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A Publication of
**THEOLOGICAL
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and public life.

One can perceive among the student participants an ever so slight shift in ecumenism out of our identification with this reality. Perhaps behind our hesitancy and lack of "official" goals is a consensus that something can emerge out of ENTS if anywhere in North American Christian life. *It must.* It is with faith and sweat and blood that the U.S. Church must newly identify itself with God in the waning moments of the 20th century. ENTS must serve this end. The theologically engaged North American ought rightly give birth to a wholly new, wholly continuous church witnessing to the Gospel in all six continents through the pain of the North American heart.

The Kairos Convocation

by Wilma Jakobsen

The time has come. The moment of truth has arrived. South Africa has been plunged into a crisis that is shaking the foundations and there is every indication that the crisis has only just begun and that it will deepen and become even more threatening in the months to come. It is the KAIROS or moment of truth not only for apartheid but also for the church.

These opening words of the Kairos Document, first published in September 1985, have proved to be more than prophetic. Since that time, the crises in South Africa has intensified, and the challenge for the church in its struggle there increases every day. The closing call of the Kairos Document to the "Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world to give the necessary support . . . so that the daily loss of so many young lives may be brought to a speedy end" led to much discussion and positive responses from churches throughout the world. It was this call which led the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (N.C.C.) to sponsor the Kairos Convocation in mid-November 1986.

The aim of the convocation was to focus and reflect on the question of what solidarity with the suffering majority of God's people in the South African population requires of U.S. Christians. With this aim in mind, a diverse group of approximately two hundred people gathered at Chicago Theological Seminary for the Kairos Convocation. A number of South Africans were present, including guest speakers Rev. Frank Chikane of the Institute for Contextual Theology, Dr. Gabriel Setiloane and Rev. Malusi Mpumlwane, both from the Religious Studies Department of the University of Cape Town. Other South Africans included those presently studying in the U.S.A., as well as those exiled from their homeland. Many of the Americans present had been active in South Africa at different times. The ecumenical nature of the conference demonstrated by the wide variety of denominations and perspectives reflected, with about ten percent being evangelical.

The Kairos Document, issued by a large group of South African lay and professional theologians, arose out of a concern to discover how to respond as Christians (especially as pastors in townships) to the intensification of repression, violence and civil war in their country. The document first analyzes and critiques what it terms "state theology," the dominant ideology of the Afrikaner government and church, and

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"church theology," which refers to the tendency of the white English-speaking churches to indulge in much talk but little concrete action. It then explores "prophetic theology," which outlines the direction the churches should move to make an authentic response to the crisis (yet—also kairos—opportunity) which the situation in South Africa presents.

The structure of the Kairos Convocation reflected that of the document, and thus the plenary sessions focused on state theology, church theology and prophetic theology, with each major address followed by responses from a panel reflecting different backgrounds and ideologies. Each session began with expository Bible study by Dr. Thomas Hoyt of the Hartford Seminary Foundation. The Bible passages related directly to the focus of the address, and the studies were a highlight of the conference for many. Romans 13, Revelation 13 and Luke 4:16-21 thus formed the backdrop to the major addresses, and it was exciting to hear how Dr. Hoyt set the passages into their historical context and applied them into the present times.

The plenary sessions were always followed by small group discussions, which picked up on issues raised in earlier presentations. It was here that the issues were debated more intensely, as each group contained such a wide variety of people. It was in these groups that frustrations and feelings of powerlessness were aired. It was also impressive to see the willingness to be self-critical, reflecting what the Kairos Document meant for the U.S. church as well as the South African church. This self-critique often ranked alongside the never-ending "but what are we going to *do*?" questions about South Africa.

This willingness to reflect on the need for justice here in the U.S. as a necessary aspect of support for suffering Christians in South Africa meant that the focus on "church theology" was possibly the hardest to deal with. This is because its critique of "active-in-rhetoric-lacking-in-action" churches hit home for many people present. In her main address on this topic, Dr. Sheila Briggs of the University of Southern California, said church theology is a co-opting of the church by the state; it is a praxis by which the church is not imitating the praxis of Jesus of Nazareth, rejecting the radical demand of Christ to take up the cross. She agreed with the Kairos Document that too often in church theology, reconciliation in South Africa is based on a false perception of reality, because the conflict in South Africa is not based on misunderstanding, but on two opposing realities. Church theology is ultimately aligned with the status quo, unwilling to take the risks of

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radical obedience to Christ, which was difficult to own under this self-critique of many U.S. churches.

