

*Peter Storey, past president of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, spoke at a Black Sash seminar on conscription recently and presented*

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## six compelling arguments for alternative national service

**W**e have to ask ourselves why there is on-going work for an alternative to compulsory military service, and why this call becomes stronger all the time, despite massive militaristic propaganda on the SABC, increasing threats by politicians and generals and the now admitted 'dirty tricks' and secret smear campaigns against organisations like the End Conscription Campaign. I shall try to offer some answers.

### 1 The world's most urgent need today is an alternative to war

Never before have the nations of the world been more heavily armed than they are today and never before have they had less confidence in their arms. The weapons of security have in themselves become a threat to the security of the world and there is a growing awareness that alternatives to war must be found if our planet is to survive.

This is not only because the ghastly capacity of nuclear weapons makes war increasingly unthinkable, but because the cost of maintaining them is making the economics of security unbearable. The contrasts between the cost of armaments and the needs of the world population are now obscene: every 60 seconds today, 30 children will die of starvation and in those same 60 seconds \$1,3 million will be spent on armaments. Right now 500 000 of the most brilliant scientists who could be using their skills in combating disease and starvation, are designing new ways to kill people. The latest trident submarine whose missile payload can destroy 70 cities, cost the equivalent of the combined education budgets of 23 countries with 150 million children to educate.

When people of conscience seek to rally support for a different way to resolve human conflict anywhere in the world so that these resources can be released for life rather than death, their search for alternatives is the sign of a new maturity.

### 2 The most precious asset in any community is the human conscience

In the Judaeo-Christian heritage the conscience is seen as something planted in us by God - without conscience we abdicate the responsibility of choice. The shape of our conscience will depend on the values which have influenced us - religious, social, ethical, political - and some will see certain issues differently from others, but every civilized society takes deep cognizance of the right to follow that conscience and every civilized society puts the highest possible premium on the value of the human life.

Conscience is not the monopoly of religious people. While as a theologian I would argue that all ethical and moral scruples have their roots in God who gives us the capacity of conscience, it would be arrogant to suggest that only religious persons therefore have a genuine right to the respect of their conscience.

When there is a clash between the state's perceived right to call on its youth to defend its security and the demands of conscience that we do not take human life, which has priority?

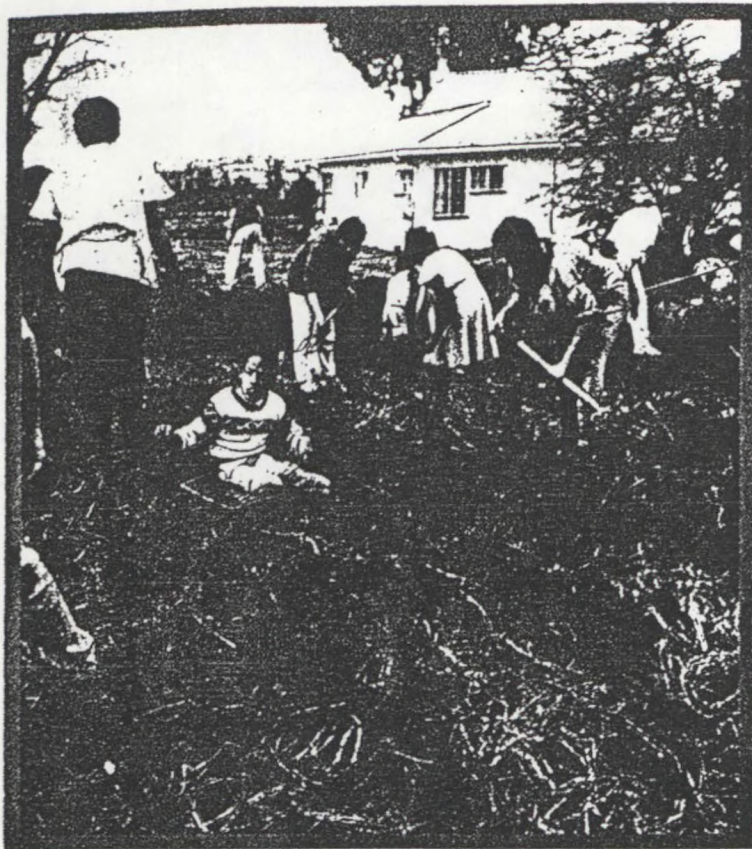
Some of us in conscience find an irreconcilable contradiction in a state that sentences some people to death for killing a fellow human being and sentences some others to six years imprisonment for refusing to do so. Some of us want no part of a system that issues indemnity certificates to some killers because they acted in 'good faith and in the national interest', while at the same time, assassinating the characters of those who refuse to take up arms in the name of national security.

