

THE STRUGGLE IN THE CHURCH: Fighting a false gospel

Since the early 19th century, South African Christianity has been the site of a struggle between those in the churches who supported colonialism and racial oppression and those who fought it.

The introduction of apartheid in 1948 intensified this struggle. The white Dutch Reformed Church sought theological justification for the policy. The multiracial churches opposed it, at first with statements and resolutions, but later with resistance and then defiance.



"This doctrine of separation is a false faith. We are being taught that our racial identity is the final and all important determining factor in the lives of men. This amounts to a denial of the central statements of the Gospel."

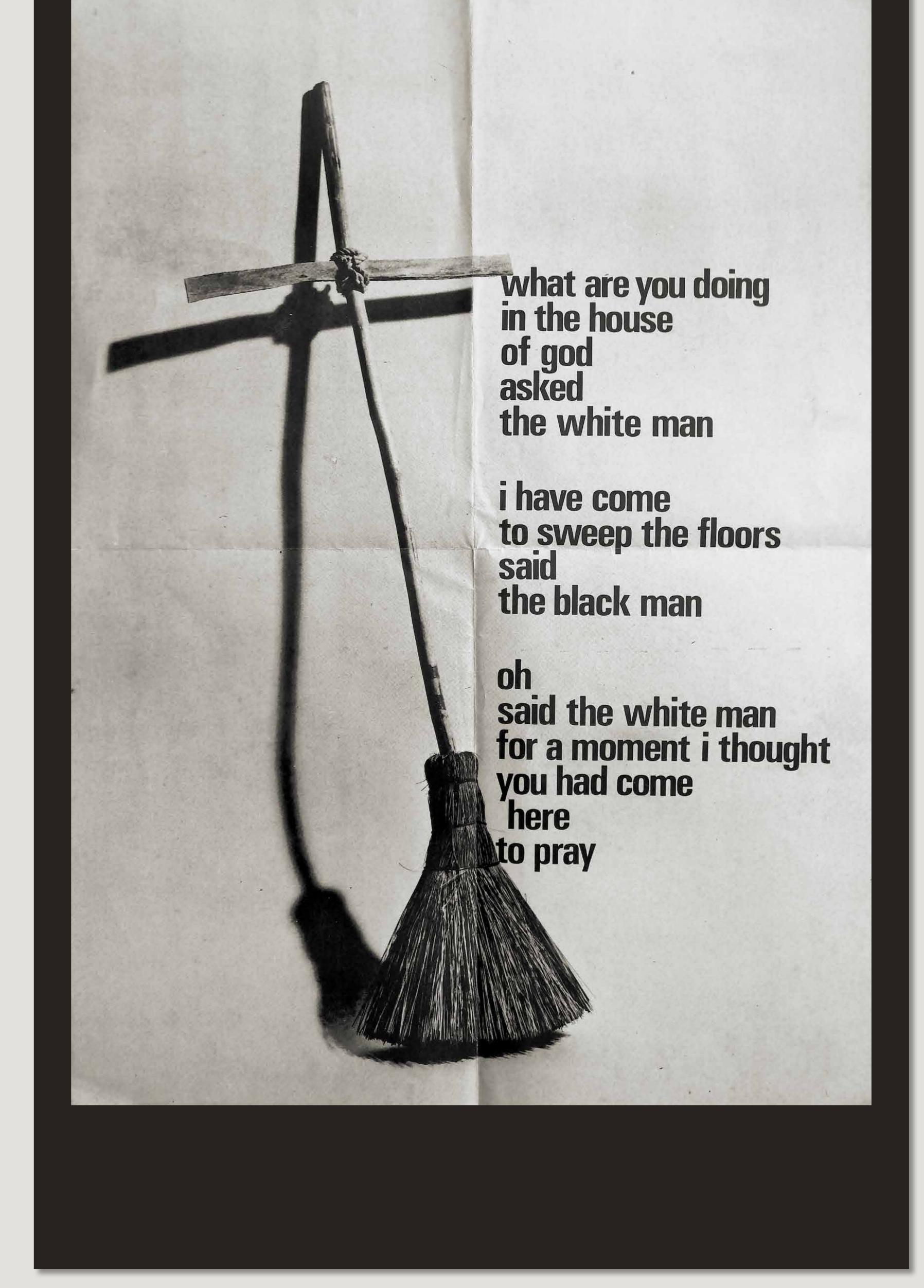
A MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE OF SOUTH AFRICA Issued by the SA Council of Churches in 1968

