

One of God's Irregulars: William Overton Johnston and the Challenge to the Church to Divest from Apartheid South Africa, 1954-1971

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William Overton Johnston founded Episcopal Churchmen for South Africa in New York City on June 12, 1956.¹ From then until his death in 1998 he conducted a ministry to help liberate Southern Africa from the apartheid system of white supremacy.

Johnston had little money, staff or modern equipment but he poured his intense energy into that task with total devotion. He lived in poverty but his life was enriched by his support of the oppressed and by his pursuit of justice. He sought to break down the barriers of inequality and privilege in which the Episcopal Church was complicit. He developed an international network of people in the church and out of the church committed to such work. The network was never large but it played an important role in the liberation of southern Africa.

Johnston was the antithesis of the organization man. He was often dismissed as an eccentric loner. Many called him a “character”, implying that he was an ineffective and peculiar outsider. Yet when he died, Archbishop Desmond Tutu paid him this tribute:

[The victory over apartheid] in 1994 would have been totally impossible without the support, the prayers and love and dedication of many in the international community. None could rival Bill for passion and untiring engagement through the Episcopal Church People for Southern Africa...

We are deeply indebted to you, Bill, and your co-workers for justice, peace and freedom. We give thanks and praise to God for this outstanding servant of the Lord. We are where we are today because of him.²

This essay will provide an introduction to Johnston’s life, covering the early years of his work up to the point where he drew back from challenging the Episcopal Church’s bureaucracy on South Africa issues to concentrate on the liberation of the people of Namibia.

Johnston was born on 20 September, 1921 to Robert Evans Johnston and Juliet Overton Alves in Henderson, Kentucky, a small town on the Ohio River. He was the only child of the marriage to survive to adulthood. His family was deeply established in the town. His father owned a taxicab company and considerable local real estate. His grandfather had been mayor.

The Johnston family were members of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. Johnston’s aunt Jeanie had enough influence in the church to persuade the bishop to confirm Will Overton in a private ceremony before he left for overseas service in World War II.

When asked if Henderson was a segregated town, Johnston replied:

Oh, you better believe it was! I guess a fifth of the population was black. In a certain section of town. Very segregated. And Deadsville! What do you do? You go into business; some people became lawyers or doctors. Me, I came up here [to Manhattan.]³

Juliet Alves was eager to write historical novels, for she was proud of her family roots in the Daniel Boone migration west from North Carolina. She was unhappy in her marriage and felt unfulfilled. After summer school at Columbia University, she went back home determined to migrate to Manhattan and enter the literary world. She got a divorce and came to New York with her son in the early 1930s, armed with an introduction to Maxwell Perkins, the editor at Charles Scribner's Sons who had befriended Thomas Wolfe and other southern writers. Perkins helped her publish a volume of poems, an historical novel and a play. She put Bill in a private school in Riverdale, where he encountered black fellow students for the first time. A girl in his class was better than he was in math and science and though her greased hair repelled him, her intellectual ability jolted him and set him thinking. He had been brought up in a racist context in his family and community and had lived in a comfortable cocoon of white privilege.⁴

Although not a good student, Johnston obtained a scholarship to New York University and blossomed in his two years there until he was drafted into the Army. He served as an officer in a regimental rear echelon unit of the First Army, close to combat but never in it. His regiment moved through France, Belgium and Germany. Through out the war, Johnston wrote his mother every day. She was the strong comrade who had helped him leave Henderson, which he continued to regard as "Deadsville."

Johnston resumed his education but could not finish his courses at Columbia University as his money ran out. He took various low-paying temporary jobs but he often had to get loans from relatives to survive. He tried to write for publication but got only rejections. These humiliations may have been the ground in which his lifelong compassion for the poor and vulnerable took root and grew.

At last he found a well-paid job as a traffic manager at A. Plein & Co., a long-established South African shipping firm in trade with South Africa, the Congo and Rhodesia [Zimbabwe]. At the same time, he found an inexpensive apartment, a walk-up at 484 East 74th Street. It was Spartan living but it would do. It had a bedroom, a kitchen and a toilet. One could take a bath in the kitchen by removing the cover that served as a table over the tub. Johnston moved there in 1948 and he died there on the 4th of June, 1998. He lived alone and for a good part of his life he had little social life apart from one-on-one, face-to-face conversations at the office or on the telephone or by fax. But it was not so at first.⁵ The best part of the situation was that the apartment was rent-controlled. He feared that he would die if rent control were to be ended. "People die when they are uprooted" he remarked in 1997.⁶

Johnston found spiritual support in the Church of the Resurrection, a short walk down 74th Street, an anglo-catholic parish with masses and ritual, connections to monastic orders and a sense of worldwide mission. Johnston found all of it inspiring and moving.

Resurrection had a group of aspiring writers called Clares and Friars which Johnston joined to improve his literary skills. His diary for 27 May, 1956 tells of his conducting morning prayer and preaching at nearby Memorial Hospital. As it was Trinity Sunday, Johnston talked about the

Trinity as “perfect unity of many” just as the church is a community “the unity of many struggling to be perfect.”

Concurrently, at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on Morningside Heights, James Pike, the dean, was drawing crowds to think afresh about a theology of social justice. In addition, C. Kilmer Myers, the vicar of St. Augustine’s Chapel on Henry Street, a mission of Trinity Church, Wall Street, was modeling a ministry of inner city engagement with youth on the streets. Myers recruited a cadre of urban priests and laymen to share the work.

In November of 1954 Father Michael Scott came to the United Nations to speak on behalf of the Herero people of South West Africa (Namibia).