### 3 The South African context confronts us all with issues of conscience

In South Africa, hundreds of thousands of whites live in a daily struggle with their consciences - with every part of our lives infected by participation in the apartheid system.

*Opposite:  
MANFRED ZYLLA  
Boys from the  
border, series 1985  
Pencil on paper  
(Reproduced with  
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ADA)*





Paul Weinberg / AFP/UPX

*An alternative service project in Eldorado Park organised several years ago by the ECC.*

Many of us have lived to see our warnings sounded over decades come tragically true. 'Pursue this policy of depriving, of oppressing, of hurting, of degrading, of banning, of exiling, of detaining, of dispossessing - pursue this violence against human dignity and you will reap the violence of enraged resistance.' There is no joy in seeing these prophecies come true. But there is outrage at being told by a government which, deaf to conscience and blind to consequence, now dares to tell us what our duty is and demands that we defend them so that they can show us how to put right their mess. Those who have brought us to the edge of ruin, now presume to lecture us on the duties of citizenship. It really is quite incredibly impudent.

There is a reason why 143 young men recently made the stand they did, refusing to serve in the SADF. It is no accident that in that group we find the very kind of people who make a society rich in resource and character: six doctors, six medical students, ten teachers, three journalists, one nuclear physicist, lawyers, five clergy, research officers. When some of them spoke at the University of Cape Town recently, 17 more young men stood up afterward to join them.

When I listened to André Zaaiman, born in Kroonstad, an Afrikaner, a captain in the SADF say that he would 'not fight or die for apartheid or the National Party ...' and that though he is not a pacifist he 'would not fight his own

people', I knew that the day has arrived when our rulers have tapped too deep into the realm of conscience and have finally come up against that place where decency, morality and principle can no longer be violated or compromised.

Some white South Africans at least - and the number is growing daily - are deeply convinced to the point of being willing to go to prison, that participation in the military in the present circumstances is not so much a contribution to security as its opposite. Look again at that list. Try if you will to brand them as cowards or *verraaiers*. It simply doesn't work. When a David Bruce goes to prison because he sees too many parallels between the South African present and a German past that treated his own mother as subhuman, who is the more moral: the prisoner or those who imprison him? I think I know and I salute him.

#### 4 The SADF is already practising forms of alternative service

The government and SADF have already conceded the principle in two important ways:

The Board for Religious Objection has heard many cases and placed many young men with the Department of Manpower. The practical workings are clumsy and remain in many cases childishly punitive. When I hear of one of my colleagues in the ministry who has a B.Sc. (Chemical Engineering), a B.A. and M.A. in Theology painting white lines on the streets of a country town because he refused to serve in the commandos, I am sickened by the waste of such valuable resources, but the principle is conceded and merely needs to be extended to embrace a more mature definition of objection.

There is however, a second far more significant recognition that national service need not be military service: we know that thousands of young men drafted into the SADF are not on military duty at all. Many are teaching in rural black schools, others are doctors in hospitals, while a whole task force of national servicemen trained in accounting are busy working in the Revenue Department chasing up tax dodgers.