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TOP LEFT

The white Dutch Reformed Church, whose congregations were segregated, likened each of South Africa's different ethnic groups to a "nation" as described in the Bible. On this basis, its theologians used biblical passages to justify separating the "nations" from one another. The state policy that followed became known as apartheid and later separate development.

© Archive of the NGK

BOTTOM LEFT

As one dragonian new law followed another in the 1950s, the churches

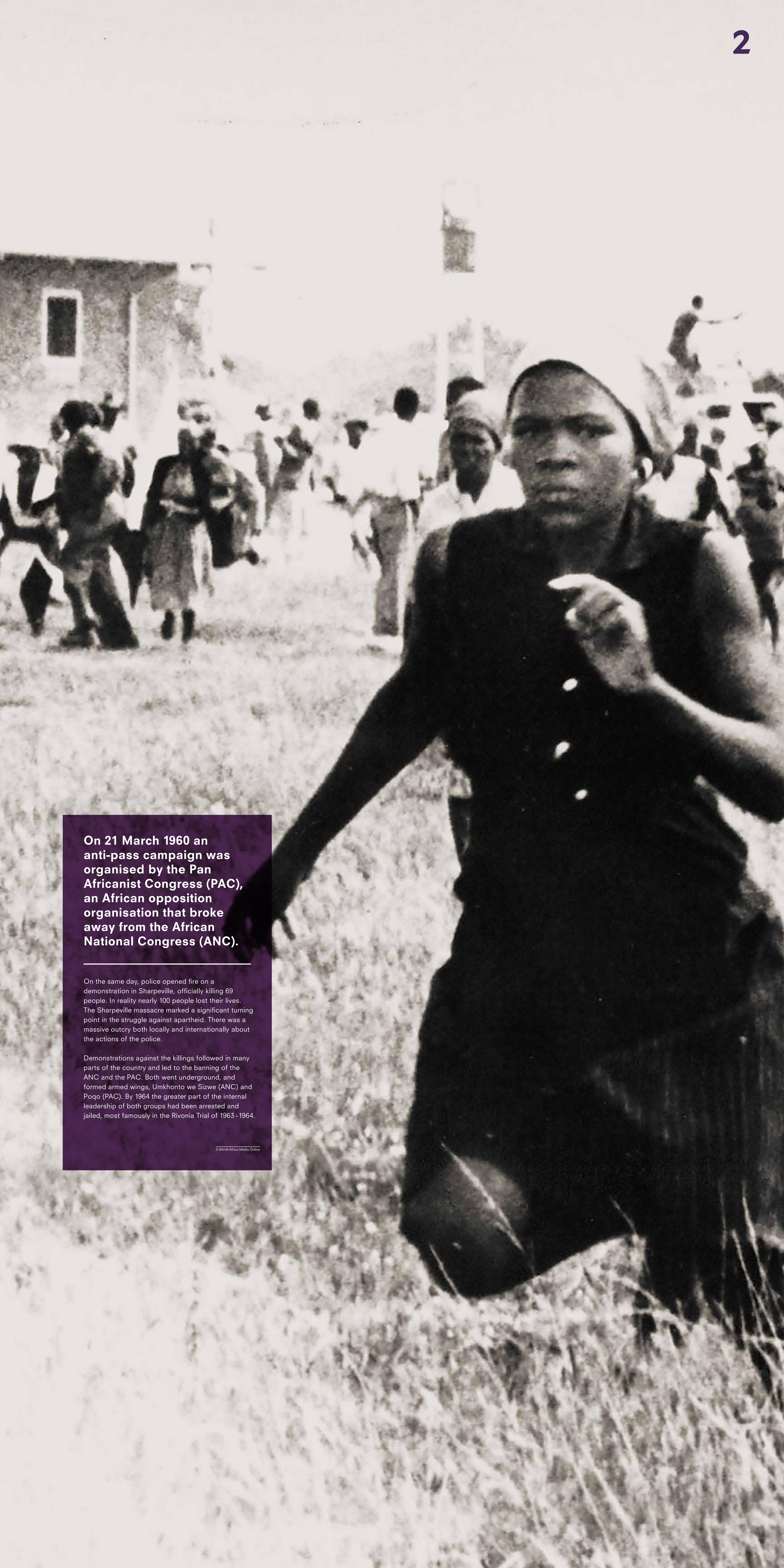
As one draconian new law followed another in the 1950s, the churches spoke out more boldly. Led by Archbishop Denis Hurley of Durban, in 1957 the Catholic Bishops' Conference condemned white supremacy for transcending the teaching of Christ and branded apartheid as intrinsically evil. His role as one of apartheid's most prominent church opponents over four decades was recognised by Durban cartoonist Jock Leyden.