As part of the peace treaty ending World War I the Allies had given a mandate to the Union of South Africa to administer the territory as a “sacred trust” under Article 22 of the League of Nations’ Covenant. The Hereros felt that South Africa had brutalized them and stolen their land. They were vehemently opposed to continued South African rule, which they saw as brutal and racist and which they feared would become permanent through annexation. At the request of Frederick Mahareru, their exiled paramount chief, Scott entered South West Africa and met with Chief Hosea Kutako and his council in the Aminuis Reserve. After Scott returned and reported to Chief Mahareru, the Herero chiefs in exile drafted a petition to the United Nations which Scott circulated and had signed by the internal leadership asking that their lands be returned to them. Scott was asked to carry their petition to the United Nations and to be the voice of the Hereros in a venue to which they had had no access. Every year from 1947 on he came and tried to put their case.

In 1950, South Africa banned him as a prohibited immigrant, cutting his access to South West Africa. Scott then made London his headquarters, where, with Colin Legum and Mary Benson, he founded the Africa Bureau to develop “a coherent body of public opinion on African questions.”⁷

Meanwhile, under the leadership of George Houser and others a similar organization was taking shape in the United States which came to be called the American Committee on Africa. Its purpose was to challenge U.S. acquiescence in colonialism in Africa and to support movements for liberation and independence. In November 1954 Lydia Zemba, whom Houser had hired as his first staff assistant, suggested to Bill Johnston that he write to Scott, inviting him to speak at his church.⁸

On a Sunday night, after returning from the Cathedral, Johnston did so. A few days later he wrote in his diary:

It was a day of phone calls. First and most wonderful of all, at ten I answered my extension and this British voice asked if it were Mr. Johnston. I said yes and the reply was “This is Michael Scott.” I stiffened with excitement. I apologized for importuning him and told of my idea to have church people gather to hear him speak. I said that if the Church takes its only too customary attitude of too bad, nothing we can do then it will be forever haunted by its failure to hang on. I said we would like to help and that he was always in our prayers.⁹

Johnston consulted the rector of his church, the Rev. Albert Chambers, who gave permission for Scott to speak to the Clares and Friars. Chambers would not allow Scott to preach or solicit funds because the bishop of Johannesburg had disciplined him for working alongside communists to help natives. Dean Pike told Johnston not to jeopardize Scott's visa, restricted as it was to a small area of Manhattan and the period of the UN General Assembly, by having him speak publicly.

Johnston's excitement at helping Father Scott grew into a lasting friendship and lifelong admiration for his single-minded zeal in supporting the Namibians' quest for liberation;

Michael was a priest, a missionary, representing a people who could not represent themselves. He had been sent by authorities amongst the Namibian people and he plugged away every year at the United Nations. He was under interdict by the U.S. Government at the time. He was a "Comsymp", a communist sympathizer. That is how they tagged him. The paranoid shit [ruled the State Department and other agencies].¹⁰

Other white prophets within South Africa were claiming American and British attention at the time. Alan Paton, a Christian educator and writer had written two powerful novels exposing the tragedy and injustice of the Apartheid system.¹¹

Early in 1956, Paton proposed to send an African student to Kent School in Connecticut, where he had arranged a scholarship for him.

Stephen Ramasodi had been an outstanding student at St. Peter's School, a project of Trevor Huddleston, the prior of a Community of the Resurrection monastery next door to the school in Rosettenville, a white working-class suburb of Johannesburg. The South African government refused Ramasodi a passport on the ground that what he would learn at Kent would be unsuitable if he were to live and work in South Africa. St. Peter's school faced closure since the government now required the teaching of a curriculum which defined the so-called "innate" characteristics of the races. In order to retain government subsidies, schools could educate Africans only for low-level jobs.

Huddleston denounced the apartheid system in a speech to Kent alumni on March 10, 1956 and in a sermon at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on March 18th. Those speeches and the forthcoming publication of *Naught for your Comfort*¹², his searing indictment of apartheid, were his introduction to New York City as he arrived to tell his story and appeal for funds. The American Committee on Africa organized a big dinner. Johnston worked with Kim Myer's group, Urban Priests and Urban Laymen, to get speaking dates for Huddleston, including one at St. James, a parish known for its wealth and socially prominent parishioners. Johnston remembered Huddleston's voice as "golden" and "very telling." Altogether \$10,000 was raised with the backing of the ACOA, *The Christian Century* and other magazines and organizations. Most of the money went to South Africa.¹³ Kent School voted to devote its annual chapel donations to Huddleston's order.¹⁴

Huddleston's visit and the publication of his book opened an opportunity which Johnston seized by calling a meeting of clergy and laity in order to create an organization in support of the Anglican church in southern Africa.

Publicity must come out of this meeting. We are running behind time now. Fr. H's book is out and reviewed and we must ride on whatever wave that arouses....I think we will

start with a prayer by Fr. Chambers... then I will read a couple of lines from Fr. H's book about the church as a revolutionary organism...and then go into practical ways we in the USA can help: books, musical instruments, supplies----leading up to the deeper stuff like Fr. H's suggestions for university scholarship offers from this country and contract clauses for artists, entertainers and athletes visiting SA, going then to possibilities of raising funds and volunteers.¹⁵

Johnston did not want to be president of the proposed organization. He preferred to be secretary because it would be the most active position.

