FAITH IN ACTION:
The campaign for sanctions

When Desmond Tutu was appointed as General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches in 1978, it was more representative of South Africans than parliament – its member churches had more than 12 million adherents, while parliament represented only four million whites.

Motivated by a compassion for those who suffered, Tutu came to office determined to use the churches' resources to fight for the oppressed. His first target was forced removals and his weapon of choice was peaceful – economic sanctions aimed at destroying apartheid.

THEME THREE

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TOP LEFT
The government began to force black people who lived in so-called 'white' rural areas to move into separate 'homelands' for each ethnic group. Forced removals was one of the most shocking and inhumane aspects of the apartheid system. The women's anti-apartheid group, the Black Sash, tirelessly protested against the effects of apartheid legislation – particularly forced removals.

© Black Sash

BOTTOM LEFT
Sophiatown, where Tutu had lived in a church hostel as a schoolboy, was a suburb of Johannesburg destroyed under the Group Areas Act of 1950. By the mid-1970s, ten homes or institutions dear to the Tutu family – from the place of Tutu's birth to where he and Leah had studied, as well as the church in which they were married – had been taken over or demolished by the apartheid state.

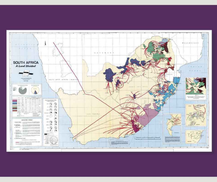
© Paul Singleton CR

TOP RIGHT
In many of the areas to which people were relocated, such as this one in the Ciskei Bantustan, the only facilities the government provided were toilets. When Tutu visited the Ciskei, he was deeply angered by how people were left to fend for themselves in remote rural areas, far from jobs and struggling to feed their families.

© Paul Weinberg

BOTTOM RIGHT
At Zweledinga in the Ciskei, Tutu was profoundly moved by a young girl's account of her family's plight. He and other church leaders responded with a campaign against forced removals. This included holding overnight vigils with communities facing removal the following day, such as this one at Mogopa in the current North West province in 1983.