The most widely supported church protest of the 1950s was the one against the Church Clause of the 1957 Native Laws Amendment Act. This gave the Minister of Native Affairs at the time – HF Verwoerd – the power to stop black South Africans from worshipping with whites. But it was rarely implemented after many of the churches resolved to defy the law.

"In specific circumstances and conditions the New Testament allows space for regulating the coexistence of different peoples (volkere) in one country on the basis of separate development."

Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) policy statement, 1974

RAS, VOLK EN NASIE





"From the late 1960s, new theological thinking helped change the course of the churches' struggle in South Africa. It was part of a world-wide movement which included African theology, liberation theology and black theology."

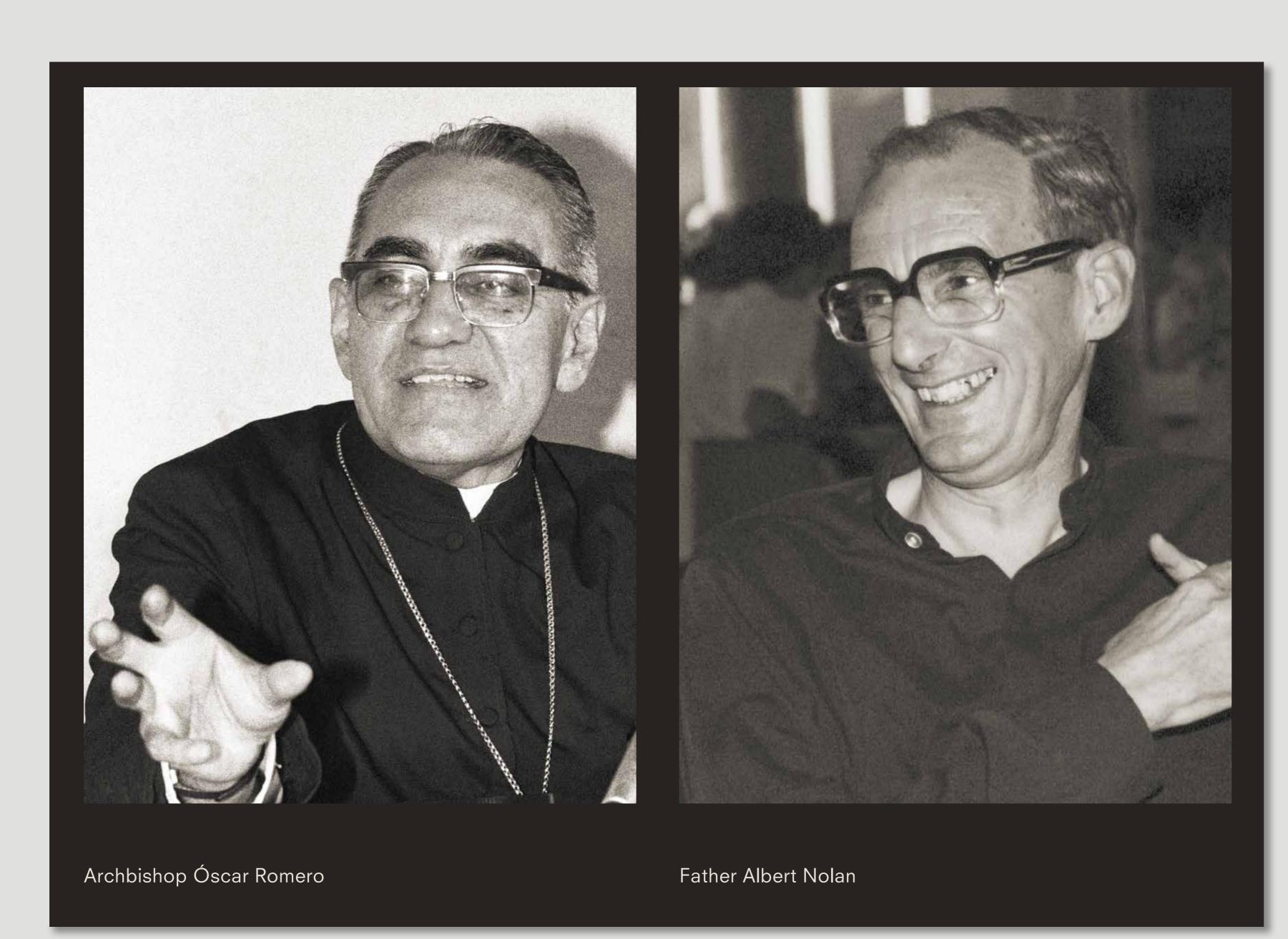
JOHN ALLEN, Tutu biographer

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In 1961 the Cottesloe Declaration prompted a backlash in the Afrikaner community. Church synods rejected it and withdrew from the World Council of Churches. However, one Dutch Reformed leader refused to back down. Dr Beyers Naudé was forced out of his church and launched the multiracial Christian Institute (1963 – 1977). Between the institute's formation in 1963 and its banning in 1977, Naudé became increasingly outspoken against apartheid.

Meanwhile liberation theologians, like Archbishop Óscar Romero in El Salvador and Father Albert Nolan in South Africa, advocated that the church should take the side of the poor. They asserted that industrialised nations enriched themselves at the expense of developing countries. "When the church hears the cry of the oppressed," said Archbishop Romero, "it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to the misery from which the cry arises."