The meeting on June 12th disappointed Johnston. The turnout was slim. Several who had expressed interest did not show up. Four priests came: the rector of Resurrection, Albert Chambers, Sidney Atkinson, a monk of the Order of the Holy Cross, Fred Meisel and an associate of Kim Myers named Newman. Chambers gave permission for the Resurrection's address to be used for mailings. A good part of the meeting was spent on the choice of a name. Johnston preferred a title with Africa and Anglican in it to be more "catholic", but the group chose Episcopal Churchmen for South Africa instead to appeal to both high and low church people.¹⁶

Stella Shepherd was the first president of ECSA and Florence (Mimi) R. LeSavage was the vice-president. No one was employed in the early days of ECSA and every one gloried in being volunteer laborers. In 1957 Oscar J. Callender, Jr. joined the volunteers and became the treasurer. Callender was a member of an historically black parish, St. Luke the Physician. He remained an ECSA board member until Johnston's death. May Dikeman, who had been attracted to ECSA by Huddleston's visit, was a novelist who offered her talents as artist, typist and writer. She later became Johnston's chief aide, confidante and alter ego for some 27 years. Frank Willie, a member of the Resurrection parish and an aide to Governor Nelson Rockefeller, fashioned articles of incorporation and bylaws for ECSA so that it could qualify as a tax-exempt organization.

In 1957, ECSA began sending books and clothing to South Africa. In 1958, it launched a national day of prayer for the church and people of South Africa. Small reminder cards with a prayer for South Africa were distributed to ECSA's network. Johnston remembered this phase of ECSA as "very churchy stuff."¹⁷

The first big challenge to ECSA was the Sharpeville Massacre of March 22, 1960. South Africa had opened fire on 10,000 unarmed Africans who had gathered to demonstrate against the system of passbooks which Africans were required to carry to prove their right to reside and work in so-called "white" areas. The police killed 69 people and wounded close to 200. Many were women and children.

We sprang into action on an old mimeograph machine. We ran off an appeal for the churches in South Africa. It was an old machine. It got sloppy as hell, inking. We sent it out to every name we could, every address we could get, a lot of which came from the Order of the Holy Cross, who supported us.¹⁸

The appeal raised \$20,000 from a great variety of people, including Eleanor Roosevelt, who lived nearby. The money was sent to Alpheus Zulu, then a canon of the cathedral in Durban, to Bishop Ambrose Reeves in Johannesburg, and others to help with the emergency. The South

African government's response to worldwide criticism was to ban the African liberation movements as treasonable.

ECSA urged its members to write letters of protest against the ban. It drew nearer to the American Committee on Africa, whose leadership had organized support for an earlier campaign against South African laws.¹⁹ ECSA assisted Bishop Reeves and Archbishop Joost de Blank in their visits to America to interpret the developing crisis. These visits and Huddleston's earlier one provided a valuable model for mobilizing church people to become concerned and active. For Johnston, Reeves and de Blank were prophetic heroes to be venerated.

In Lent of 1962, ECSA brought Tom Savage, Bishop of Zululand and Swaziland to the United States to visit church people around the country. In the fall, ECSA set up dates for Anthony and Maggie Barker, who conducted a medical mission in Nqutu, Zululand at the Charles Johnson Hospital.

Later in 1962 Johnston set off for South Africa to see for himself the church missions in the "homelands" now gripped by the apartheid regime's tightening hold. In anticipation of his family inheritance, he borrowed the money for the trip from a board member.

No sooner on his arrival had Johnston booked into the King Edward Hotel in Durban than he was off to see an Alan Paton play, *Spoletto*, at Sultan College, an Indian school. At the intermission, Johnston was astonished to discover that the audience was "absolutely, totally integrated."²⁰ There were other surprises in store for him as Johnston toured the diocese of Zululand and Swaziland with its Bishop Tom Savage and his wife, Monica. One evening, he went out with two white parishioners for a gin and tonic. When the time came to leave, he picked up the tab and added a 25% tip for the waiter. His hosts gave him a look that said, "Bad form. Just not done. Spoiling the natives."²¹

In Swaziland, Johnston visited St. Christopher's School, a project of the Usuthu Mission, a circuit of 25 outstations in southern Swaziland, part of Bishop Savage's cure. Three years before, in 1959, the Paramount Chief of the Swazis, Sobhuza II, had donated 250 acres of royal land to the church for the school and had dedicated its foundation. Its purpose was to educate soundly to prepare for junior certificate and perhaps university education.

110 boys were in attendance but the school structures were less than half completed. There would be girls in attendance as well as boys and there would be no racial barriers. Johnston saw it as a "gate to the modern world."²²

On the 5th of November, Johnston was in Cape Town attending the provincial Anglican convention, staying with the suffragan bishop and "on the go all the time." He was interviewed by the *Cape Town Times* and spent the following week with the bishops of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa in their yearly synod. The house of Bishops was still almost completely white with the exception of Bishop Zulu, suffragan of St. John's diocese (Transkei). Following that session, Johnston accompanied Robert Mize, the Bishop of Damaraland, back to South West Africa for the last week of November. Mize was from Kansas, an associate of the Cowley Fathers. In the north there was a diocesan seminary that needed help.

At Christmas, Johnston spent a week with Anthony and Margaret Barker at their hospital in Nqutu, Zululand. It was the highpoint of his trip.

I was summoned at six in the morning to go to the operating theater, where [the Barkers] performed a Caesarean section. Here was this place like a concrete garage, spotlessly clean, very, very... And here were these two committed people: Anthony the surgeon had been in the Royal Navy as a surgeon, a real Royal Navy type. Maggie was quieter, a pediatrician, she would sit at the head of the table, talking in Zulu to the woman, chatting and encouraging.... They were real people, absolutely genuine loving people, [operating] in conditions that were not primitive but damned close to it.²³

Johnston followed the Barkers into the fields to make clinics under the trees, made friends with the superintendent of nurses and the manager of linens and laundry, and on Christmas Day itself, he ladled out beef, potatoes and vegetables.

