

SOUTHERN AFRICAN CATHOLIC
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE



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TELEGRAMME: "CHURCHWEL PRETORIA"
TELEPHONE: 3-6458 / 3-6459
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0001
PLEASE CALL
NEW TEL. NUMBERS
326-6458 / 6 / 6

Dear

Enclosed please find a proposal for the Alternative Service Campaign. This campaign is being proposed by the S.A.C.B.C. Peace and War sub-committee.

We would like you to discuss the following re. the campaign:

- 1.If your church will participate in the campaign.
- 2.If your church can provide any jobs for objectors and if so if you could afford to pay the salaries.If not,a fund for salaries would be made available.
- 3.The election or nomination of a member of your church to sit on the Panel for Conscientious Objectors.
- 4.If you are willing to take part in the campaign,please could you elect or nominate a member/s to sit on an ecumenical body which will be responsible for further planning and co-ordination of the campaign.

The deadline for replies is

If you would like someone from the S.A.C.B.C. to come and speak to your church assembly,please contact the Justice and Peace Commission at Khanya House,and they will make the necessary arrangements for you.

Thanking You
Yours in Christ

BACKGROUND TO THE ALTERNATIVE SERVICE CAMPAIGN: History of the Churches support for Conscientious Objectors.

The Churches in South Africa have for a long time been aware of the problems facing Conscientious Objectors re alternatives to the SADF. Since the early 70's the Churches have defended the right of C.O.'s to object to military service. In fact in 1974 the SACC adopted a resolution at its annual national conference calling on all its member Churches to :

" ..Challenge all their members to consider whether Christ's call to take up the cross and follow Him in identifying with the oppressed does not in our situation, involve becoming Conscientious Objectors."

Throughout the 70's and in the early 80's church support for objectors continued. In 1983 with the introduction of the Defence Amendment Act , which brought with it the Board for Religious Objection, the Churches launched new campaigns demanding the broadening of the parameters of the Board. The 1983 Methodist Conference resolution on the subject aptly represents the Churches' views on the matter: 29.9.19; "The Conference while appreciating the work of the Naude Committee of the SADF and the positive aspects of the Defence Amendment Act of 1983, finds the new provisions for C.O.'s , taken as a whole, to be inadequate and calls for:

29.9.19.1;The recognition of ethical, moral, and philosophical objectors to warfare.

29.9.19.2;The recognition of the Just War Objector, whether or not his position involves a religious basis or a political assessment.

29.9.19.3;The composition of the examining Board for objectors in a less partial form.

29.9.19.4;An adequate discussion with the Churches to review these and other aspects of the Act.

Some groups like the S.A.C.B.C. went as far as refusing to let their members serve on the Board until such time as their demands were recognised.

In 1985 most of the Churches reiterated their demands re.the limitations of the Board For Religious Objection, alternative service and the system of conscription. These were presented to the Geldenhys Commission in their joint paper supported by the S.A.C.C., the Methodist Church of S.A., the Presbyterian Church of S.A., the Society of Friends (Quakers), the United Congregational Church of S.A. and the S.A.C.B.C.

A summary of the demands presented by all these Churches to the Geldenhys Commission follows;

- 1.To make community service an option for every national serviceman.
- 2.The recognition of all objectors, i.e. moral, ethical, philosophical humanitarian and religious objectors.
- 3.The revision of the period of community service to the same length as military service.
- 4.The revision of the regulations relating to community service to provide for service in "...a recognised church, welfare, research, development or peace corps agency."
- 5.The broadening of the Board for Religious Objection.

Again as was revealed by the 1986 Defense White Paper, the evidence submitted by the Churches was completely ignored.

What we see happening is that the church, profoundly competent to pronounce to give advice on such issues, is being ignored.

The effects of the government decision to ignore the recommendations of the Churches is being felt by those young conscripts who in conscience refuse to participate in the S.A.D.F. and who fall outside the provisions of the Defense Amendment Act. Often it is because of a deep faith and commitment to justice that these young men find themselves in their predicament. The options available to these people are:

1. A life in exile.
2. A jail sentence of up to six years.
3. To go to the army against their will and beliefs.

We as the Churches of S.A. have a moral responsibility to these people and to the struggle for justice. As such we must continue to reiterate our calls for changes in the law. Yet this is no longer sufficient as the government remains deaf to our calls. We now need to find new ways of making ourselves heard and of standing by our demands. It is in light of this need that the Alternate Service Campaign is being proposed.