In some ways it was easier to explore the concept of state theology because it related more to governments and less to individuals in the church. Dr. Richard Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary placed the Kairos Document firmly in the tradition of orthodox Christianity in developing its position that apartheid is repugnant to the Word of God. Dr. Mouw emphasized the *proper* ministry of government, with the need for a *just* law and a *right* order, not only law and order. He agreed with the Kairos Document that "state theology" is based on an improper understanding of Romans 13, and that the South African government has neglected its nurturing responsibility and failed to do the work of justice. The implications for the U.S. government can be seen in the way it needs to deal with economic apartheid, and the need for a critique of the values of the U.S.

As the conference moved through times of worship and discussion, it could be said that the hallmark of the conference was intensity. The presence and participation of so many deeply committed South Africans deepened this feeling, particularly in the evening worship services. The opening night, when Rev. Frank Chikane spoke of his struggle to maintain his commitment to non-violence under experiences of severe torture, was a powerful example. Another memorable act of worship included testimony from six South Africans about life under the State of Emergency. This service led to a prayer vigil for South Africa and particularly for detainees, which lasted until 4 a.m. This underlying commitment to worship throughout the conference served to increase its impact as an event which was very meaningful to the participants.

As the conference moved on to discuss "prophetic theology" and its challenges, Dr. Cornell West of Yale University Divinity School outlined three necessary components. First, religious vision—of the imago Dei, our fallenness, and the coming of the kingdom to empower us; the Kairos Document gives hope. Second, intelligent historical and social analysis. Third, political action and praxis, to work out the options and alternatives of how to live in our brokenness of circumstances.

There was no doubt in anyone's mind that some kind of action had to be taken by the convocation. A statement was drafted by a small committee, and then distributed to the discussion groups. Opportunity was given for input from the groups, and discussion raged fast and furious about varieties of wording and ideas. Time was a limiting factor as the plenary group also discussed various options for action to be taken up as a result of the convocation. Ideas ranged from planning a mass march of protest in Pretoria, South Africa, in 1988, to convening discussion groups about the Kairos Document, the Kairos Covenant (the statement) and the convocation itself, in local church settings. Although it was not clear that an authorized follow-up could be orchestrated by the N.C.C., it was clear that the individual participants would continue their activism in local settings, using material from the convocation.

The conference closed with a very moving worship service. Participants signed the Kairos Covenant, to a background reading of the covenant made by Joshua in chapter 24. In so doing, they pledged a deep commitment to respond to the Kairos of these times, to be in solidarity with the oppressed in South Africa. The singing of the national anthem of South Africa, Nkosi Sikelel i' Afrika (God Bless Afrika) by this group of committed South Africans, Americans and others, marked the end of a convocation which, although it had its frustrations, yet proved to be intense, inspiring, moving and challenging. It remains to be seen what the outcome will be, but the challenge of the Kairos Covenant is there, for those who

are willing to read it and work towards justice both in South Africa and also the USA.

THE KAIROS COVENANT

An Initial Response of U.S. Christians in Solidarity with the Oppressed in South Africa

This is the time of crises and judgment—a KAIROS—for U.S. Christians.

God speaks to us today. In the prophetic cry of our sisters and brothers in South Africa we hear God's Word.

—It is a call for confession and repentance for our participation in the sin of apartheid; —It is a call to conversion, and we give thanks for it; —It is a call to understand and act in solidarity with all who are bound by the chains of apartheid; —It is a call to speak out and take action against the fears, the rationalizations, the paralysis, the policies, the structures—whether in church or society, whether in the U.S., South Africa, or elsewhere in the world—against all that contributes to continuing oppression.

The grace of God compels us to respond.

The KAIROS of these times judges our nation as well. U.S. administration support of the government of South Africa is mirrored by a domestic policy, grounded in racism, that imposes economic apartheid. Its victims are disproportionately men, women, and children of color. The majority of our people remain insensitive to the poverty and oppression of their sisters and brothers throughout the world and unaware of our complicity in the systems that inflict and prolong their suffering.

Called to a new radical commitment by the KAIROS of our times and in active solidarity with our oppressed sisters and brothers in South Africa, we pledge in the name of Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected:

—to tell the truth about the evil of apartheid in South Africa and work to abolish it; —to offer increased support to the people of South Africa in their own struggle; —to support the peoples of southern Africa who are victims of U.S. and South African political, military, and economic destabilization; —to speak the truth of justice in our churches; —to fight racism, sexism, and economic injustice in our own society; —to challenge our social and political structures to send clear messages to the South African government: we will not as a nation tolerate apartheid, and we will encourage all other nations to stand together against it; —to renounce a self-centered U.S. lifestyle that exists at the expense of blacks in South Africa and other oppressed people in our country and throughout the world.

The hour is late. The judgment of God is at hand. God asks us to love more deeply, work more diligently, risk more courageously. We give thanks to God for this opportunity to help prepare the way for the gift of a reign of justice in which the present signs of death will be swept away and God's new Life will fill us all.