

On The Department of Religious Affairs's Recent Consultation

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In one of its resolutions, the Culture in Apartheid South Africa (CASA) December '87 conference, noted the historical role of religion in the oppression of our people as well as the laudable endeavours of democratic theologians of various Faiths to have religion in our country play a meaningful role in the national democratic struggle. In a milestone development, the conference resolved to support the efforts of all theologians struggling to find a meaningful way of expressing their faith in our struggle for a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa. Also, it called upon all theologians to identify completely with the national democratic struggle and to consult regularly with the National Liberation Movement and the MDM with a view to strengthening the links between organised religion and the national democratic struggle.

A few weeks ago the ANC Department of Religious Affairs & Multi-Faith Chaplaincy (DRA) held a consultation of clergy who are ANC members in exile, lay people and executive members of the ANC working on the religious front. The central motivations for the consultation were the obligations of the Movement to the commitment to struggle on the religious front.

The conference lasted two days and was concerned with a number of issues relating to the objectives and organisa-

tion of the DRA. Principally, it was established that the ANC Department of Religious Affairs, with its chaplaincy, was not trying to be a substitute for the various religious communities members of the Movement are associated with. Neither was it attempting to produce any 'ANC theology'.

As the primary political organisation of liberation in South Africa, which has a population of which more than 82% are religiously active, the ANC has a duty to understand the religious voice of the people, particularly its political dimensions. Thus the NEC had established a political department of Religious Affairs, rather than a Religious Section or 'a religious department'. To aid the DRA in its work all people of faith within the ranks of the ANC, especially clergy and theologians, have been mobilised to

assist. The DRA, it was established, has nine full-time officials as its H.Q. directorate. Four of these are NEC members, and the rest constitute the department secretariat which consists of the Head of Department, Director of Chaplaincy, the Administrative Secretary and two other posts.

Consultation clarified that the ANC was not resurrecting the formation of an ANC Chaplaincy-General such as it had in the 1940s. There is no general ANC chaplain; there is, rather, a Director of the chaplaincy activity within the movement, who currently is Cde Rev. Fumanekile Gqiba. The consultation designated Cde Rev John Lamola as the new Head of Department.

In line with its main purpose, the meeting proceeded in a determined spirit to review its structures, goals and operations, in the light of the accen-



AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS PRESS STATEMENT

At a meeting of the African National Congress Department of Religious Affairs, held on 9 and 10 September 1989 in London, the current critical situation in South Africa was considered.

The meeting was attended by members of the National Executive, clergy and lay persons of the ANC.

The meeting:

1. Salutes the Mass Democratic Movement on its enormous success, achieved in the continuing challenge to the racist regime, and especially through the Defiance Campaign and the two-day strike.
2. Denounces the fraud of the white and puppet elections and condemns in the severest terms the brutality and exceptional violence unleashed against peaceful protesters, resulting in large numbers being murdered by the regime.
3. Mourns with our people the loss of life.
4. Demands that the people shall have the right to bury their dead in a dignified manner in accordance with their own customs.
5. Rejoices at the leading role of significant numbers of South Africa's religious community in the Defiance Campaign.

The meeting, in a message to the people of South Africa, states its rededication to the urgent and vital task of informing and interpreting to the international religious community the significance of current events in South Africa. The objective in doing so is to call on the international community to:

- condemn these atrocities;
- take further action towards the total isolation of the South African regime;
- provide increased support for the liberation struggle to remove the illegitimate and violent regime and replace it with a united, non-racial and democratic government.

The meeting sent a letter to President OR Tambo, assuring him of their prayers and support and wishing him a full and speedy recovery.

tuated need to meet the needs of the resistance movement on the religious front at home, and the religious solidarity movement abroad. It also looked at our own membership's Chaplaincy requirements in all its facets, dealing with salient problems which have been experienced thus far.

We also looked at questions relating to the development of a liberation theology contextual to the South African experience, i.e. relations of religion in South Africa to the national liberation movement, armed struggle, the women's movement, and workers' issues. Amongst other things, we explored methods whereby those 'doing theology from ANC trenches' could bring their experiences to a broader audience at home and abroad. Conclusions were reached and projects have been set up. Also, plans to have the ANC voice forged into the language of the religious community were also worked out. Delegates also saw a need for those theologians engaged in struggle within the ANC to lead the way in opening up a 'Marxism and Religion' dialogue in the context of South Africa.

As with all conferences, progress must be measured by both what happens within sessions and outside sessions. Many informal, albeit, important, political and theological discussions and debates were held at the eating tables, in sleeping quarters and in corridors. In

conclusion, let me take up just one point from one of these conversations, which brings us back to the CASA resolutions.

One delegate who had also been a delegate at the CASA conference remarked how, when the issue of religion was brought up at CASA, some people around him hissed and tut-tutted in annoyance at what appeared as an insinuation of a relevance of religion to liberation or culture. The comrade expressed his surprise at that attitude, and thus ensued an interesting discussion about this important side of the resistance of the oppressed. We started by going back to Karl Marx, as those who expressed their annoyance were probably thinking of what Marx once said, that religion is the opium of the oppressed. We reminded ourselves that all too often people forget how Marx prefixed that statement. He also said that religion, 'is the expression of real distress and protest about real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world ...' We looked at two forms of religious expression:

That is, religion as the idealist tool of oppression and religion of the people concerned with the material now. Towards the end of our discussion we found ourselves coining a new phrase: 'Religion can also be seen as a manifestation of the expression of the oppressed for a better and higher form

of life!'

We then took this theoretical position and applied it to South Africa. We recognised that the vast majority of the oppressed were people with religious faith. We also noted that for many of our people, the only literacy they possess and are comfortable with, is the literacy of the Bible stories and the Hymns. Furthermore, we identified and looked into how an informal education arising from these forms of popular literacy affect popular culture and political expression.

The ANC as the movement of the people has to respect and use the people's language and forms of thought to forward the struggle. We can either bury our heads in the sand and use the finest political phrases which people cannot comprehend, and thereby speak over their heads, or we can meet the people where they are, using a language and methods of communication which are derived from their day to day life. We have witnessed the central role institutions of all Faiths have played in mobilising people. Because the ANC is at the heart of this activity, nobody can break the bonds between the people and their political movement by using religion mischievously as a tool of division. May we all be aware of this important victory.

**FORWARD WITH THE STRUGGLE
ON THE RELIGIOUS FRONT!**

