PROTEST AND PEACE-MAKING:
In the streets and stadiums

The final years of apartheid were very volatile. Township life in particular was marked by frequent mass protests, regular political funerals and ongoing violent conflict between communities and the police. Desmond Tutu took to the streets and stadiums of South Africa to lead demonstrations against government brutality.

Tutu was often present at the most dangerous hotspots, urging calm, admonishing police, intervening to save lives and defuse conflict. He channelled the anger of young activists into constructive action. Along with other religious leaders, he put himself on the frontline ready to challenge the state and broker peace wherever he could.

THEME FOUR

PROTEST AND PEACE-MAKING
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TOP
When a host of community organisations banded together to form the non-racial United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983, they named ANC veteran Albertina Sisulu one of its presidents. Desmond Tutu himself served as a patron of the UDF. At the same time, he helped to launch the Black Consciousness-oriented National Forum.

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BOTTOM
Rev Geoff Moselane, the Anglican Priest of Sharpeville, was arrested in October 1984 as part of a crackdown on the uprising in the Vaal Triangle. Desmond Tutu, then Bishop of Johannesburg, led Bishops Sigisbert Ndwandwe (left) and Simeon Nkoane (right) and other clergy on an illegal march to demand his release. Rev Moselane went on to face charges of treason in the Delmas Treason Trial (1985 – 1988), alongside key leaders of the UDF.

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“It’s very hard to shake your hand when your foot is on my neck.”

DESMOND TUTU
Johannesburg, 1985

TOP
As protests spread across South Africa during 1985, PW Botha – who had become state president under a new apartheid constitution – declared a State of Emergency. As a result, security forces patrolled townships, such as Gugulethu in Cape Town, in armoured military vehicles known as Casspirs. To block the movement of security forces, barricades were built by township residents using tyres and anything else they could find.

© Louise Gubb

BOTTOM
On 28 August 1985, Tutu mediated between mothers of children who had been randomly arrested and the police in Soweto, Johannesburg. Under the State of Emergency, thousands of men, women and children were detained without trial, some for years. Activists were killed, tortured and made to disappear. The apartheid state wanted to keep the world ignorant of its crimes against humanity.

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“A tremendous orator, Desmond Tutu inflamed his audiences’ outrage at injustice while contriving to steer their passions towards peaceful action. He knew how to seize on people’s anger, drain the violence out of it and channel it into energetic hope.”

JOHN CARLIN
The Observer, London

Tutu comforts mourners at a mass funeral in KwaThema township, near Johannesburg on 23 July 1985.

On this occasion Tutu strongly condemned the practice of "necklacing", a horrific method of killing suspected informers where a tyre filled with petrol is placed around the victim's neck and set alight.

"We are in a very desperate situation," he said. "Violence is escalating to the point where many young people have become almost reckless."

But Tutu was also critical of the government for arresting prominent black, anti-apartheid activists. "The action of the government is self-defeating," he said. "You end up with a group of people who have no real leadership, and that kind of group soon degenerates into a mob."

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“What I am saying is not based on any ideology, political or otherwise. This holy book says when a ruler gives you unjust laws, disobey. And the church says, an unjust law does not oblige obedience.”

DESMOND TUTU
August 1989

PROTEST AND PEACE-MAKING
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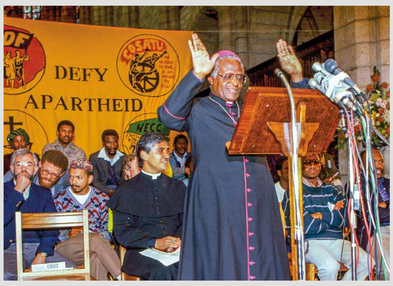

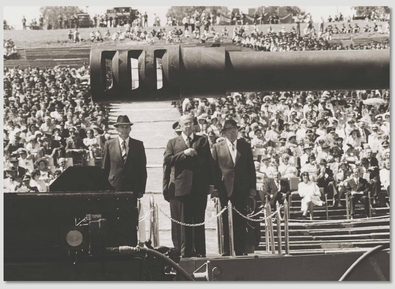

TOP LEFT
In February 1988 the government banned 17 organisations, including the UDF and the Azanian People’s Organisation (AZAPO). Clergy marched on parliament in Cape Town to protest. Police stopped them, arrested the leaders and dispersed other marchers with a water cannon. The BBC reported: “South Africa entered a new era today. The church has unmistakably taken over the frontline of anti-apartheid protest.”

© Adil Bradlow

BOTTOM LEFT
The church leaders were quickly released but a few days later Tutu and President PW Botha had a furious argument over the march. After an encounter with the aggressive, militaristic president, Tutu reported: “It was a slanging match, accusation, counter-accusation, finger-wagging at each other. I thought, well, he’s certainly never heard this from a black person in this way.”

© Paul Weinberg

TOP RIGHT
Leading up to the apartheid elections in September 1989, Desmond Tutu joined a church-led campaign, “Standing for the Truth”. This in turn supported a national Defiance Campaign against apartheid laws. Many protests began at St George’s Cathedral in Cape Town, which under the leadership of Dean Colin Jones (front left) became known as the “People’s Cathedral”.

© Louise Gubb

BOTTOM RIGHT
The Defiance Campaign generated six weeks of frenetic activity around the country in which thousands of South Africans of all races – members of civic organisations, trade unions, churches and academics – joined almost daily protests. A Freedom March took place in Durban on 22 September 1989. It began with an interfaith service and ended with a mass rally of an estimated 20 000 anti-apartheid activists outside the Durban City Hall where trade unionist Jay Naidoo declared, “We have liberated the city of Durban.”

© Adil Bradlow

“We want to say to Mr de Klerk: `We have already won. Mr de Klerk, if you know really what is good for you, join us! Join us! Join us in the struggle for this new South Africa.’ We say we are the rainbow people! We are the new people of the new South Africa!”

DESMOND TUTU
Cape Town March, 13 September 1989

On 13 September 1989, in the city's biggest protest in 30 years, about 30 000 people of all races marched from St George's Cathedral to the Cape Town City Hall.

Police had killed more than 20 people in Cape Town on election day on 6 September 1989. Hearing the news, Desmond Tutu broke down sobbing. The next day he called for a march. FW de Klerk, the president-elect, acting against his generals' advice, backed down and did not try to stop it.

The march led by faith, civic, union and community leaders, effectively ended the government's ban on public protest. Over the following days, marches swept the country, with Tutu's fellow church leaders usually in the front ranks. In Johannesburg 25 000 marched, in Durban 20 000 and in East London 40 000. On one day in October 1989, as many as 150 000 protesters took part in 17 marches across the country.

De Klerk's minister in charge of subsequent negotiations claimed that allowing the Cape Town March was "a more fearful leap into the dark than any De Klerk made later – including the decision to release Nelson Mandela."

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BREAD
NOT
BULLETS
HANDS
OFF
LONINE
BLOEM

A MAN OF PEACE, BUT NOT A PACIFIST:
Into a vortex of violence

During the 1980s Archbishop Tutu led the service at many political funerals of activists, often killed by the police. He was thrust into the vortex of rage and violence. Both in his sermons and by personally intervening to save people's lives, he pleaded for peace. But he also expressed the anger and suffering of the people to the apartheid government. Tutu became the voice of the people.

THEME FOUR