

MEMORANDUM TO THE CHURCHES.

March 1986.

INTRODUCTION:

The End Conscription Committee (ECC) is at present engaged in a nationally co-ordinated campaign focusing on the issue of alternative national service. This campaign, "Working for a Just Peace," seeks to highlight the willingness of the members and supporters of the ECC to render genuine alternative national service in religious and welfare organisations.

The ECC Churches groups, comprising members of various denominations, see their role as addressing the church establishment concerning this issue. Through the Board of Religious Objection the government has attempted to co-opt criticism of military service by making available a non-military form of national service to religious pacifists. As most objectors prior to this legislation were Christians and Jehovah Witnesses, some form of recognition to such objectors tended to placate the criticisms stemming from the churches. However, from the beginning it was apparent that the legislation was extremely limited and punitive.

At the time many of the churches did condemn the legislation as not going far enough in that it did not recognise non-pacifist and non-religious objectors. Moreover alternative service at present is a continuous six years in a government department usually at a private's salary. Those who do not qualify face exile or six years in gaol.

The churches, and those from the churches who are pacifists are in a privileged position in that they are seen by the government as having the legitimate right to object to service in the SADF. Others, who suffer the anguish of the same crisis of conscience because they regard the SADF as contributing to an intolerably unjust situation, do not have this dubious privilege. It would therefore seem appropriate that the churches should reiterate the unacceptability of the present legislation on the basis of its exclusivity and punitive nature, and call on the government to make available genuine alternative service in religious and welfare organisations. This would contribute to the broad thrust of the ECC campaign. As the crisis and conflict in our land increases so does the crisis and anguish of conscience of so many conscripts.

The following is a memorandum drawn up nationally by the churches sub-committee of the ECC, stating the demands of the present campaign and motivating the different clauses. We urge you to take serious cognizance of these demands and press the government to take heed and alter the legislation accordingly.

1. OUR COUNTRY IS SINKING INTO A DEEPENING CIVIL CONFLICT. THE USE OF ARMY CONSCRIPTS IN THE TOWNSHIPS SHOWS HOW SERIOUS THE SITUATION IS.

Since October, 1984 SADF troops have been deployed in the townships - bringing young white youth into a position of tragic confrontation with township residents. The distinction between the role of the police and that of the troops has been blurred. The situation is one of civil conflict, where on average 2 people a day lose their lives due to the situation of 'unrest.' Moreover since the declaration of the state of emergency the powers of the security forces have been drastically increased. The 'border' conscripts are called upon to defend is no longer along the northern borders of our country, but in townships.

2. /....

2. TODAY SOUTH AFRICANS ARE FIGHTING FELLOW SOUTH AFRICANS IN THE TOWNSHIPS WHICH FURTHER INCREASES TENSION AND BITTERNESS IN OUR DIVIDED COUNTRY. THIS MEANS THAT MANY CONSCRIPTS FACE A SERIOUS MORAL DILEMMA. FOR THIS REASON THEY SHOULD BE GIVEN THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE WHETHER TO PARTICIPATE IN THE SADF OR NOT. THIS IS WHY WE CALL FOR AN END TO CONSCRIPTION.

The main-line English speaking churches have at various times asserted the right of individual conscience before God to decide whether or not to serve in the SADF. The legislation makes no such provisions for the right of individual conscience in that it is restricted to religious pacifists. These restrictions while ignoring the right of individual conscience on ethical and moral grounds, also ignore that there are two authentic Christian approaches to issues of violence and war. The legislation only recognizes one approach, namely pacifism, and ignores the criteria of the just war position in church teaching, which in the traditional position of all main-line churches. Moreover the right to conscience presupposes an informed conscience and the church has frequently failed in its mission to provide the faithful with information enabling them to choose.

The church also has a ministry to secular and moral/ethical objectors and their right to conscience must also be asserted. The SADF is contributing in no small way to the maintenance of the apartheid system. Apartheid has been condemned as a heresy by the churches. Therefore the churches clearly have a ministry to both assert and defend the individual's right to conscience - the right to choose.

3. IN THE INTERIM, OUR RIGHT TO CHOOSE WOULD BE RESPECTED IF THE GOVERNMENT ALLOWED FOR GENUINE ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF SERVING OUR COUNTRY.

THEREFORE WE CALL ON THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- A. PROVIDE GENUINE ALTERNATIVE SERVICE TO ALL CONSCRIPTS WHO IN GOOD CONSCIENCE OBJECT TO SERVICE IN THE SADF.

Genuine alternative service would be work which contributed to the well-being of the majority of South Africans. Moreover this work should not be contributing to the maintenance of the apartheid bureaucracy. Also it should be work which allows for the utilisation of the individual's skills, talents and creativity.

- B. REDUCE THE LENGTH OF COMMUNITY SERVICE FROM A PUNITIVE SIX YEARS MAXIMUM TO A MAXIMUM OF FOUR YEARS.

At present conscripts who serve in the SADF, serve a maximum of 480 days Citizen Force duty after an initial two years of continuous national service. Those conscripts who do alternative service serve six continuous years. This is unnecessarily punitive, especially at such a formative time in a young person's life. Moreover, a private's salary for the full period of service seems unreasonable. The punitive nature of alternative service fails to respect the individual's right to conscience - one is punished for one's belief and for living out the demands of one's integrity.

- C. TO MAKE ALTERNATIVE SERVICE AVAILABLE IN RELIGIOUS AND WELFARE ORGANISATIONS.

This would broaden the possibilities of working for a just peace in our land.

Endorsed by:

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END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN (ECC)

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