On his way back to the United States, Johnston stayed in London with Ambrose and Margaret Reeves, whom he regarded as close friends. Archbishop de Blank was in London, too, as a result of a serious stroke and was in the hospital. Johnston went to see him burdened with the knowledge that Ambrose Reeves and de Blank were not talking to each other and he urged them to be reconciled and succeeded in getting them to start talking. Shortly thereafter de Blank returned to South Africa and died from another stroke.²⁴

Johnston was asked to speak at a memorial service for de Blank at the Episcopal Church Center in New York at which he described de Blank as a man who dressed and used authority like a Renaissance cardinal. He meant it as a compliment for though he felt that de Blank was blunt and “kind of lordly,” “he did speak out at certain points and that offended the Boers, probably a lot of Anglicans too.”²⁵

ECSA’s Christmas newsletter in 1963 called de Blank a voice crying in the wilderness for love, understanding and brotherhood. It warned that South Africa had become committed to a policy of total racial separation which would make the country a checkerboard of white and black states. White priests would no longer be able to work in black areas. The church would have to build new churches and train more African priests.

Alpheus Zulu, the suffragan bishop in the Transkei, the first black state, would be responsible for the new work of the diocese of St. John. He had been raising money in the United States to train lay teachers and to provide them with audio-visual equipment. There would be training centers in four archdeaconries.

While the white bishops and priests who had presided over black dioceses in the homeland areas were liberal, their replacement by black bishops and clergy meant the end of a certain paternalism. The Christian Institute, founded by Afrikaner liberals, faced a similar and necessary transformation with the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement in the late 1960s.

Johnston’s conception of how to proceed was unheirarchical. He suggested that an American parish could help one of the 900 poor churches in the Transkei. ECSA would explain how to get in touch with the African congregations. Certain wealthy parishes were already responding to Bishop Zulu’s appeal. St. Mark’s in New Canaan, Ct., had underwritten a Land Rover, and a mission society in Ottawa had volunteered to supply a second for the five diocesan-sponsored hospitals. ECSA had shipped a large quantity of vestments and other liturgical furnishings in the

spring. It had mobilized women in four congregations to create jackets, gowns, shirts, bandages and clothing for the Barkers' hospital in Nqutu.

By the end of its fiscal year (Michaelmas 1963) ECSA had collected more than \$31,000 for the church's work in Ovamboland, Transkei, Zululand, Swaziland, Basutoland and Masasi. The bulk of the money went to schools and hospitals in the "homelands" in which blacks were to be citizens. These homelands were only 13% of the country; in the rest of South Africa blacks would be foreigners. They could be residents in the "white" areas only if they possessed a permit to do so.

ECSA offered two prayers with its report: one for a wise choice to replace Joost de Blank and the other expressing concern for "all who suffer on account of their race, colour or creed" and pledging active support for all who witness to Christ by taking a courageous stand against discrimination and segregation.²⁶

Up until this point, the structure of ECSA had been that of a volunteer society with no staff. Johnston joked that every one was "working class." Inevitably, conflicts arose. Stella Shepherd, the first president, lost an argument with Johnston in which the board supported him and she left ECSA. Clearly, Johnston had become the principal actor in the organization and now became the president. In early 1964 he became its part-time paid director. Mimi LeSauvage, who had lent him the money for his 1962 trip and was his vice president, also left because she felt there would be no role for any one else in the organization if these changes became effective. Her insight was prophetic. ECSA as an organization became Bill Johnston and a small, loyal group who shared his point of view and approved his plans. Later meetings were often held over the telephone.

To carry out this planned shift to paid staff, Johnston left his job with the shipping company and got a job in the promotion department at the Episcopal Church headquarters at 815 Second Avenue. In the morning he would work at an ECSA office provided by Dewitt Mallery, vicar of St. Thomas' chapel of All Saints Church at 229 East 59th Street.²⁷ In the afternoon he would walk to his other work. He explained to his Aunt Helen that the work pays well and he could walk the whole way from home and back. It was perfect he claimed. "I am so busy that such things as travel and location make a lot of difference."²⁸

In 1965 Johnston paid another visit to South Africa and Namibia. He visited Bishop Zulu in the Transkei, Bishop Maund in Lesotho and Bishop Mize in Namibia. When he returned he would continue to facilitate tours and raise funds for their institutions. However, the political context in which Johnston's ministry had been carried out was shifting. The adoption of the concept of mutual responsibility in mission made it hard for ECSA to fit in. ECSA was more a facilitator than a structure with congregations which could exchange missions and ministries. Companion relationships such as those between Chicago and Swaziland/Zululand were developing on their own. ECSA's continued facilitation seemed less necessary than it had been earlier. The American Committee on Africa with a bigger staff and budget was a competing sponsor of tours.

More important, new questions demanded attention. Was financial support for church institutions in the homelands of South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho and Swaziland assisting the segregation of South Africa or should outsiders challenge its ability to create a segregated society by cutting its financial support from western capital?