WHAT IS THE ALTERNATE SERVICE CAMPAIGN?

In the last few years we have seen resistance to conscription into the S.A.D.F. growing. Several young men find themselves in a moral crisis re. participation in the S.A.D.F. This could be because they are pacifists due to religious convictions, or because they believe the war to be unjust. Whatever the reasons most of these young men have little alternative. (i.e. except for universal religious pacifists)

Conscientious Objectors have long been part of the tradition of Christianity and the churches in S.A. The churches do not only recognise universal religious pacifists but rather all objectors of conscience. As such, we have a responsibility towards all those young conscripts who find themselves unable to serve. We have made this demand to the S.A. government on numerous occasions yet no moves have been made to provide for these young men. The time has come for us to stand witness to our demands and to provide alternative national service to these objectors either in our churches or in welfare institutions. This service should be the same length as national service. The volunteers would be paid the same wage as they receive in the S.A.D.F., only this time the church would be paying them. By doing this the Churches would be reiterating their demands that;

1. Alternate service be made available to all objectors.
2. It be for the same length as service in the S.A.D.F.
3. That objectors be allowed to do their community service in church or welfare organisations.

This would be the essence of the Alternate Service Campaign.

WHO WOULD THE CHURCHES BE ADDRESSING THEMSELVES TO IN THE CAMPAIGN?

There are a number of conscripts who fall outside the classification of the Board for Religious Objection but who would regard themselves as objectors. The majority of these people while being opposed to service in the S.A.D.F. are willing to do an alternative form of national service which they regard as a genuine service to their community. This would be the primary target group that the Churches would be addressing themselves to.

HOW WOULD WE GO ABOUT IMPLEMENTING THIS PROGRAM OF ALTERNATIVE SERVICE?

If the Churches agree to providing alternative service to objectors falling outside the Defence Amendment Act some mechanism of clarifying the objectors motives and of placing the objector must be introduced.

It is in light of this that a Panel for Conscientious Objectors is being suggested. This Panel should be an ecumenical one, made up of representatives from the various churches as well as non-religious representatives. The Panel would be responsible for interviewing possible objectors in order to help clarify the objectors motivation and to ascertain;

1. Whether the objector falls into the Panels definition of an objector
2. If the objector needs to be placed in a church or welfare agency and for what period.

This information could then be passed onto a placements team who would find a place for the objector. This team could consist of some representatives from those churches and welfare organisations that are willing and able to employ objectors.

Applications to the Panel should be made in writing and should include

1. Personal details of objector-age, dependants, work and situation with the S.A.D.F.

2. The nature of the applicants objection (e.g. moral, pacifist or just war) and the grounds for such objection.

Note that the terms of reference of the Panel should not include recommending that the applicant should serve in the S.A.D.F. or that he should apply to the Board for Religious Objection.

HOW WOULD WE INVOLVE THE WHOLE CHURCH IN THE CAMPAIGN.

There are 2 possible ways of gaining congregational involvement in the campaign. The first would be to publicise the stands of the individual objectors in our churches and to encourage support actions. The second would be to ask for Peace Volunteers over a specific period. The volunteers would then take part in various Peace Projects (similar to those conducted by the E.C.C.). The importance of this would be;

1. An active sign of solidarity with the objectors.
2. The display of a constructive action as oppose to the destructive actions of the S.A.D.F.
3. An emphasis of our commitment to a genuine national service.

TIMESPAN.

As the campaign is an important one and one which directly confronts the State with the churches demands, it is important that the campaign as far as possible, has official church support and backing. In order to allow for this and the infrequency of official church body meetings it is suggested that the campaign be seen as a one year project. This timespan does not however mean that we can sit back and wait for the next eight months. It is important to put as much effort as possible into the campaign from the start.

CONCLUSION.

Although the government has absolute power in the area of conscription it would be more loathed to act against the united initiative of all the churches. This coupled with wide public and international support might enable us to make our demands.

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