

ALTERNATIVE SERVICE CAMPAIGN

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The Church in South Africa has, for a long time been aware of the problem facing conscientious objectors, being conscripted into the SADF. In 1977 the Bishops defended CO's right to object to military service. In 1983 at the introduction of the Defence Amendment Act, bringing into existence the Board for Religious Objection, the SACBC, through Cardinal McCann, called for a number of changes, none of which were considered. In May 1985 the SACBC added its voice to the call to end conscription, and later in the year presented again its suggestions to the Geldenhuys Committee. Again it was clear from the 1986 Defence White Paper that the Geldenhuys Committee had completely ignored the evidence submitted by the Church on this matter.

What we have seen happening is that the Church, profoundly competent to pronounce and give advice on such issues, is being completely ignored. We must however continue to call for changes, but perhaps we need to consider a more active response.

On different occasions many people within the Church have suggested that the Bishops should call on Catholics to refuse to do their military service. The Bishops have refused to do this, because of the moral predicament this would put young Catholic men in. Recently, however the Executive of the NCFS suggested that the Church call on Catholics to refuse to do service, and instead to do their service in an alternative form.

This has formed the basis of a possible campaign that could be embarked upon, by all the Churches in SA. Instead of calling on young people to refuse to do military service, this could be framed in a positive way. Young men could be called on to volunteer for an alternative form of national service. Such service could be for a specific length of time, eg. one or two years. It could be with Church schools, welfare agencies or in other types of work. The volunteers would be paid the same wage they would receive doing military service.

The Church would have to make the implications of such service clear, to the volunteers. To the Government the message could be clear:

- You have always disregarded our calls and representations for changes in the law.
- We have thus established alternatives for young men faced with conscription.
- We are convinced that these volunteers have sincere and strongly-held beliefs leading to their refusal to do military service, and thus we have offered them alternative service in which they can positively serve the

community.

- We thus request that you recognise this service and refrain from prosecuting these volunteers for failing to adhere to their call-up instructions.

Although the government has absolute power in this area, they would certainly be loathe to act against the united initiative of the Churches. It would therefore be imperative to get as many Churches involved in this initiative. This united strength coupled with wide public and international support, might stop the government from suppressing the initiative.

In this campaign, held during the 10 or so days of the January/July call-up we would be presenting a critique of national service, by raising our objections to Conscription on the basis of the role of the SADF in our society. Thus it would be important to raise the issues of the military in the townships, the role of the SADF in Namibia, etc. In this we would be making the general points of the ECC.

However we would be presenting a positive alternative to military national service by actively involving ourselves in projects which are at the service of all of SA citizens. In this we would be demanding national service that would be based on the real material needs of the people. Thus it would be important that any project embarked on would have to be in real consultation with the people, represented by organisations that are recognised as truly representative of the people. This is important because it will ensure that we are involved in projects that do not impose solutions on the people, which is how the government acts. Within this presentation of real alternatives we would be able to present a critique of religious alternative service, which at the moment is only available to a small group of individuals, and is in the service of an unrepresentative government.

Such a campaign holds similar attractions to the public as the fast did, and possibly even greater. It will serve to attract a liberal constituency who would be attracted by the fact that we would be 'doing' something constructive for people. It would be attractive to people with a 'charity' consciousness and enable ECC to draw such people into our ranks.

Depending on the projects we embark on it will enable us to draw in different professional constituencies eg. lawyers, doctors, teachers.

In terms of the gains we could make for the demands of the ECC in general, this would be around the publicity. It is likely that such a campaign would not attract the imagination of the press on the same level as the fast did, so it would be important that we work out and co-ordinate our press campaign carefully.

We can however use such a campaign more for consolidation of our regions and for actively recruiting into our ranks. It is thus important that we work out actions that will enable us to recruit people and familiarise them with the overall goals of the ECC, together with a deeper understanding of the situation in SA.

The projects that we embark are going to need careful work, for they must

be with groups that are prepared to accept the publicity that we would be making. Thus we would have to research such projects carefully. We would also need to work out whether or not to embark on a single project in a region or have a number of projects that we could get involved in. A single project would enable us to build our organisation and consolidate new people. However a number of different projects would enable people with different skills to get involved. It would also serve to publicise various alternatives to military national service.

Various actions are possible drawing on either individuals, small groups or one large group. Ideas suggested are:

Tutoring schemes	Rural development work
Teacher upgrading	Building projects (urban or rural)
Adult education	Childrens recreation
Literacy	Health work eg clinics
Peace camps	Staffing offices eg. Black Sash advice, DPSC
Relief work eg. Red Cross	

In Johannesburg a number of organisations and service groups were listed as groups that need to be consulted, with regard to the feasibility of such a project. These were:

SACHED, Learn and Teach, SACC, EDA, Transvaal Rural Action Committee, Black Sash, DPSC, Legal Resources Center, Technology Action Group, Health Information Service, Winterveld Action Committee, Self-Help Schemes, South African Voluntary Service, Wits Medical School Projects, NAMDA, Health Workers Association, Industrial Aid Society, Institute of Race Relations, International Red Cross.

We need to work out whether January (given the organisational weakness of ECC), is the best time for such a campaign or whether we should rather embark on such a campaign over the July call-up. Given the publicity and 'national pride' engendered around the call-up it is important that such a campaign is held over the period of the call-up.

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