In March, 1965, Students for a Democratic Society organized a large demonstration in New York City against Chase Manhattan Bank for its financing of apartheid. Asked to help, the Southern Africa Committee of the National Student Christian Federation, formed the previous year at Union Theological Seminary, decided to participate in the project. In the fall, several students at Union circulated a petition asking students, faculty and church agencies in the nearby Inter-Church Center to withdraw accounts from First National City Bank unless certain demands were met. First National City had branches in South Africa and was, like Chase Manhattan, part of a consortium of ten American banks which had provided a \$40 million revolving trade credit to the South African government. The main result of the protest was to confront many people with the issue of American complicity in apartheid. In the summer of 1966, the American Committee on Africa and the National Student Christian Federation hired staff to continue the protest campaign.²⁹

The debate over the issue soon spread to several denominations. In 1967, a committee of Episcopal church officials headed by Bishop William Creighton of Washington recommended that “banks and businesses and industries that express no moral concern for the implications of their involvement in apartheid or who are not using their presence in South Africa as helpfully as the situation permits, be considered inappropriate holders of the invested funds of the church.”³⁰

In December, 1968, the Executive Council of the church had directed its Executive and Finance Committee to examine its investments in companies and banks doing business in southern Africa and apply these criteria: Was the involvement of the company or business significant in the economies of Southern Africa? If so, was it promoting education of Africans and development of family life? Was it improving labor-management relations and collective bargaining, increased skills of the African labor force and integration of Africans into higher levels of leadership? Was it promoting equalization of wage scales, pension provisions and social security, hospitalization and other benefits? Was it breaking down the pass law system and other restrictions?³¹

This approach, which called for gradual amelioration of labor conditions for Africans employed by US firms, was not designed to destroy apartheid but to make improvements that would better the lives of employees of American companies, who represented a small fraction of foreign direct investment. It foreshadowed the Sullivan Code, which became the standard response of corporations to challenges for divestment mounted by churches, universities and others in the 1970s.³² How such a code could apply to the direct financing of the apartheid system’s international trade was not apparent.

Johnston was following these developments closely. He had been a member of the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity from its founding in Raleigh, N.C. in 1959. He was convinced that the bank campaign started by activists was worthy of full support. In preparation for the hearing of the bankers set for March 23, 1969, Johnston prepared a detailed argument calling on church members and institutions to withdraw deposits and investments from all institutions benefiting the racist regimes of southern Africa and to re-invest in African areas where racist determinations did not obtain.³³

In collaboration with ESCRU, Johnston developed a plan to turn the coming hearing into a public event with participation by a wide spread of witnesses. He submitted a list of 30 people who were “deeply involved and fully knowledgeable” and proposed a set of questions to be asked of the bankers. The hearing must be open to all who wished to attend. His purpose was to open “the poorly known situation in Southern Africa to public scrutiny.”³⁴

The subcommittee of the Executive and Finance Committee making the arrangements did not agree to this plan. It would give an hour to each of the three banks with which the Episcopal Church did business and an hour to three South Africans in exile to present their views: C. Edward Crowther, the deported bishop of Kimberly and Kuruman; Elizabeth Franklin, formerly an official of the Defense and Aid Fund; and the Rev. Gladstone Ntlabati, a Methodist minister who headed the Chief Albert Luthuli Fund in Atlanta. Ntlabati was the only black witness called. The hearing would not be open to the church public because the bankers had not agreed to such an arrangement.

Johnston was outraged. He fired off a telegram to the Presiding Bishop protesting the closed hearing, demanding a full transcript and asking, "Whose rights hold precedence, the banks or the people's?"³⁵

Refused entrance to the official hearing, ESCRU, the Episcopal Peace Fellowship and ECSA invited its constituencies to attend a "Churchmen's Open Hearing" in the lobby of 815 Second Avenue to coincide with the hearing on the ninth floor.

As the bankers arrived, they were forced to pass through a gauntlet of church activists holding placards denouncing banks that profit from apartheid. Johnston was delighted with the drama:

The Church officials, wary of any demonstration, particularly after the recent appearance on the church scene of Mr. James Forman,³⁶ expected almost anything, even taking the precaution of locking up certain files in upper offices.

But their fears were groundless. We were a peaceable lot, ... some 35 to 50 priests, students, press reporters, lay people from all walks of life... One after another addressed the assembly... overshadowed by the giant ceramic mural of the world, its continents, seas, mighty cities, its great whales.³⁷

Johnston orchestrated a testimony of dissent from the church's waffling on its responsibility to withdraw its funds from the banks which financed the apartheid regime.

Robert Chapman, an African American priest on the staff of the National Council of Churches attacked the Executive Council's presumption that only a "significant" involvement in making credit available was worth debate. He argued that a limited degree of involvement in sin is to be condemned when it is conscious and deliberate, premeditated and calculated. "The Church, therefore, is compromising her Christ."

The author of this essay, representing ESCRU's committee on investments, called on the church to use its moral values in evaluating its investments in corporations doing business in and making loans to South Africa. This would mean breaking down the traditional partition between values and investment built by institutional money managers for the church. Timothy Smith spoke about his participation in the efforts of Union Seminary students to confront the banks and the churches. Hidepo Hamutenya and Gottfried Geingob, UN representatives of the South West African People's Organization [SWAPO], spoke of the brutal domination of their country by South Africa. Elizabeth Landis, an expert on South African laws, focused on the struggles at the United Nations to end South Africa's control and administration over Namibia and to bring independence and majority rule to the territory. The Rev. Metz Rollins, director of the National

Conference of Black Churchmen, urged that faithful church people should become revolutionary in dealing with the Church establishment.

It was a short exposition of the growing demand for divestment of church funds from banks and other businesses which continued to do business in South Africa. Many of those who spoke became prominent in that effort. Landis became a close ally and supporter of Johnston, particularly while she was serving as legal counselor to Sean McBride, when he was UN commissioner for Namibia. Tim Smith became the director of the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility, the chief channel through which church investment committees could work to challenge corporate practices. Jennifer Davis, who was in the attending crowd, would later become the director of the American Committee on Africa. A South African in exile, she suspected that Johnston was “Special Branch”, i.e. a covert South African intelligence agent.³⁸

One person who did get to speak upstairs was George Houser, the director of ACOA. He stressed the huge influx of foreign capital that paralleled the intensification of apartheid laws and political repression. Individuals and organizations could show their disapproval of the white government’s actions by closing their bank accounts without harming the United States financially.

