words of our Vice-President, Imam A. Rashied Omar, in a reflection on "Justice, Retribution and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission", (Appendix A)

Have we as religious people really earned our right to lead the process of reconciliation and truth in the democratic South Africa? Were we really committed to the destruction of apartheid and the creation of a non-racial South Africa? Or were we merely content with enjoying a parasitic relationship with apartheid South Africa and theologically justifying it by claiming that we were apolitical?

As believers from particular religious traditions we submit that we have, as communities, betrayed the trust of justice passed on to us by the Transcendent. While in our own small way we have tried to hold out a candle for the religiously, motivated activists, we are at the same time tied to our own communities and structures; structures with leaderships who were only reluctantly, dragged into the struggle. Then, too, they came along kicking and screaming and often did not go beyond adding their signatures to a diluted anti-apartheid statement. We have chosen to remain part -and parcel of our various communities and their religious leadership structures and thus share in this complicity.

4 Towards the Future: The Reconciliation Process.

We are well aware of the many, problems surrounding the reconciliation process. Because of this we organised a consultative process on religious interpretations of reconciliation during 1996 among representatives of various faiths. This culminated in the issuing of a proposal on Reconciliation and Nation-Building, While we chose to target it for fast

year's Day of Reconciliation, 16 December, and distributed it widely, we believe it is of continuing relevance, and therefore include a copy as an appendix to this submission (B). We believe many of the /pp. 5-6/ suggestions made in it can be used in future efforts at reconciliation, and we shall encourage our various regions to consider making this part of their programme in 1998 and beyond.

Religion and religious groups, often seemingly like big business, display a remarkable ability to tailor their coats to suit the prevailing fashion and then to claim that they were in fact the trendsetters in fashion. We acknowledge the survival strategies of these institutions and their vested interests in identifying with the powerful of the day. We, nevertheless, undertake to continue a) to challenge everything in our traditions and among the leadership structures of our communities which does not facilitate a process of reconciliation based on truth and justice and b) to persistently work for a true conversion among our people towards a shared humanity with a shared country and collective stewardship of the global environment rather than one based on "finders keepers losers weepers."

We in WCRP are grateful for the opportunity given to us to participate in this process of self-examination and nation-building. We have lived to see the fruition of the struggle culminate in a democracy committed to the recognition of the rich diversity of us all. We are set to help develop it further in the years ahead.