

# The James Backhouse Lecture 2001

## Reconciling Opposites: Reflections on Peacemaking in South Africa

Review by Trish Johnson, Australia Yearly Meeting

When political power in South Africa was transferred peacefully in 1994 to the new Government of National Unity, people were amazed at the lack of violence and the generosity and moral stature of Nelson Mandela. Once a political prisoner, now a president, he embraced all South Africans. For many of us who had watched the performance of white Nationalist politicians over the years and thought we knew the inflexible and dominant Afrikaner character, there was gratitude that they too had been willing to negotiate a peaceful settlement. How do people cross boundaries to reconcile such differences?

This 2001 Backhouse Lecture contains the reflections of a man who traversed vast distances in his own life, belief and action, and assisted a nation to do so too.

*Reconciling Opposites: Reflections on Peacemaking in South Africa* is a fascinating account of the inner journey and outer role of Hendrick van der Merwe, Afrikaans conservative turned Quaker peacemaker, and his five decades of peacemaking in South Africa. Many opposites are explored in the life and times of this white South African: Calvinist Boer and liberal Quaker; black versus white; justice versus peace; coercion versus negotiation; partisan or impartial intervention; forgiveness versus retribution; private convictions and public statements.

Friends attending the lecture at Australia Yearly Meeting were grateful for the gift of Hendrik van der Merwe's presence, given his frail health. His humility and humanity and humour gave a glimpse of how this

slight man built trust with opposing enemies and helped to bring them together.

The lecture highlights Quaker history in South Africa, the visit of James Backhouse and the political action and compassionate care of Quakers during the Anglo-Boer war when the first concentration camps, set up by the British, killed 26,000 women and children. In this period, the Quakers "championed the underdogs"; in the 1950's they did so again to support the blacks against Boer oppression. In the 1970's, Hendrik van der Merwe found himself independently on the same path as Quakers working against apartheid, economic inequality and political injustice. Since he joined Friends in 1974 Hendrik has been active in South African and international Quaker life.

Hendrik van der Merwe describes his own transition from "conservative Afrikaner to cosmopolitan African." As a ninth-generation Afrikaner the story of his spiritual and intellectual journey to academic, Quaker and peace broker is fascinating. As Director of the Centre for Intergroup Studies in Cape Town from 1968 to 1992, Hendrick van der Merwe pioneered conflict resolution practice and science. He was instrumental in facilitating communication between major political groups in South Africa, including the National Party, the African National Congress, the Inkatha Freedom Party and the Afrikaner Vryheidstigting.

The chapter on ethnicity describes the author's "own escape from ethnic politics," and the complex task of reconciling ethnic and racial groups in South Africa, including

the difficulties of being European Quakers in an African society.

Hendrik van der Merwe affirms that of God in everyone, but "is not blind to the presence of evil." As observers rather than victims of discrimination and violence, we may prefer peace to justice, forgiveness to retribution. Who are we to judge the choices of those who have suffered? Hendrik van der Merwe contrasts the magnanimity of Nelson Mandela and his willingness to forgive, with Winnie Mandela and Steve Biko's widow who want punishment for the perpetrators before they can move on. Is punishment necessarily an evil thing? May it be an integral part of restitution? The ongoing tension between needs for peace and reconciliation and the demands for retribution and justice is a recurring theme of the lecture.

The final chapter "Challenges in the new South Africa" challenges all Quakers. Hendrik writes, "while retribution is commonly seen as negative and forgiveness as positive, I argue that they are not mutually exclusive or irreconcilable opposites, but form part of the continuum of responses to prior injustices... Punishment as retribution is the paying of a debt to one's fellow citizens."

Hendrik van der Merwe makes a plea for restitution, the synthesis of retribution and forgiveness which allows a society to heal itself and face the future. Sorry is not enough.

*(Friends will be sorry to hear that Hendrik van der Merwe died recently.)*