The bankers refused to speak at the open hearing except for John Meyer, CEO of Morgan Guaranty, which was the manager of the church’s trust investments. Meyer confessed to be uncertain whether the consortium trade credits could be used to buy armaments. He conceded that it could also be used in South West Africa.

At 2 o’clock the crowd in the lobby was invited to join the hearing on the 9th floor, where the South African exiles and Bishop Crowther were telling their experiences with apartheid and advocating action. Ntlabati said the liberation movements had become the confessing church while the institutional church in South Africa had become demonic. He urged the church to identify with the liberation movements and to fund organizations like ACOA, ECSA and the Luthuli Fund and to withdraw from the banks which lent money to the apartheid regime.

At 4 p.m. the committee began its deliberations. At 6 p.m. they had reached a unanimous decision with one abstention. They found that the banks’ involvement in South Africa was not positive in promoting the welfare of Africans in the areas of life specified in the 1968 resolution. It directed the Treasurer to terminate the Executive Council’s relationship with the banks if they continued to participate in the line of credit.

It was a surprising victory, which Johnston hailed as one of the most decisive moments in recent Church history.

Unwittingly the Executive and Financial Committee, acting in response to pressures in our nation, both specific and general, and with perhaps equal measures of compunction and conscience, parted company with their peers in the Anglican Church of South Africa, for whom bank withdrawals are not their glass of sherry. The door is at least ajar for our Church to reach the restless, desperate, partially submerged Church in South Africa which is composed of young clergy and laity, black, brown and white- a majority in numbers, a fraction in power. The question is: Will our Church now begin to crystallize its thinking and chart a strategy consistent with reality? Can they embark upon a path that

admits of the revolutionary? Revolution is needed in South Africa. Revolution is what is coming there.³⁹

In the event, the church never had to cut its relationships with the banks. South Africa advised the banks it no longer needed the consortium trade loans. Johnston assessed the situation in this way:

... there is little hope of changing the powers that be, except by infiltration. Confrontation is reaching the point of no return, and I get the distinct impression they are digging in. I heard Lindley Franklin [treasurer of the national church] at a communion breakfast Sunday, at which he expressed joyous relief at the South African government's dropping of the consortium loan. He did say Council would take up other aspects of church involvement with banks and businesses in SA at its meeting next week.⁴⁰

Not only did Johnston see that confrontation was no longer worth pursuing; according to Kim Dreisbach he was even ready to drop the investment question.⁴¹ Both Dreisbach and Johnston believed that the national church would shelve the guidelines developed in 1968 and reduce the issues to the plane of feasibility and technicalities. Johnston, however, retained his ability to see the Presiding Bishop and put personal pressure on him.

On the morning of 20 January 1970, Johnston interviewed Hines to try to learn what the next steps would be. Hines was "obviously pre-occupied" and Johnston had to carry the conversational ball. Hines was prepared to appoint an Ad Hoc Committee to consider whether the Trust Funds Committee was correct in deciding that the social criteria for investments in South Africa adopted in 1968 were "unworkable."

Johnston expressed dismay and repeated his feeling that the situation in Southern Africa was grave. He urged Hines to let other voices rather than simply those of bankers and businessmen have a say in what was to be done.⁴² He felt that the whole matter had been not only set back but reduced to the plane of feasibility and technicalities, rather than the moral and philosophical. He sounded out Lindley Franklin, the treasurer, reassuring him that he knew how much of the church's income was tied up in companies doing business in South Africa (one third of the portfolio) and he appreciated how much church finances needed the income.

Meanwhile, ECSA and ESCRU planned to extend the victory of 1969 into the field of the Church Pension Fund by running an alternative slate of trustees at the General Convention in Houston to be held in October 1970. On 11 February the author of this essay wrote to Bishop Hines on behalf of ESCRU asking that a member of the society be appointed to the proposed committee and that the society be invited to participate in its deliberations.⁴³

Shortly thereafter, Bishop Hines invited Robert Potter to chair an ad hoc committee of nine persons including Karl D. Gregory, a black consultant, the economist Peter Drucker, Scott Paradise from the Boston Industrial Mission, Marian Clark of Baltimore, John Stires, a student leader and myself to consider the social criteria for the church's investments in companies doing business in South Africa. Potter was a partner in Patterson, Belknap and Webb, a law firm representing Dow Jones and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Johnston immediately wrote to me to accept the post:

Looking at the line-up, yours is the sole firm and guiding voice which can and will present consistently the case for judgments based on criteria other than prudent financial gain. You have the grounding, the knowledge and the commitment. You will probably be alone in many arguments and it is obvious you will be overwhelmed in the end result. But you are the pillar around which a minority report can be built; this expression is needed lest the church's bold move into the Southern Africa business ends with a final bleat.⁴⁴

In joining the committee, I had the continuing support of Johnston and felt accountable to him and to others in the anti-apartheid movement. Johnston continued to broadcast appeals to lobby Bishop Hines for a larger and more diverse committee.⁴⁵

Much of the movement for social change in the church and in the country fell apart as the Sixties ended. ESCRU did not survive into 1971. As a coalition of blacks and whites raising racism issues, it ceased to exist after the Houston Convention. The reasons for its demise are open to debate. One factor was the urgent desire among blacks that they speak for themselves without mediation by whites. Whites should raise issues of racism in the white community. Johnston was upset at the six candidates for the Pension Fund put forward by the Union of Black Clergy and Laity because they were "the same old thing." Bob Chapman, whom ECSA favored, would not run against the choices of the black body if he was not chosen by it.⁴⁶

The Ad Hoc Committee began its work by commissioning the Council on Economic Priorities to conduct research into the corporate activity in Southern Africa of 31 major corporations. This study was completed and filed on 15 September, 1970.⁴⁷ It concluded that U.S. corporate activity supports apartheid in that it must abide by the law and order imposed by the racist system. The Committee therefore agreed to file a resolution asking General Motors to withdraw from South Africa.

