

JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION
REPORT AND ASSESSMENT OF THE PEACE PROJECT
October 1986

The aim of this report is to report on the activities of the Peace Project in terms of the original aim of the Project. The outcome of this will result in a recommendation concerning the future of the project.

INTRODUCTION

The Project was initially a six-month pilot programme set up in February 1985. In August of that year it was decided to continue the project to January 1987. The aim of the Project was to:

To enable Catholics in general and young Catholics in particular in the face of the escalating conflict situation in Southern Africa to;

- develop an awareness of their Christian responsibility in the situation
- form and inform their consciences
- actively work for peaceful solutions
- open up lines of communication between groups which have conflicting stances towards militarisation.

To achieve these aims a number of different approaches were embarked upon, to varying degrees of success.

1. Resources

In order to realise the aims of the Project it became essential to collect resources on various aspects of militarisation. This involved information gathering; finding out what was happening in various parts of the country. Thus visits were organised to the Eastern and Western Cape, Namibia, Natal, and the townships surrounding the PWV area. It also involved talking to Priests and lay people living and working in areas where SADF activity was high. This helped the employee of the Project have an overview of the nature and extent of SADF involvement in SA townships. It also served to put in perspective this state of affairs for the members of the Peace and War Sub-Committee of the Commission, to which the Peace Project is responsible.

There were also specific requests for material on aspects of militarisation from various quarters. Supplying this material served to inform others in a deeper way of what the military are doing in the country.

Two specific resource documents for public distribution, was a pamphlet concerning the Board for Religious Objection, informing potential conscripts of their rights. Some 20 000 of these were distributed around the country.

A Dossier on Militarisation was also prepared. It contains information gathered from a range of different sources on many different aspects of militarisation. It was ready for publication just before the present State of Emergency and is now halted because of the provisions of the regulations relating to conscription.

The resource work undertaken through the project has certainly been very useful in different ways. The halting of the militarisation Dossier is a severe blow, because so much work was put into it both by the Peace Project and by the staff of the Human Awareness Programme.

2. Workshops

In order to form and inform consciences it was decided that the Peace Project would arrange to run workshops for different groups within the Church. Workshops were held for the SACBC Youth Department's leadership training course, for students from Christian societies at the university of Pietermaritzburg, for members of the National Catholic Federation of Students, and for members of congregations in Johannesburg and Pietermaritzburg. These workshops were generally very successful, in that they served to both inform people and to get people more actively involved in resisting the process of militarisation taking place.

The main problem however is the fact that not enough workshops were held. This could be attributed to the fact that people do not perceive this to be a major problem in our society. Ignorance of the resources of the Peace Project also contribute to this. The staff worker of the Project could also have been far more active in informing people of these resources.

3. Organisational

At the start of the Project it was felt that a national initiative had many drawback. It was decided to start local War and Peace groups that could continue the work on militarisation at a local Diocesan level. Work was done with the already existing Johannesburg and Cape Town groups. Initiatives were also made in Maritzburg and Port Elizabeth. These latter two failed as branches of the End Conscription Campaign were formed in both of these areas, and the Catholics in those Dioceses got involved in the ECC instead. Ongoing work was also done with the National Catholic Federation of Students and preparatory work for the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference. This work was aimed at putting the issue of militarisation firmly on the agenda of these groups and making more people aware of the issues confronting young

men being conscripted into the SADF.

Contact was also made with the Knights of De Gama and the Catholic Womens League. A number of meetings were held with these groups in an attempt to set up lines of communication around the issue. Both these groups have somewhat different attitudes to the Project, and so it was felt work had to be done to try and develop a common understanding, and thus common action. It appears to have had some success, although much work still needs to be done to overcome fear and suspicion of one another.

4. Relationships with others

Work with other groups involved in the issue was identified as a major priority of the Project. This was initially with the Conscientious Objectors Support Group (COSG) and various other Church groups. The work with COSG involved helping with counselling training and work, the collection of resources and co-ordinating action around the Board for Religious Objection. Work with the other Churches was difficult as these Churches did not have a similar structure to the Project. The work thus involved informing key people in those Churches of the work of the Project.

Work with the End Conscription Campaign started initially with co-ordinating and arranging Catholic participation in their Peace Festival held in June 1985. Part of this was arranging and preparing the visit of Cardinal Arns from Brazil. Thereafter work involved helping with the ECC finances as a person involved with the Bishops Secretariat was best placed for this. Work was also done in establishing a branch of the ECC in Pretoria, and working with academics, particularly from the Theological Faculty at the University of South Africa. The major area of work identified was in the area of Christian participation with the ECC. As purely Catholic initiatives in this area had failed it was decided that the Project co-ordinator should help in establishing ecumenical Church groups that would focus the Churches attention on the issue of conscription. This was aimed at raising Church opposition to the system of compulsory conscription. This work was fairly succesful as groups were established in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Pietermaritzburg, Durban and Cape Town.

