

Official representation from Diakonia member churches was a feature of the recent annual national conference on conscientious objection held in Durban.

From 14th to 17th July seventyfive delegates from C.O. Support Groups around the country met at the University of Natal with representatives from the Methodist, Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches, the South African Council of Churches, Black Sash, National Union of South African Students and Student Union for Christian Action.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION AND NEW LEGISLATION

Against the background of the growing militarization of South Africa, a 1983 Defence Budget of R3 092 million and the probable extension of conscription to Indian and so-called Coloured men in the near future, the conference studied the new legislation covering conscientious objection.

The provisions of the Defence Amendment Act, 1983 allow for recognition of only strictly pacifist religious objectors, who will be allowed to do a form of alternate service in an allocated government or municipal department. All other objectors face a prison sentence of up to six years, three times as long as the present maximum sentence.

Delegates rejected this legislation as punitive and draconian. They reaffirmed their continued support for the stand taken by young South Africans who refuse on the basis of their conscience to participate in the South African Defence Force.

Further discussion of the Act brought a recommendation that the Church consider the possibility of refusing to serve on the proposed

CONFERENCE ON CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

A Special Feature
by Sue Britton

Boards for Religious Objection, as the theological base of the Act conflicts so clearly with that of English-language churches.

Conference closed with a commitment on the part of Conscientious Objectors Support Groups to work towards a general call to end conscription in South Africa.

ANGLICAN C.O.'s APPEAL TO BISHOPS.

Anglicans at the recent fourth national conference of Conscientious Objectors Support Groups in Durban drafted a call to their Bishops to take the lead in informing and guiding members of the Church of the Pro-

vince of Southern Africa about the role of Christians as peacemakers and reconcilers.

The Church of the Province, together with most other mainline Churches, has declared apartheid a heresy, the upholding of which means the increasing militarization of our society.

The Bishops were asked to give guidance to the Church as to possible ways in which its members could counteract this militarization, particularly the way in which young people are being socialized into an unquestioning militaristic mentality which accepts violence as a norm.

Anglican delegates asked their Bishops to inform Church members of the Christian values and Biblical principles which should guide and determine their response to militarism, and to remedy the lack of Christian teaching relative to the causes of the present civil war conflict in South Africa.



THE CADET SYSTEM UNDER ATTACK

The cadet system, which gives white boys at high school military training in preparation for their national military service, came under fire at the recent C.O. Conference held in Durban.

White males come under the authority of the South African Defence Force for up to forty years of their lives now that the call-up has been extended to the age of 55.

At high schools throughout the country uniformed youngsters are drilled and trained to use firearms. By the time they leave school they not only have the rudiments of their military training, but more importantly they have come to accept without question the way the South African Defence Force is operating in the present conflict.

Although Section 57 of the Defence Act no. 44 of 1957 allows for parents or guardians to object in writing to their sons being trained in this para-military cadet system, it became obvious from speakers at the conference, including mothers of school-going white boys, that parents or guardians were not made aware of this right.

The Church came in for severe criticism in this connection: why, the question was asked, does the Church allow cadet training at many of its schools? How is this compatible with the Church's stand on apartheid or its role as peacemaker in society?

Delegates saw the cadet system as both a symptom and a reinforcing agent of the increasing militarism in our society.

Anglicans at the conference resolved to ask their Bishops to exercise their authority as far as possible not to allow Anglican private schools to continue the practice of cadet training and to bring the provisions of Section 57 of the Defence Act to the attention of all Church members, particularly those who are or will be parents of school-going boys.

CONSCRIPTION AND THE CONSTITUTION

"Conscription and the Constitution" was the theme of a public meeting held in Durban during July in conjunction with the Conference on Conscientious Objection.

One of the main speakers, recently-unbanned Natal Indian Congress leader, Mewa Ramgobin, said that the constitutional proposals were part of a grand design to entrench apartheid.

"There will be no power sharing", Ramgobin said, referring to the probable extension of conscription, "but Indians and Coloureds will be called to join whites in the oppression of themselves and the majority of South Africans. They will be the instruments of their own oppression if they opt for the so-called new dispensation. And by opting for it, they will also subject themselves to conscription."

Ramgobin pointed out that while Indian and Coloured youth would be fighting, sleeping, eating, playing and praying together with whites in the operational area, when they returned to civilian life they would again be segregated.

Speaking at the same meeting, Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu said the constitutional proposals were bad because they entrenched apartheid and white domination and oppression. More than that, they were a dangerous waste of time: "time", he said, "we can ill afford to dismantle apartheid and establish a just and participatory society with a Bill of Rights to guarantee fundamental individual rights".

NUSAS President, Kate Philip, saw the military's role in the formulation of the constitutional proposals as part of the total strategy of "reform" initiatives which were trying to devise a system in South Africa which would be more militarily defensible. She pointed out that in a guerilla war such as that presently being fought, the guerillas' most vital asset is support and cover from their communities. The SADF understands that, and this is why "hearts and minds" and a stake in the system are being seen as so important.



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