

WORKING AT THE OUTPOSTS

the pretoria branch

Few Black Sash members realise quite how politically distant we are from the majority of white South Africans. But Black Sash members in Pretoria are under no illusions, as these vignettes, compiled by Carol Long, reveal.

The Pretoria Black Sash began in the 1950s with an all night vigil at the Union buildings. Shelagh Clear remembers this as a bitterly cold night, the group draped in blankets to keep warm. This group consisted mainly of women although some men were present.

Pretoria is mainly a civil service town — and was even more so in those days. It was very difficult for wives of senior government officials to join the Black Sash. The membership was small but the group used to go to Rustenberg three or four times a year for some moral support. There they met with the Rustenberg Black Sash members at a Mrs Retief's home. This small group apparently disbanded after about 14 years and not much more information about this period is available.

However in the early 1970s a group of concerned women in Pretoria were visited by Johannesburg Black Sash members. This led to the formation of the Pretoria advice office, which until this year was under the capable directorship of Mary Harrop-Allin. The advice office is still the most active part of the Pretoria Black Sash's work.

One of our chief problems is the shortage of workers. The Black Sash membership in Pretoria is small considering the size of the city, and many people are afraid of being associated with the Black Sash — another result of government propaganda.

Operating in Pretoria is difficult, but there are certain advantages, stemming from the fact that government departments, and a number of industrial councils are on the spot, and are, on the whole, helpful and co-operative. This may seem surprising, until one remembers that we are not known as the Black Sash advice office. Those who so kindly allow us to use their premises and who give us tremendous support, have requested that we leave off 'Black Sash' from the title — hence we are known as the Pretoria Advice Office for Black People.

Working at the Pretoria advice office is probably no more physically exhausting or emotionally draining than it is anywhere else. But our problems may be different owing to the proximity of Bophuthatswana, especially the 'limbo' area of Winterveld, where non-Tswana residents, who were 'dumped' there long before independence, have enormous problems.

Working at the advice office is a humbling experience: jobless people, reduced to penury, come to us with the belief that we can somehow perform miracles. In cases where we are powerless, these people walk a little taller when they leave, simply because somebody cared enough to listen to their stories with sympathy and concern. As Margie Laurence says, 'We never cease marvelling at their dignity and stoicism.'

Pushing wheelbarrows against apartheid

Several Black Sash members in Pretoria have been 'pushing wheelbarrows against apartheid'. This is one way of describing their weekly visit to Oukasie, a community near Brits threatened with forced removal. In the heat of the mid-summer Northern Transvaal sun, they have — together with the women of Oukasie and a group from Laudium — been wheeling wheelbarrows loaded with rubble from demolished homes, and using this to try to fill up some of the many ditches and pot-holes in the dusty township road. They have found this an extremely meaningful and worthwhile activity as it has given them the opportunity to show solidarity with the community's proud and determined resistance against the injustice of forced removal.

Confronted with a government order to evacuate Oukasie, and then with the withdrawal of many services to the township such as road maintenance, the community formed an action committee to lead them in resisting removal, and in maintaining their own township. The women of Oukasie (Brits Women's Organisation) took it upon themselves to maintain the road and the cemetery.

This year the problem of Oukasie's roads was overshadowed by the more immediate problem of



trying to keep the crèche and schools open as the government attempted to close them down. We have tried to support them by collecting re-sellable household items which the women then sold in the village to raise funds for the crèche. We also join them every last Sunday of the month for their combined church service designed to encourage the community in their present situation. Johanna Mennen, a Pretoria Black Sash member, says she comes away from these meetings with an awareness that these are people in the front-line of the struggle against apartheid.

Another important aspect of the Black Sash's life in Pretoria is a weekly prayer vigil. In June 1986 many people felt the need to practise their Christian conviction that prayer can aid fellow human beings. In Pretoria, lay people of various denominations started meeting in a church for half an hour every week to pray silently for fellow South Africans who might be in trouble or detained, or for relatives of detainees.

No week has been missed even during the holiday periods of Christmas and Easter. Usually the half-hour is entirely silent, each person praying, quietly focusing thought and heart on the precepts of Christ. In particular the meeting remembers silently all who are detained in prison. Many detainees know they are remembered during a short time of prayer. We believe this helps them spiritually, to face their physical, mental and emotional trial.



Black Sash archives

Some common (mis)perceptions about the Black Sash

Marjorie Jobson



I have been a member of a small group of concerned individuals in Pretoria for several months. We meet each week with the common purpose of working out how we can contribute to the building of a new South Africa.

The group developed a level of trust in which I shared that I was a member of the Black Sash. This triggered a reaction from one of the women, which I thought I would share with others through the magazine because it gave me some idea of how the Black Sash is sometimes perceived.

She challenged me on the following points:

She said she regarded me as a 'white traitor' and that she could not trust me because I must be more on the side of the blacks than the whites. The name 'The Black Sash' indicated to her our identification with, and support of, black people.

She said that being a member implied that I condoned violence, and that she suspected that I was unable to deal with my own personal aggression and so vicariously condoned violent acts by black people.

She said that she believed that I had been brainwashed and that I was probably being manipulated unawares by individuals with communist intentions. She was concerned that I had 'jumped on a bandwagon' and that I could have no control over its direction or goal.

As I listened, it seemed that I heard the cries of fear of many of our white population —

- the fear for one's own personal security;
- the fear of being out of control;
- the fear of losing something if blacks were to become free and equal;
- the fear of a future under a black government.

And it seems to be that those in power have succeeded to a large extent in fostering the 'siege mentality' referred to by Mary Burton in her public speech during the national conference in March.

Someone in the group then asked this woman whether she would then put me into detention, were she a member of the security police. She replied that she did not have enough evidence!

I know that it was only through personal contact with me over the next few weeks that led her to admit that she was in fact acting out of her own fear of what I represented to her and that her fears were irrational and illogical and separated us. □