The work with the ECC has been important as it is the major organisation in the country that is succesfully mobilising white opinion against the process of militarisation that is so sorely affecting our country. Perhaps a lot more work could be done in organising more active Catholic participation in the organisation.

5. The Board for Religious Objection

As this has become a major alternative for conscriptees it was essential that the work of the Project involved a fair amount of work on this. This involved informing people of the existence of the Board and how to apply to the Board. It also involved attending Board hearings to see at first hand how the Board operated. The bulk of the work, however involved helping applicants in their applications. This involved a lot of counselling to help people discover whether or not they wanted to apply, and then help in preparing statements, helping organising affidavits in support of applicants, organising witnesses for the applicants and arranging transport for the applicants to and from Board hearings.

In the event of applications being refused it involved working with those people through their possible alternatives. In the case of Philip Wilkinson it involved organising legal aid and witnesses for his trial, as he had decided to go to jail rather than obey his call-up instructions. It also involved organising both public and personal support of his decision. As charges against him have been dropped, while he is in detention under the emergency regulations this work has been halted, although he has been advised that charges will still be brought against him.

Another area of work has been organising opposition to the narrow terms of reference of the Board. This involved co-ordinating evidence from the SACBC to the Geldenhuys Committee that sat to consider the issue of conscription and the internal organisation of the SADF. Our evidence in the report produced in Parliament was completely disregarded. Work has now involved looking at the possibility of the Churches organising a joint Alternative Service Campaign that would be aimed at extending the terms of reference of the Board.

6. The Peace and War Sub-Committee

This is a Sub-committee of the Commission. It meets three times a year and the co-ordinator of the Peace Project acts as the Secretary to the committee. The work of the co-ordinator is thus reviewed and decided upon by the committee. The co-ordinator of the Project is completely responsible to the committee and to the Chairperson of the Commission. The committee identified other areas of work that the co-ordinator was involved in. This involves organising the writing of a booklet incorporating the content of the book, 'The Things that make for Peace', written by the Theological Advisory Commission. It also involved initiating action aimed at stopping the

registration of boys for military service that takes place at Catholic schools. In April 1986 it was also decided to look at the possibility of starting a campaign in the Church to call for the removal of troops from the townships. Thus an in-depth consultation was done to start this. This action was eclipsed however as Church groupings became involved in the issue of Sanctions which was being decided upon by the SACBC.

As the Sub-Committee only meets once every four months, it is not as effective as it could be in reviewing the work of the Project. There is need for a more ongoing form of review structure, to help this process. It could be more effective if the Secretary met more regularly with the other staff members of the Commission.

7. Namibia

The co-ordinator travelled twice to Namibia. Firstly to visit the operational area and to get a firsthand experience of the war in Northern Namibia. The second trip was at the invitation of the Windhoek Commission. The aim of this was to help examine the issue of the extension of conscription to all members of the Namibian population. It also involved looking for ways in which people might legally avoid doing service with the South West African Territorial Force. This was successful as work with lawyers indicated that people could legally refuse to do their service. Work then involved finding a way to inform them of this possibility.

It has been clear however that not enough work has been done in trying to stop the continued occupation by the SADF of Namibia. This is primarily because the actions of the SADF in SA townships has focussed peoples attention on this. A lot more work, however could have been done and perhaps more creative approaches to the Namibian war could have been found.

8. International

In August/September 1985 the co-ordinator travelled to Europe. The aim of this was to discover how various groups were involved in the issue of Peace in Europe. It also served to focus peoples attention in Europe to the issue of conscription and Conscientious Objection in SA. It was also important to discover what provisions exist in European countries for alternative service for conscientious objection. The visit was a great success as many groups were visited and a lot was learnt about the work of these groups. This helped enormously in informing the work of the project in SA.

9. Conclusion

The work of the Project has taken a lot to get it off the ground. Many people within the Church are still unaware of the existence of the Project. Many are also unaware of the seriousness of the issue of militarisation and how that affects them. The war is intensifying and all are involved in this. The Church needs to be responding to this and working out ways in which it can halt this process.

The project should be continued as more people are going to be faced with a crisis of conscience concerning conscription.

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Collection Number: AG1977

END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN (ECC)

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

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