If the SADF can use its available manpower in this way, how can it justify imprisoning people who would be very happy to serve their time in alternative service? If there is manpower to spare from war, why the charge that objectors are sabotaging the security of the state? If refusal to do military service is a blot on a man's character, what character test does the SADF apply to those it allocates to non-military duties?

Alternative service is already happening and is clearly seen as a necessary contribution to the well-being of the nation. All that has to happen is that it be taken out of military hands.



*'Our true security lies not in military power but in development, justice and peace.'*

### 5 Democracies are increasingly recognising alternative service

In the United States there is provision for people who have 'personal scruples against war' not only on the grounds of religious belief. What they call conscientious non-militarists are permitted to serve not only in civilian state organisations but also in approved welfare organisations.

In Germany, which has gone down the road of militarism to its tragic conclusion, the law is now perhaps the most liberal of all: 'No one may be compelled against his conscience to render military service involving the use of arms.'

In what was then Rhodesia at the height of the civil war, which was to end with the establishment of Zimbabwe, the law allowed for both universal and selective conscientious objection although requiring that it be on religious grounds. Nevertheless, there was a clause which actually gave their objectors' board total discretion to exempt anyone, should they so choose.

Even in countries like East Germany where there is no patience at all for the conscientious objector, prison sentences for these men are much less punitive than the six years demanded in South Africa.

### 6 National service is more than military service

We need a wider definition of the national interest than the purely military one.

As far back as 1981, former head boy of Hilton College, Charles Yeats, presented a plan for non-military service. His proposal was for relief and development work in rural areas, and he cited just one - the Msinga area of the Tugela valley. Since then we have heard from organisations like Operation Hunger, enough statistics to remind us that many more people die of starvation in South Africa than from military and political violence.

Rather than spending state money on prosecuting, feeding and housing objectors for up to six years as well as sustaining the steady loss to the economy of those who emigrate, Yeats argued that the future of South Africa could be secured by an infusion of creativity and service in rural communities.

'The state must eventually recognise that conditions in certain rural areas present an equal, if not greater threat to any the country faces on its borders', he said. He saw a committee from each church denomination and each development project working with an official of the Department of Agriculture, with a task of screening conscientious objectors and projects, supervising their lives and work over a

three-year contract.

Mr Yeats went to jail and presumably the Msinga area of the Tugela valley remains a starvation zone.

South Africa has become a security state - which means just the opposite. Our true security lies not in military power but in development, justice and peace. Short-term military goals cannot secure our future and the best way to guarantee disaster is to put that future into the hands of the generals. Even the generals have been at pains to tell us that our problems are 20% military and 80% non-military. Why then do they want to run the 80% as well? Why not let at least a portion of the 100% of white young men they control for two years of their lives, make some contribution to the 80% problem?

We need to expose the propaganda fallacy that the hope for the future lies with the military. Let a growing number of committed, highly motivated young people of all races involve themselves sacrificially in development and service projects at minimum wages and under difficult conditions and there you will see a new South Africa in the making.

Let churches and welfare organisations list their needs and offer positions for these young people where their gifts are desperately needed and could make a positive difference.

Let business support this kind of enterprise in the same way as it pays national servicemen's salaries while they are away. If in law judges and magistrates are now permitted to sentence convicted criminals to 'community service', why in God's name do some of our finest young men have to go to prison for refusing to serve in the SADF?

The SADF may argue that such service can be done in uniform but true alternative service cannot afford to be identified with the SADF 'hearts and minds' policy which is reminiscent of that enunciated by President Nixon of the United States: 'Get them by the [expletive deleted] and their hearts and minds are sure to follow.' That is the SADF way but their problem is that when they let the [expletive deleted] go, so do the hearts and minds.

Of far more permanent value to group relations in this country would be a corps of committed and principled young people giving sacrificial civilian service in identification with the poor and marginalised people in our society.

Major churches in this country have been working together on an alternative programme which could provide immediate placement for young men who would otherwise emigrate or rot in jail. If our rulers could see beyond the narrow confines of their military priorities, the national interest would truly be served in this way.



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