

Exciting Editorial

I feel a need to excuse myself for the delay since the last issue of Sizwe, but I do have good excuses.

Contrary to my expectations, I have met the most wonderful girl in the world and we have just this week announced our engagement! Contrary to my normal calmness, I am completely ecstatic. Contrary to popular opinion, I have always been a romantic and now I have someone to show it to.

Rosalee and I hope to visit Aus in January and may get married while there (so please don't go away on holidays!). Next year Rosalee will be finishing her Honours course in politics and religion.

I am sorry for all the close friends who hear this news from a mere Newsletter rather than a personal letter. I'm afraid my letter writing has gone downhill in the last two months and if I don't send this to you all at once you may never hear about it.

Reconciliation Conference

Apart from university commitments and falling in love, the other big event for me has been to become involved in the planning of a national conference to train church leaders in reconciliation skills.

About 120 people will attend the conference called "Empowering for Reconciliation with Justice" (henceforth ERJ) during the first week of next February. The program includes lectures, discussions and case studies in peace-making, negotiating and mediating, and visits to townships where there has been successful steps towards reconciliation.

The organising committee draws on people from virtually all major church denominations (including Dutch Reformed and the African Independent Churches) and a variety of other Christian organisations working in this field (such as Africa Enterprise, who I have been representing). The group has also been calling on advice from Bob and Alice Evans from the US-based "Plowshares" organisation.

I'm sure you would have heard about the National Peace Accord which was signed last month by most of the key players in SA. But I'm also sure that the Aus media neglected to mention that the Accord was organised by church leaders - notably Desmond Tutu and Frank Chikane. This is a major achievement and a wonderful role to see Christians taking.

It remains to be seen, of course, whether the various parties will uphold the Accord and whether it can be implemented at the grassroots level. There is a immense need for people throughout SA to develop skills in conflict resolution. Historically, the only way of resolving conflicts has been by force. It will take much time and dedication to change the pervasive attitude that one side must win and the other side lose.

Nevertheless, the Peace Accord is a hopeful sign. It leaves us with a great challenge - can Christians lead the way by showing in words and actions how the Gospel can bring reconciliation? It may be that the resources we have gathered for the ERJ conference could be used not just to equip those within the church but within political parties as well.

Violence

Amidst these hopeful signs there is still a depressing amount of animosity and bloodshed. There is much tension and mistrust and a very pervasive security mentality. All houses have burglar guards on windows and metallic security doors. An amazing proportion of whites own guns for protection and even carry them as though it were normal. Any society which relies on firearms for personal safety is, as a consequence, quite unsafe.

“You must treat people as though you trust them if you ever want them to be trustworthy”, I want to declare. “If you act as though South Africa is unsafe, you only perpetuate the problem. You must consciously let go of all the things you fear losing, otherwise the security mentality binds you in fearful poverty. It’s better to have nothing and be free than to have everything and live in fear of losing it.” And especially to Christians I want to say “your security is completely misplaced anyway - he who lives by the gun will die by the gun! He who lives behind a padlock is a prisoner.”

This security mentality is especially distressing to me because it is largely based on ignorance. Certainly there are justifiable fears that you house may be burglarised, and farmers in particular are vulnerable to attacks by Blacks. But the typical African is as honest, trustworthy, non-violent and wants to live in peace just as much as any White.

Statistically, there are about 15,000 murders per year compared to 10,000 deaths on the road. I’m not sure how this rate compares with other countries, but remember that this number is spread over a population of some 30 million. Many of these are politically motivated, but many more are purely criminal.

There are a number of sociological reasons which help explain why violent crime has such a firm footing here. Firstly, the police force has been a political weapon for so long that it has lost both ability and credibility as a preventer of crime. Blacks especially have little respect for police - an attitude which makes the investigation of crime difficult.

But probably more significantly, there has been a long history of solving conflict by force. which has been reinforced by the strong authoritarianism of Afrikaner rule. The Government has unconsciously taught the people that violence is legitimate. “If the Government can kill people who disagree with it why shouldn’t I?”

This very primitive attitude to conflict resolution leaves people thinking that there is no alternative to force. Such thinking seems to be present in all levels of society - at the

national negotiation level; between racial/cultural groups and at the inter-personal level. It is difficult for many South Africans to even contemplate an alternative. There is a huge need for people to learn basic skills in handling conflict in more constructive ways.

These dynamics seem to me to be at the core of inter-Black fighting. It is clear that the claim that the fighting is due to inter-tribal resentment is false. This is clearest in Natal where all the fighting is between Zulus, not between Zulus and Xhosas as it is often portrayed. It is truer to say that the conflict is between groups of differing political ideology, but at the grass roots level the fighting is over more personal issues such as one family seeking revenge for the death of a son.

Why is it that the leaders can agree to stop fighting, but that the fighting continues? Is it that the leaders speak a different message to their supporters than what they say in public? There is some evidence of that - I've been ANC meetings where the words spoken to the crowd are much more aggressive and provocative than the public pronouncements. Is it that the people refuse to listen to their leaders? Quite possibly. Is it that there is some outside force stirring up trouble? The police and the conservative Afrikaners have frequently been blamed as the elusive "Third Force".

It is interesting to ask who benefits from the continuing violence. It is hard to see how anyone at the grass roots level gains by living in fear and seeing relatives die. The White government seems so committed to the course of change that it benefits little from having a country in civil war. The ANC continues to lose credibility because it has failed to stop the violence. However, two groups have gained - the conservative Whites and Inkatha. The Conservative Party and those further to the right use the Black violence to gather supporters. They can draw on White fears of Black rule to raise opposition to the government's changes. Inkatha, which was once a local political group with a small constituency of Zulus has now been elevated to the national negotiating table. This would not have happened if Inkatha (and Buthelezi in particular) had not been given such substantial publicity because of their role in the violence.

This is, of course, no more than a suggestive question. The real causes of the inter-Black violence are too complex to blame on any one party.