

ST. JOHN'S CENTRAL METHODIST CHURCH

36 Havelock Street  
Central  
PORT ELIZABETH 6001

12th April 1988

PASTORAL LETTER

My dear Friends,

RE : SHOULD THE METHODIST CHURCH BECOME A PEACE CHURCH?

Once again the S.A.T.V. has tried to do our theologizing for us, giving us no chance to respond to their mischievous reporting.

THE FACTS ABOUT THE PEACE CHURCH DEBATE

At the 1986 Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Quarterly Meetings were asked to debate the following and report back through their District Synods 1988 to the Conference of 1988.

1. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa should declare itself a Peace Church.
  2. Conference should specifically state its rejection of violence and war and declare that its members ought not to participate in violence or in military service of any form, **ALTHOUGH SUCH NON-PARTICIPATION SHOULD NOT BE AN ARTICLE OF FAITH OR A CONDITION OF MEMBERSHIP.**
  3. Methodists should not participate in the manufacture, propagation of advertising of munitions, weapons or instruments of war, or scientific, educational or cultural programmes designed to contribute to war, or propaganda or activities promoting ill-will or hatred among peoples or nations.
  4. Methodists should enter into the study, training and practice of forms of non-violent action as a positive substitute for the violence of war in resisting injustice and bringing about change.
- Conference then instructed the Christian Citizenship Department to prepare and circulate a Study Document on the issue for the use of Quarterly Meetings and Synods.

WHAT IS A PEACE CHURCH?

The simplest answer we can give to this is: "a Peace Church is one which declares, as a basic tenet of its teaching, its objection to war, participation in war, financial support for war and training for war".

This would apply whether the war was to support a Government or to displace that Government. The degree to which this teaching is binding upon members varies from Peace Church to Peace Church. As you read in the Conference statement it would not be the wish of the Methodist Church to see any decision regarding our becoming a Peace Church, being an article of faith within our church or a condition of Membership.

One of the Peace Churches in South Africa today is the Society of Friends, commonly called "Quakers", and they "urge" and "call" their members to refuse participation in the military even as non-combatants, but they would hold in respect those, who in conscience, chose to enter the armed forces, and would support those who are called up and refused to serve.

We cannot make such a decision regarding a Peace Church until we've asked ourselves what are some of the implications for the Methodist Church if it were to declare itself a Peace Church. It is my opinion that many people have not stopped to ask what the cost of this would be. It is absolutely crucial that we accept that in this debate we are being asked to make a costly commitment to an on-going process by which we will allow ourselves to be transformed into a peace-making church. It is also crucial that this process be understood not as the church deciding to be passive in the struggle for justice, but rather committing itself to an active programme of promoting justice and peace, liberation and reconciliation. IN OTHER WORDS ONE OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF BEING A PEACE CHURCH IS THE WILLINGNESS TO OFFER OUR LIVES WITHOUT BEING WILLING TO TAKE ANYONE ELSE'S LIFE. Yes, there is a cost involved and we need to think and pray very deeply about this cost.

As you are aware the Methodist Church is made up of many different people with many different points of view,

TO THAT END I WANT TO INVITE YOU TO A MEETING TO BE HELD AT ST. JOHN'S ON WEDNESDAY 20th APRIL, AT 7.30 P.M., WHERE ALL THESE MATTERS WILL BE DISCUSSED. I ask you to come prepared to listen and to speak. Very often in these debates silence is interpreted as consent.

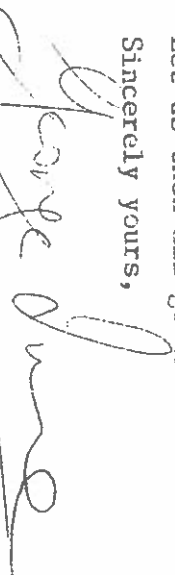
At that meeting we will not be fighting each other. We will be stating our point of view and these comments will be noted and sent on to the Quarterly Meeting and thus on to Synod and Conference.

I have every faith in the people called "Methodists", as they discuss these deep matters, to come to them with prayer and openness to God and to each other.

I will chair the meeting on Wednesday 20th, and I promise you that if you want to speak, no matter what your point of view is, you will be allowed to speak and you will be listened to.

Let us then all go on in the name of the Lord.

Sincerely yours,

  
GEORGE KRIVINE and STAFF

unbreakable link between violence and hatred.

Violence testifies that God cannot or will not protect. It testifies that our weapons are more powerful and more reliable than God. As someone has written -

"The Lord is my Shepherd,

So says the Psalm,

But just in case not,

I'll get me a bomb."

What do you think about all of this? As I bring this already too long letter to a conclusion, I want you to notice the following points.

As I have already hinted, the Methodist Church is made up of different kinds of people. In the one Methodist Church, we have supporters of the A.W.B.; supporters of the National Party; supporters of the Conservative Party; supporters of the P.F.P.; supporters of the Independent Parties; supporters of the A.N.C.; supporters of the P.A.C.; supporters of the U.D.F.; supporters of AZAPO, and many others.

In the one Methodist Church we have parents who have lost their children on the border and we have parents whose children have gone across the border and are fighting and dying on the other side.