© Gille de Vlieg/Africa Media Online

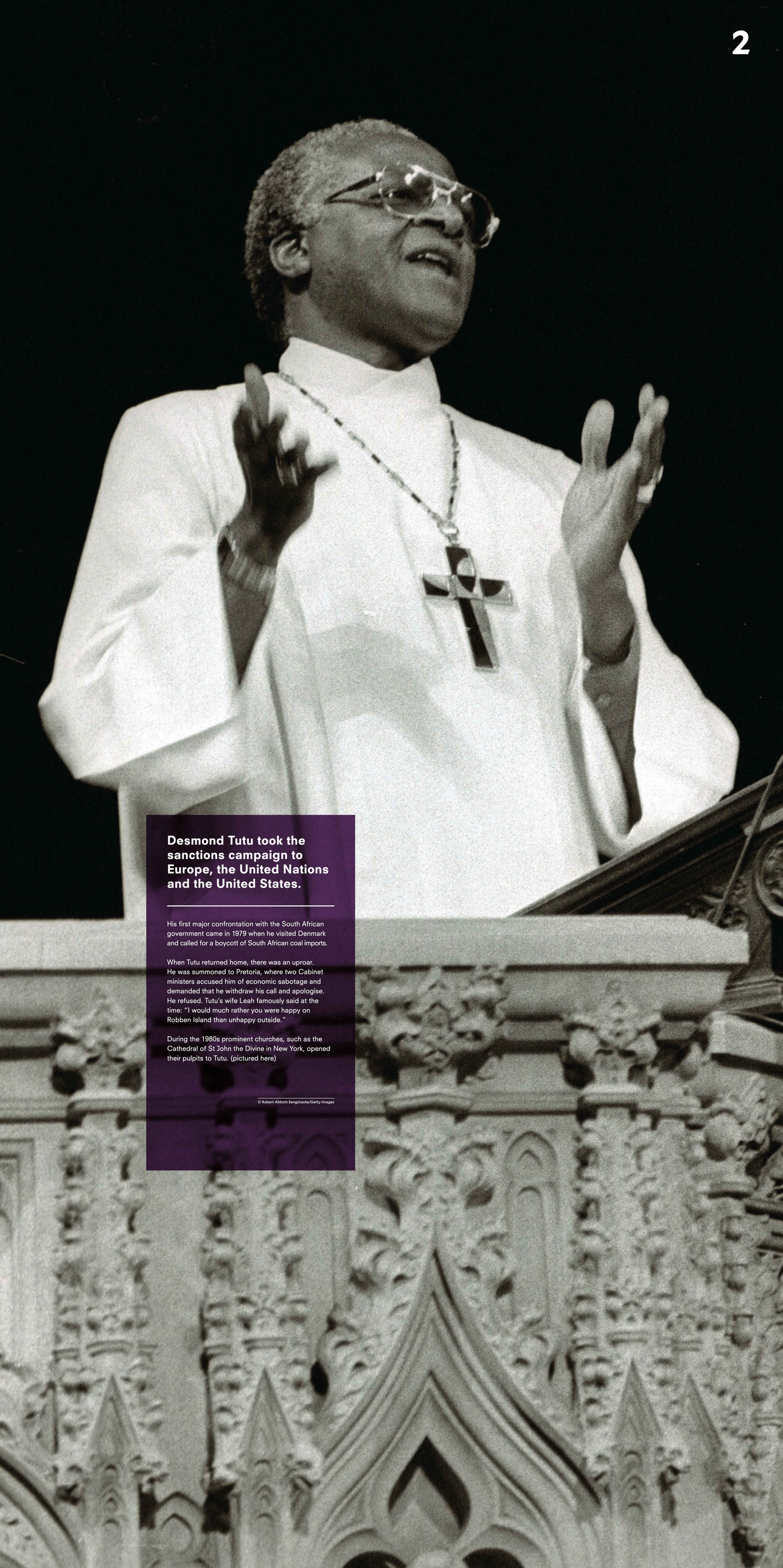


The Black Sash published this a map in 1982 showing the dramatic impact of the homeland policy and the extent of the forced removals that followed. Between 1960 and 1994 over three and a half million people were deliberately uprooted from their homes and their livelihoods, and plunged into poverty and hopelessness in the barren homelands.

© Bantustan

‘Does your mother get a grant or a pension or something?’
She said, ‘No.’
And then I said, ‘Well, what do you do for food?’
She said, ‘We borrow food.’
I said, ‘What happens if you can’t borrow food?’
And she said, ‘We drink water to fill our stomachs.’

DESMOND TUTU
Account of a conversation with a young girl in Zweledinga



Desmond Tutu took the sanctions campaign to Europe, the United Nations and the United States.

His first major confrontation with the South African government came in 1979 when he visited Denmark and called for a boycott of South African coal imports.

When Tutu returned home, there was an uproar. He was summoned to Pretoria, where two Cabinet ministers accused him of economic sabotage and demanded that he withdraw his call and apologise. He refused. Tutu's wife Leah famously said at the time: "I would much rather you were happy on Robben Island than unhappy outside."

During the 1980s prominent churches, such as the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York, opened their pulpits to Tutu. (pictured here)

© Robert Abbott Sengstacke/Getty Images

“I will always be haunted by that little girl in Zweledinga and I pledge myself to do all I can to see an end to what I believe to be utterly diabolical and unacceptable to the Christian conscience.”

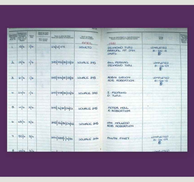
DESMOND TUTU
Letter to Prime Minister PW Botha, 5 July 1979

TOP
In a letter to PW Botha, who succeeded BJ Vorster as prime minister, Tutu said “I cannot avoid speaking about the *dumping* of people as if they were things. I cannot see how such treatment is consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” Botha was unmoved. He strongly defended his government’s policy and said the advantages of removals outweighed the disadvantages.

© Gallo Images/Business Day/Robert Botha

BOTTOM
Tutu’s support for sanctions as a response to forced removals was the most controversial stand he took in the struggle against apartheid. The SA Council of Churches was at first divided. But the Methodist leader, Rev Peter Storey, introduced an idea which achieved consensus in the Council’s executive: that Tutu was entitled to speak as a prophet. This meant that, like the biblical prophets of the Old Testament, he did not need a mandate.

© Gallo Images via Getty Images/Rand Daily Mail/Noel Watson



In calling for sanctions, Desmond Tutu was risking a minimum of five years in prison under the Terrorism Act of 1967. The government, unsure of securing a conviction in court, confiscated his passport instead. Security police began secretly monitoring his movements, his meetings and his letters. They recorded details in this logbook at their John Vorster Square headquarters in Johannesburg.

© John Allen Collection

The sanctions campaign turned Desmond Tutu into a hated figure in the white community.

State agents secretly produced anti-Tutu bumper stickers. He was attacked by cabinet ministers, right-wing church groups and liberal business leaders. Attempts were made on his life and on the life of Rev Peter Storey.

He was also criticised for other reasons from within the liberation movement. At home, leaders objected to him acting without a mandate from them. In the churches, his high media profile and enjoyment of the limelight generated resentment.

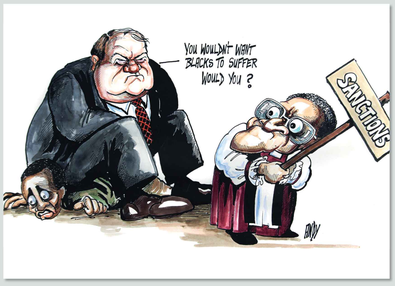
Among exiles, there were reservations about the roles of independent internal leaders such as Tutu. But OR Tambo, leader of the African National Congress in exile, argued that their influence should be encouraged for as long as it served the cause of freedom.

Stratkom anti-Tutu bumper stickers. © John Allen Collection

“This year’s award to Bishop Desmond Tutu should be seen as a renewed recognition of the courage and heroism shown by black South Africans in their use of peaceful methods in the struggle against apartheid.”