Suffice it to say that the Executive Council, after heated debate, adopted the Committee's recommendation to authorize the filing of a resolution calling on General Motors to cease manufacturing and operation in South Africa. The Presiding Bishop appeared and spoke at the annual meeting of the corporation in May, 1971. He said he was convinced that the preservation of capital and income would best be served by this action in which moral and business considerations are inextricably intertwined. Thulani Gcabashe, a lawyer and the son in law of Chief Luthuli, former head of the African National Congress, supported the Episcopal position. The highlight of the day, however, was when the Rev. Leon Sullivan, a GM black director, descended from the dais to speak for the resolution. The national press gave the event major coverage. Although the resolution got only 1.29% of the vote, it was evident that the struggle against apartheid had entered a new phase.

Hines' statement drew more protest mail than any church action since his installation. Nevertheless, it was the opening of a re-examination of investment portfolios by churches and foundations in the light of social goals.⁴⁸ The church had developed a bureaucratic way to consider the points that Johnston had been raising. He saw the new committee as stacked against the radical position he espoused. He moved on to challenge a diocesan eviction of tenants on Morningside Heights and to concentrate on South Africa's oppressive administration of the Namibian people.

By his relentless insistence on the relevance of moral principle to the way in which church funds were invested, Johnston played an important role in transforming the debate about church investment policies from questions of financial prudence to a broader consideration of the effects and morality of investment in a country whose official policy and structure were based on white supremacy. Huddleston's insistence that apartheid was evil and revolt against it was inevitable struck home in Johnston and became the touchstone of his work. He worked to bring about a South Africa based on the unity of all its races and on the real strength of moral principle.

The break-through decision by the Episcopal Church to challenge apartheid using moral criteria for investments began a movement that ran through denominational bureaucracies, universities, municipal and state pension funds and purchasing departments. This kind of pressure in turn helped persuade the financial community to face the fact that investments in South Africa were unsafe and unwise until white supremacy came to an end. The rolling tide of disinvestment proved to be a critical factor in bringing the apartheid regime to negotiate a transition to democratic, multi-racial rule in South Africa.

Johnston would have been too modest to claim credit. He preferred to play a role as a gadfly and prophet to the church structures. He was not gifted as an organizer. But like Amos, he spoke the word that the Lord gave him and it had a life of its own.

¹ "One of God's Irregulars" is borrowed from the title of a book by Douglas V. Steere, *God's Irregular, Arthur Shearly Cripps. A Rhodesian Epi. (SPCK,1078)*

² E-mail to Jennifer Davis 13 July, 1998 The name of Johnston's organization was originally Episcopal Churchmen for South Africa. It was changed to the more inclusive form that Archbishop Tutu used in the 1970s.

³ Interview with Johnston, 7 April,1997

⁴ Letter to the author from May Dikeman, 25 March, 2001. Johnston's mother described Harlem as "Niggertown" when she and her son disembarked at 125th Street in Harlem. They lived on Morningside Heights adjacent to Harlem on the west. She said Johnston had been brought up on Black Sambo.

⁵ A parishioner at the Church of the Resurrection who had known Johnston in the 1950s and 60s told the author that Johnston often had parties at his apartment. She said he was "eccentric but lots of fun." Conversation with Barbara Q. Myers,27 January 2002

⁶ Interview with the author 7 April, 1997

⁷ See Michael Scott, *A Time to Speak*, (New York, Doubleday 1958) 216-233 cf 241 and 269.

⁸ See George Houser, *No One Can Stop the Rain*,(New York., Pilgrim Press, 1989),64

⁹ Diary of Bill Johnston, 30 November,1954

¹⁰ Interview with Bill Johnston, 7 April 1997

¹¹ Alan Paton, *Cry the Beloved Country* (New York, Scribners,1948); *Too Late the Phalarope* (New York, Scribners, 1953)

¹² Trevor Huddleston, *Naught for Your Comfort* (New York. Macmillan, 1956),

¹³ Interview with Bill Johnston, 7 April, 1997. Cf Houser, 65. Huddleston, 119. *N.Y. Times*, 19 March, 1956.

¹⁴ *N.Y. Times*, 27 February, 1956.

¹⁵ Diary of Bill Johnston, 27 May, 1956.

¹⁶ The name stayed in this form until the end of the 1970s when it became Episcopal Church People for Southern Africa to reflect a growing awareness of the need for gender inclusivity and the shift to a more regional focus. In the organizing meeting Johnston preferred *Anglican* because it was more catholic but feared it would scare off low church people. He preferred *African* to *South African* because he saw the whole continent as involved in and inter-related to apartheid. Diary entry 1a.m. 13 June 1956

¹⁷ Interview with Bill Johnston, 7 April, 1997

¹⁸ Interview with Bill Johnston, 7 April, 1997

¹⁹ George Houser, who was then the Executive Secretary of the Committee of Racial Equality (CORE),and a number of civil rights leaders set up a group to support the Defiance Campaign of the African National Congress and affiliated organizations in 1952. Houser, *No One can stop the Rain*, (New York, Pilgrim) 10-19.

²⁰ Interview with Bill Johnston, 8 April, 1997

²¹ Ibid. Theater was able to avoid the strictures of “separate development” by organizing clubs which could set their own membership rules. The Market Theater in Cape Town, for example, was able to show Athol Fugard plays before integrated audiences because it was organized as a club.

