A TRIP TO SOUTH AFRICA

On Saturday, May 16, Dick Gilbert was to have left for South Africa. He planned to return to Rochester on June 4, and preach on his experiences Sunday, June 7. The trip was cancelled because the South African government did not grant visas.

The following statement, adapted from a letter by Frank Anderson, chair of the planning committee, explains the purpose and nature of the proposed trip:

The Genesee Ecumenical Ministries (GEM), responding to an invitation from Bishop Desmond Tutu and the South African Council of Churches, attempted to send a group of Rochesterians to South Africa last summer. Because of alleged procedural difficulties (and other reasons) our visas were refused.

Our friends in South Africa, bitterly disappointed, have aggressively pursued the matter. They have renewed the invitation and have expressed enthusiastic support for the purposes of the trip:

(1) To exchange views and express American Christian solidarity with religious people working for peaceful change in South Africa.

(2) To express our solidarity by bringing with us a small fund for the education of Black youth in South Africa through the special scholarship programs of the South African Council of Churches. (There is no free education for Blacks in South Africa.)

(3) To observe the activities of American corporations -- particularly the Rochester based firms Eastman Kodak and Xerox -- in the Republic of South Africa.

(4) To report back to the Rochester community and churches what we have seen and heard, and to sponsor a series of educational programs to enlighten Rochesterians of the situation in South Africa.

The visitation group planned to visit the Johannesburg area, Durban Pietermaritzburg area, Port Elizabeth-Grahamstown area, Cape Town, and at least one Black Homelands area. They were scheduled to visit Kodak and Xerox installations, the American Chamber of Commerce in South Africa, the Urban Foundation, the South African Council of Churches, the Dutch Reform churches, both black and white, newspaper editors, and the Africa Institute -- groups across the political spectrum.

Members of the Visitiation Group are:

Sumati Devadutt Coordinating, International/Intercultural Programs, M.C.C.
Arthur Dolch Minister, Asbury First United Methodist Church
James Evans Professor, Colgate Rochester
Richard Gilbert Minister, First Unitarian
Robert McKinney Academic Dean, M.C.C.
James Prichard Canon for Urban Ministries, Episcopal Diocese
Vivian Raalston Teacher, Rochester School District
Charles Thurman Minister, Second Baptist, Mumford
Gayraud Wilmore Professor, Colgate Rochester
Mary Wintish Office of Urban Ministries, Roman Catholic Diocese
James Wright Director, Phillis Wheatley Library

The group was chosen by a GEM selection committee which attempted to balance race, sex, denomination, background, and the ability to speak to various community groups and church constituencies upon return.

Over for Dick Gilbert's reaction to the cancellation of the trip--
FROM THE STUDY: AN ILL-FATED TRIP TO SOUTH AFRICA

(Dick Gilbert's "Concern" at the Sunday Service, May 17, 1981)

It is a self-evident truth that I am not now en route to South Africa. Once again that government has thwarted our visit by its obstructive delaying tactics in withholding our visas beyond our intended date of departure.

While South Africa's Foreign Minister R. Botha is being wined and dined in official Washington, eleven American citizens are denied permission to visit his nation. After fourteen months of patient negotiations, we have learned for the second time we are not welcome there. Despite meeting every condition imposed upon us, we are denied opportunity to witness apartheid and efforts to end it at first hand. Despite planned visits to Kodak and Xerox facilities, South Africa has chosen to further isolate itself from the inquiring eyes and ears of the world. Evidently, the power of these corporations to change apartheid is not enough even to gain permission for their stockholders to visit these facilities.

One cannot escape the conclusion the South African government has something to hide. If substantial progress is being made as officially stated, if American corporations are improving the life of Black and Coloured peoples, then surely South Africa has nothing to fear from us. While church groups have access to Cuba, Russia and China, among other nations, this refusal to allow us entry suggests something is rotten in South Africa. What do they have to hide?

Twice I have travelled behind the Iron Curtain and never encountered the delays, the investigations, the deception and dehumanization to which I have been subjected this past fourteen months. It is easier to visit Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia than South Africa. Twice my carefully laid family and professional plans have been scuttled at the last minute by this exercise in psychological brinkmanship.

However, my personal outrage pales beside the suffering of our friends in South Africa. Denied the right to vote, denied family solidarity, denied equal rights of any kind, blacks and coloureds must live daily with far worse frustration. May any self-pity I may harbor, any sympathy you may have for me, be transformed into personal action on behalf of those who suffer far more than I.

Despite the cordial personal contacts we have had with South African officials, there is something ominous about their public actions. Personally, any of these gentlemen would make a charming dinner guest. Each is urbane, intelligent, personable, but apparently this is merely a cover for public repression in South Africa. I am led to the conclusion that I have encountered, in a mild way, fascism with a friendly face.

We were going with an open mind -- not open to the virtues of racism -- there is no compromise on this -- but open to governmental, church and corporate strategies to end it. The treatment we have received does not encourage us to believe those who say democracy will come if we give South Africa time. It is clear the present government has no intention of moving toward one person/one vote democracy. Instead it seems intent on beautifying the window dressing so apartheid will appear benign. There is no way a bandaid can obscure cancer.

Our group will stay together, doing all in its power in this community and others to assist those struggling for justice in South Africa. We will continue to work toward a significant scholarship fund for Black South African students. We will continue to speak the truth as we understand it based on over two years of study, reflection and experience. I invite you to join me in that endeavor.

The Rt. Rev. Desmond Tutu, whom we were to meet Monday evening, was recently notified his passport would be taken after critical remarks about the South African government and the United States. He said he would not take back anything he said. "Having one's passport confiscated is not the worst thing that can happen to a Christian. Even being killed is not the worst thing. For me, one of the worst things would be if I woke up one day and said to people, 'I think apartheid is not so bad.' For me this would be worse than death."

To that I say, Amen.