NORWEGIAN NOBEL COMMITTEE
Citation for the 1984 Peace Prize

FAITH IN ACTION:
The campaign for sanctions



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Desmond Tutu was not a pacifist like Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. He believed that taking up arms would be justified if all peaceful means of achieving change had been exhausted. “Those whom many whites and their newspapers called terrorists,” he said, “those are our sons, those are our brothers, those are our fathers.

But for himself, he chose to pursue sanctions as the last peaceful means of ending apartheid. Despite criticism, he also insisted on meeting apartheid leaders to appeal to them to end apartheid. Citing the Bible, he said even Moses had gone to see Pharaoh to urge him, “Let my people go!”

© David Anderson/Sunday Star

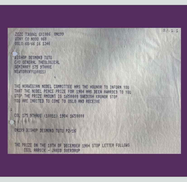
BOTTOM LEFT
In 1984 Desmond Tutu’s commitment to peaceful methods of ending apartheid was recognised by the Norwegian Nobel Committee, which honoured him as a unifying leader figure and awarded him that year’s Nobel Peace Prize. Tutu was the second South African leader to receive this award – following in the footsteps of Chief Albert Luthuli, president of the ANC, who was the recipient in 1960.

© AFP via Getty

BOTTOM RIGHT
When Desmond Tutu visited Washington in 1984 before receiving the Nobel Prize, he passionately argued in an Oval Office meeting with President Ronald Reagan that the US policy of “constructive engagement” with South Africa was making the situation of black South Africans worse.

Reagan was unyielding. He wrote in his diary afterwards: “The Bishop seems unaware, even though he himself is black, that part of the problem is tribal, not racial.” Tutu later said of Reagan, “He sits there like the great, big white chief of old who can tell us black people that we don’t know what is good for us. Your president is the pits.”

© Dennis Brack/Alamy Stock Photo

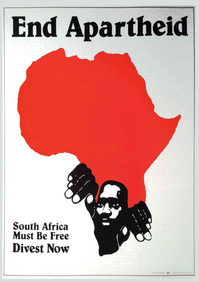


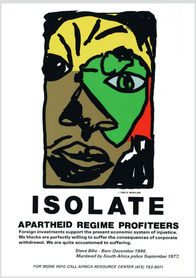
Telegram from the Nobel Peace Prize Committee advertising Tutu that he has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, 1984.

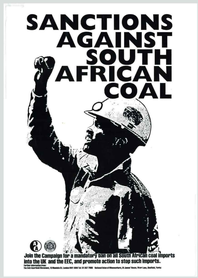
© Insert Source

“You are mere mortals. You are not gods. Many like yourselves tried to take on the church in the past. Where are they today? They bit the dust quite comprehensively. You, like they, if you don’t repent and mend your ways, will end up as the flotsam and jetsam of history. But the Church of God will continue.”

ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU
Addressing apartheid leaders, 1982







POSTERS
In the 1980s the anti-apartheid movement across the world fought for sanctions against apartheid South Africa, mobilising students, workers and civil society. The South African government did everything it could to oppose sanctions, finding support from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the UK, President Ronald Reagan in the USA and Chancellor Helmut Kohl in Germany.

Desmond Tutu argued strongly in favour of sanctions, meeting with many foreign governments and addressing protests around the world. He played a pivotal role in persuading French and Canadian leaders to impose sanctions. In 1985, nine of the ten European nations voted to impose a limited set of sanctions, and this led to a wave of similar decisions around the world. In 1986, all the Commonwealth heads of state except for Margaret Thatcher unanimously agreed to impose sanctions.

© Insert Source

ABOVE
In December 1984, students at Berkeley walked down to the administrative offices for the whole University of California (UC), determined to secure a meeting with the chancellor and president. They demanded that the UC pull out billions of dollars in investments in companies doing business with the government of South Africa.

A decision to begin disinvesting in South Africa was taken by UC in July 1986. With by far the largest block of South Africa-connected holdings of any American university, this decision increased the amount of US educational disinvestment by more than 450%.

© James Mitchell / © AP/Catharine Krueger

Badges produced for the AAM's Month of Boycott Action in March 1985.

© Insert Source

In 1986 Desmond Tutu was elected the first black Archbishop of the Anglican Church, once seen as the home of the English establishment.

Soon after winning the Nobel Peace Prize, Desmond Tutu was appointed Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg. Before his election as Archbishop in 1986, Tutu made his strongest call yet for comprehensive sanctions, which many Anglicans did not support.

Despite this call, and amid fierce controversy, he was enthroned in St George's Cathedral, Cape Town, in a formal service which was given worldwide news coverage.

At an open-air service for 10 000 which followed, exuberant young people chanted freedom slogans and raised their fists in victory. If a black person could lead the Anglican Church, could liberation be far behind?

© Trevor Samson/AFP via Getty Images

NOT TAKING NO FOR AN ANSWER:
A call for sanctions

Horrified by the degrading poverty that black people had to endure when they were forcibly relocated to desolate areas as part of the homelands policy, Archbishop Tutu began a decade-long campaign calling for sanctions against South Africa. During this time, he became an international figure and 'public enemy number one' of the apartheid government.

THEME THREE