²² See ECSA single sheet promotion *St. Christopher’s School of the Usuthu Mission*, 1963

²³ Interview with Bill Johnston, 7 April, 1997. The Barkers were missionaries of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (USPG) in England. They were featured in a documentary film by Cosmas Desmond, a Roman Catholic priest, called *The Discarded People*.

²⁴ Second interview with Bill Johnston, 7 April 1997

²⁵ Ibid. For a balanced account of de Blank’s confrontational style see John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1979) de Blank conceived the idea of the Order of St. Simon of Cyrene with a cross designed by Canon West of the New York cathedral. He invested Johnston and Russell Brown, the president of a liquor company who had generously supported the church in South Africa at an early mass at St. Mary the Virgin church in New York some time between 1960 and 1963

²⁶ See ECSA’s Christmas, 1963 bulletin for further details... The words of the statement of concern and the pledge were taken from a statement of the Anglican Congress in Toronto in that year.

²⁷ ECSA had had an earlier office at St. Matthew and St. Timothy at West 84th. After its stay at the St. Thomas chapel, ECSA moved to the parish house of the Church of the Ascension at 14 West 11th Street. Its last home was at 339 Lafayette Street, a low rent walk-up office in a building occupied by other peace and justice organizations and owned by the A.J. Muste Foundation.

²⁸ Letter to Helen Johnston, 8 March, 1964 The actual amount of his pay was \$3.00 per hour, which Johnston later denigrated scornfully in his interviews with the author in April, 1997

²⁹ The statements made about ECSA’s emerging difficulties are based on correspondence and conversations with May Dikeman in March, 2001. For a full account of the beginnings of the bank campaign see William Minter, *Action Against Apartheid in Reflections on Protest: Student Presence in Political Conflict*, ed. Bruce Douglass (Richmond, John Knox Press 1968) The University Christian Movement (UCM) succeeded the National Student Christian Federation and then ceased to exist by 1968.

³⁰ Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity press release, 3 January, 1969

³¹ The text of the resolutions adopted 11 and 12 December, 1968 will be found in the ECSA bulletin for Lent, 1969 at page 8. They had been worked out by a committee headed by Bishop William Marmion of Southwest Virginia.

³² The Rev. Leon Sullivan developed the code following a divestment challenge led by the Episcopal Church, the American Baptist Convention and others at the annual meeting of General Motors Corporation in May, 1971. Sullivan had developed training institutions for black youth in the United States. As a member of the GM board, he supported the resolution for divestment with a vigorous floor speech but was persuaded to develop a more moderate approach by corporate boards facing divestment challenges. By 1981, he had changed his mind as he saw that the code had done little to end or change the apartheid system.

³³ Johnston suggested Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland as countries where investment could be made “without racist determinations”. These states were members of a customs union controlled by South Africa. The enterprises in those countries were mainly South African companies. The working conditions there were better marginally. The political states were black ruled but under severe pressure from South Africa. Thus Johnston’s suggestion seems a bit naive in hindsight.

³⁴ See *Render Unto God*, ECSA bulletin, Lent, 1969, 2-7

³⁵ Chase Manhattan was represented by William Beatty, a vice president; Morgan Guaranty by its Chief Executive Officer, John M. Meyer, Jr. and First National City by three officers, whose names and titles are not known to the author.

³⁶ James Forman was the spokesperson for a Black Manifesto, which demanded reparations from the churches of America on behalf of the National Black Economic Development Conference. ESCRU backed the concept of reparations in principle and issued guidelines for Bishops anticipating confrontations with groups seeking economic redress. See ESCRU news releases 23 June and 6 July 1969 Forman led a delegation to 815 Second Ave. to deliver the manifesto to Bishop Hines. Hines was not in New York and therefore Forman met with Bishops Bayne and Mosley and demanded a \$60 million contribution as well as 60% of the church’s annual profits for BEDC. They politely refused. George H. Shattuck, Jr., *Episcopalians and Race*, (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 188-190. Shattuck surprisingly does not deal with the church’s struggles over divestment or the adoption of social criteria in regard to South Africa.

³⁷ ECSA Special Report, *Church Takes a Decision on South Africa/Banks* August, 1969

³⁸ Davis had recently come to the United States. As a political activist, she was well aware that the South African government had infiltrated spies into the anti-apartheid movement, many of which were undetected for a number of years.

³⁹ A complete report on the event of 23 May 1969 is contained in the ECSA Special Report, *The Church makes a Decision*, which was published in August, 1969

⁴⁰ Letter from Johnston to the author, 3 December, 1969

⁴¹ Letter from Kim Dreisbach to the author, 15 January, 1970

⁴² Letter from Johnston to the author, 20 January, 1970. The Executive Council had mandated the appointment of an ad hoc committee to consider the feasibility of applying the criteria on 25 September 1968.

⁴³ Letter to Bishop Hines from the author, 11 February 1970

⁴⁴ Letter from Johnston to the author, 4 March 1970

⁴⁵ Letter to ECSA constituency 30 May, 1970; Johnston's letter to Bishop C.J. Kinsolving, 30 June 1970

⁴⁶ See Shattuck, 204-205 Letter from Johnston to the author 1 July 1970.

⁴⁷ *U.S. Corporate Activity in Southern Africa, An Analysis of 31 Major Corporations*, The Council on Economic Priorities, 15 September, 1970. The author was one of the founders of this organization.

⁴⁸ *Social Responsibility the Church and Corporate Power*, a proposed report of the Committee on Social Responsibility in Investment of the Episcopal Church, February, 1972, draft in author's possession.