

Protagonist Corner

No Longer At Ease

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Snoopy was sleeping peacefully on top of his doghouse. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Linus came walking by uttering a prophecy from Amos: "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion." "Well," thought Snoopy, "that ruins this day."

I was at ease in the suburbs of Charleston. It was a lazy, sunshiny day. Suddenly, a phone call came—not out of nowhere, but out of the Youth Ministry Office in Atlanta. South Africa seemed a world away from South Carolina; but I was being asked to go with ten other "young" people representing what was then the PCUS.

I was somewhat aware of the social and political situation into which I would be heading. I had seen the film, *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, a damning portrait of the horrible injustices of the apartheid system. I had listened to exiled journalist, Donald Woods, say in 1979 that he predicted large-scale violence within four to five years. (We would be there just in time.) I had memories of riots in Johannesburg's Black township of Soweto; and just before we left, the news media released vivid pictures of a bombing in Pretoria. All things considered, I was inclined to heed the proverbial saying: "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

However, things did not seem so bad once we arrived in South Africa. Customs officials at the Johannesburg airport smiled and waved us on through without even checking our bags. In the airport lobby, we were openly and warmly greeted by both Black and White Presbyterians. It did not even seem strange that our whole group stayed only in the homes of White people. I hardly noticed that Black people disappeared at night. Rather, what impressed me was that the Black people in our group were so graciously received into the White homes, more so than they would have been in much of Charleston.

The first blatant signs of apartheid I observed were at a small service station along a rural road. The restrooms were segregated into "White," "Black," "Asian," and "Colored." But at least all groups had one to use. I remember a hot summer day in Decatur, Georgia, not so terribly long ago when I first noticed a sign over the water fountain at the ice cream shop which said "Whites Only." It was the only water fountain in the shop.

I am convinced that one could (and many do) visit South Africa and come away with the idea that the situation there is not really so bad. One could visit only the magnificent animal parks, the beautiful mountains and beaches, and the modern cities and resorts. But then one would see only a part of the story.

Many South Africans themselves see only a part of the story. As one young Black man at a predominantly White youth conference told me: "These young people here do not have any idea how we live. They don't know what we go through. They've never even been to my neighborhood." The one White

South African who traveled with us over the entire six weeks and 5,000 miles went places he had never been, saw things he had never seen, and was changed by them—as I was—forever.

It is not that South Africans are unaware of problems in their country. They are very much aware that they are living on the edge, the last bastion of White rule in Black Africa. For some of the people, the present situation is too frightening and too out-of-control for there to be any workable solutions. Therefore, like others throughout the centuries living under similar conditions, their Christian faith has turned ever more eschatological. Their focus is only upward.

But to other South Africans, the problems of their country are seen primarily as the work of outsiders, communist agitators. They fail to see, as one White Presbyterian minister put it, “the terrible injustice of this society.” As early Dutch settlers circled the wagons against the Zulu and other tribes, so they still circle the wagons. They are set to fight it out to the end. A great many houses belonging to White people sit behind high walls and locked iron gates. The Dutch Reformed churches in every town are huge stone edifices which resemble fortresses. The clocks in their towers count down the hours to bloody revolution.

Once we began to look around us, the problems of South Africa were obvious. They were not just Black and White, but involved Asians and people of mixed blood too. Injustices stood out literally in living color. Why were they not so obvious to more of the people who upheld the system and called themselves Christians?

Strangely, the more we asked that question, the more the question was turned back on ourselves. American businesses in South Africa and American policies toward South Africa help to uphold the system there. We share in the guilt. But what we saw and heard in South Africa also served to open our eyes further to problems within our own country.

While we were visiting with author-statesman, Alan Paton, in his house, the wise old man asked us a number of questions about America. He got few answers. Finally, he slapped his forehead and said, “What are you doing in this country when you don’t know anything about your own?”

Surely, the problems in the United States are not nearly so blatant. At least the Constitution guarantees the rights of all citizens; and the majority living here *are* citizens. We have come a long way since the 1960s. Yet certain things are not so obvious to some of us who live here and call ourselves Christian.

Maake Mosango, a Black minister in the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa and one with whom I had studied at Columbia Seminary, said to me that when he is in South Africa, because of his education and manner, people often think he is an American. They will treat him well—until they find out he is African. But when he was in America, in White churches, people often ignored him or had little to do with him—until they found out he was African.

When I returned home, I went immediately to meet my family in Montreat at the Youth Conference. As I looked around, it struck me that the conference was practically all White. Then I recalled the words of that young

Black man at the youth conference in South Africa, and I wondered how much we knew about the lives of Black people in America, and how many of us had been into the neighborhoods of Black people, except to pass through quickly, especially at night. Later, on a train trip from Charleston to Rocky Mount, N.C., I became intensely aware of how dramatically the train tracks divided the neighborhoods in each small town. It was easy to tell who lived where.

In the cities of America, Black people have not been forced out as in South Africa. But certainly many White people have fled to the suburbs. The words of a Black minister and professor of mine have haunted me since leaving seminary. He warned me: "Don't get lost in the White suburbs." One thing is sure, I am no longer at ease.