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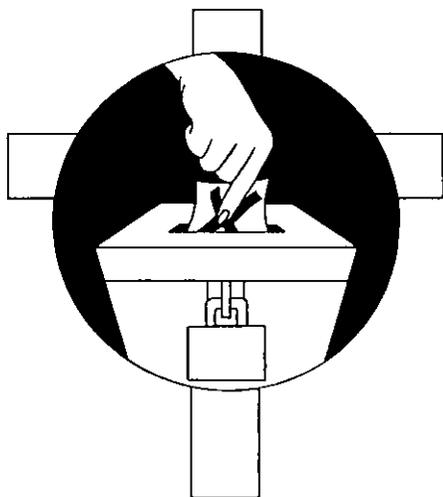
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CHRISTIANS, DEMOCRACY AND THE ELECTIONS

A pastoral letter from leaders of
Natal churches



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Motivation leaflet

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Within the next 12 months South Africa will have its first ever national elections. Everyone of voting age will have the opportunity to help decide who the government will be – a new experience for most of our people.

Because the elections will be a turning point in our history we believe that, as leaders of churches in Natal, we should send all our people a special message about what will be needed if we are to have free and fair elections and a truly democratic society. Our concern is that these elections be conducted in a way that will inspire hope and confidence in democracy.

Much is at stake and the experience of other countries shows that the potential for increased conflict and violence is great. Already more than 7,000 people have died in political violence in Natal since 1987. Many thousands more have been injured or their homes burnt down making them refugees in their own country. One of the key causes of the violence is political intolerance.

Democracy

If we are to overcome political intolerance and end the violence we need to remember that each person is made in God's image and likeness. We all share in a dignity given us by God. That is why the Church believes democracy is the best form of government; it involves participation in government by the largest possible number of citizens, all acting freely according to this God-given dignity. Christians should lead in promoting democracy, an ordering of society closer to what we believe is God's will.

True democracy needs different parties and different points of view. All these parties must be allowed to operate freely, and people must be free to choose between them. Everyone must show all parties the tolerance which Christian love requires. The party which wins has to serve the nation as a whole. Those which lose must play the important role of representing the minority in a democratic way – as the opposition in parliament.

However, multi-party democracy does not of itself guarantee true justice for all. To prevent the misuse of democracy the following are also required:

- respect for basic human rights;
- concern about social and economic rights;
- a just and independent legal system;
- free and open reporting through the media;
- protection and support for the family as the basic unit of society;
- special concern for the poorest;
- respect for different points of view;
- regular elections.

Sometimes, because people are lazy or fearful or do not care about democracy, they allow politicians to behave like dictators without challenging them. Democracy needs to be constantly defended, otherwise it will fail. Christians should be vigilant and play a full part in this defence.

It is, however, not the role of Church leaders to be involved in party politics nor for clergy to stand as candidates in elections. They should not promote particular political parties. But the Church has a right and a duty to speak out on issues of justice, even when this means speaking about political issues.

The Church also has a duty to help people understand democratic values.

Election promises by political parties

People have struggled hard and some have died for the right to vote. It is a right so precious that we have a duty to use it wisely. We need to think carefully when we vote, because it is a serious responsibility.

We should ask questions of the parties and evaluate their policies in the light of gospel values. We should reflect on the promises they make before the elections. If a party promises more than is possible (for example, that they will give everyone jobs and housing at once), then we might decide that party is dishonest. If a party does not show concern about housing and jobs, then we might question that party's compassion for the poor.

Preparing for elections – how we can help

If we are to have free and fair elections, we need to create a climate in which free political activity is encouraged. We affirm the role that local and international monitors can play in creating such a climate. They can help reduce the level of violence, and bring to light cases of intolerance, for example, where people are forced to join a political party, denied access to venues, or in other ways prevented from meeting.

We need many more international monitors than are in South Africa at present. In addition, thousands of South Africans will have to be trained as monitors and electoral officers. This is highly important work and we encourage our people to volunteer for it.

There is another way in which our churches can help to prepare for elections. All those who are of voting age will need identity documents. Our churches can play a crucial role in assisting people to apply for ID's in good time.

The future

As we look to the future, we want to encourage all members of our churches to play a full part in the democratic and free society for which we have long prayed and worked. Any attempt to prevent democracy will increase violence and make the economy worse; in fact we should regard such attempts as contrary to God's will and therefore sinful.

We also need to say that new structures, however just, will not heal our country unless God's love transforms our hearts. The Church invites everyone to such a change of heart.

God's will

In giving us this country, God places its welfare in our hands. As we move towards a democratic future, we are all called to rid our country of poverty and violence so that everyone can live in peace. If we choose a government that cares about all the people, as well as the land and its resources, we will help to bring about God's will for South Africa.

Surely this is what we pray for whenever we say "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." During these critical times let us pray and work even harder for a new South Africa that is just, democratic and peaceful.

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Bishop Ross Cuthbertson **Anglican Bishop Suffragan of Natal, Coastal area**
Bishop Brian Fennell **Natal West District, Methodist Church**
Ms Virginia Gcabasbe **Vice President, South African Council of Churches**
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Bishop Philip Russell **former Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town**
Very Rev John Salt, OGS **Vicar General, Anglican Diocese of Zululand**
Mr Richard Steele **Presiding Clerk, Religious Society of Friends**
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10 June 1993

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