In the same Methodist Church we have parents whose children are in detention and we have parents whose children work for the Security Police. It is interesting when attending Conference to look out on that Conference and see ministers sitting together, some with children in the armed forces, some with children in exile, some with children fighting on the other side, some with children in detention, some with children in jail. What are we going to do in a church like that? I suppose we can try to ignore the problems, hoping they will go away. Ultimately though what we need to do is to give all the Methodist people a chance to express themselves and to unburden just some of their pain in the present and their hopes for the future. The great thing about the Peace Church debate is not the answers we get but it does give our widely diverse Methodist Family a chance to express itself from many various points of view.

and it would be right for me to place before you some of these viewpoints.

### AGAINST BECOMING A PEACE CHURCH

1. We are facing a total onslaught, master-minded by the Communists. What would become of the Church and Christianity here if South Africa came under Communist control? Christians must therefore do their duty and take up arms to defend the Church and Christianity. This is a "just war" we are fighting.

2. The only thing that stopped Hitler was armed force. If we hadn't fought then, perhaps the light of Christianity would have been extinguished.

Please note that the above arguments may broadly be described as white Methodist viewpoints.

The next argument I have heard from Black People.

3. The institutional violence of the South African régime has now reached horrific levels. In such a violent society, what possible hope is there for non-violence? Those who truly seek effective change in such an already violent society have no choice but to take up arms, much as they might hate the thought of killing.

4. Then there is the pietistic argument which says: "The more we talk about this kind of issue, the more we polarise and damage the church. We should leave these debates to the politicians and get on with the real work of the church which is to preach the gospel and to save souls".

The above then are four arguments I have heard against us becoming a Peace Church.

### FOR BECOMING A PEACE CHURCH

People who are arguing for a Peace Church appeal basically to three or four principles.

1. The Witness of the New Testament
2. The Witness of the Early Church
3. The Extraordinary Power of Non-Violence
4. The Ineffectiveness of Violence

Let me draw your attention briefly to each of these in turn.

1. The Witness of the New Testament. Have a look at the following texts; Matthew 5 vs 9 "Blessed are the peace-makers for they shall be called the sons of God." Matthew 5 vs 44 "Love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you." Mark 26 vs 52 "Put your sword back into its place, all who take the sword will perish by the sword." John 18 vs 36 "If my Kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight that I might not be handed over to the Jews, but my Kingdom is not of this world." Luke 23 vs 24 "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Acts 9 vs 60 "Lord do not hold this sin against them." Romans 12 vs 14-21 "Ask God to bless those who persecute you ... if someone has done you wrong do not repay him a wrong ... never take revenge ... conquer evil with good." 1 Corinthians 10 vs 4 "The weapons we use in our fight are not the world's weapons." 1 Peter 2 vs 21-23 "Christ suffered for you and left you an example ... when he was insulted he did not answer back with an insult, when he suffered he did not threaten." 1 John 4 vs 7-8, 20 "Love one another ... whoever does not love does not know God ... if someone says he loves God but hates his brother, he is a liar."

From the above it seems that the witness of the New Testament is clear. God loved us while we were yet sinners and He calls us to do the same for others. Loving and killing are incompatible. We cannot save anyone's soul by taking his life.

2. The Witness of the Early Church. There is no evidence of any Christian serving as a soldier until about 170 AD and for more than another century most Christians still believed that love was incompatible with killing and therefore with any violence.

3. The Extraordinary Power of Non-Violence. The words "non-violence" and "passivism" are misleading. They give the impression of sitting back, folding one's hand and opting out of the conflict so that someone else has to pay the price.

In fact peace-makers are called to an active engagement

with injustice, a costly involvement in the struggle for true liberation. They simply will not kill while they are involved in that struggle.

Like Jesus, peace-makers are called to forget self, take up their cross every day and follow those bleeding feet on the way to death, Luke 9 vs 24. This takes at least as much courage as is needed by those who are involved in killing, because peace-makers cannot draw comfort from the cold steel of their weapons. And they must still face the naked weapons of those who call themselves "enemies".

The Extraordinary Power of Non-Violent action lies in the way it can transform people. Gandhi called it a programme, not for seizing power, but for transforming relationships so that there would be a peaceful transfer of power. Non-violent resisters say "God changed me by His patience and by the way He confronted my sin. How can I now let Him use me to change this person who calls himself my enemy?" Non-violent action assumes that human nature can be changed.

Non-violent resisters also know that they have to root out their own self-righteousness, pride and violence. They believe that it is not out there, but in "me", that the oppressor must die. They do not then sit in judgement over those who resort to violence. Rather they generate their own creative alternatives or complimentary programmes.

4. The Ineffectiveness of Violence. The problem with violence is that it achieves no change in the long run. Close to two-thirds of all Governments that have assumed power by means of violent revolution, are ousted by the same means. The same applies to pro-government violence. Torture, assassination, detention and armed suppression by some part of a country's population, are never effective in extinguishing a passion for justice. Indeed, this only hardens the opposition, and drives it into counter-violence. The deepest danger about violence is that we are likely to become what we fight in the very act of fighting it.

The problem with violence is that it cannot redeem people. Certainly the ones who are killed, cannot repent. And those who survive have a legacy of guilt, horror and vengeance to cope with. It is doubly difficult then for the survivors to give and to practice peace-making. There is an