TOP RIGHT
In the late 1960s in South Africa, Barney Pityana, a close associate of Steve Biko, said that black theology represented the people's search for the God of liberation. It challenged black Christians to defend themselves against inhumanity and oppression.

For Steve Biko, black theology was an important aspect of Black Consciousness. He believed that a large proportion of black people in South Africa were Christians still swimming in a mire of confusion – the aftermath of the missionary approach.



"Black theology seeks to make sense of the life experience of the black man, which is largely black suffering at the hands of rampant white racism.

Black theology has to do with whether it is possible to be black and continue to be Christian; it is to ask:

On whose side is God?"



© The Star, Johannesburg

After Steve Biko was killed by police in detention in 1977, Desmond Tutu was called back to South Africa to preach at Biko's funeral. He described Black Consciousness as a movement by which God sought to awaken in black people a sense of their intrinsic value. Although Christ had been crucified, life had ultimately triumphed over death. The same would happen after Biko's death: "Because, you see, Steve started something that is quite unstoppable." © Mayibuye Archives

BOTTOM In 1978, Desmond Tutu returned to South Africa from Lesotho and was appointed General Secretary of the SA Council of Churches. In 1980, he joined other clergy and his wife, Leah, in demanding the release of a fellow minister. The marchers were arrested, detained overnight and charged under the Riotous Assemblies Act. They escaped with fines but a new era of open confrontation with the state had begun.



THE CHURCH AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE:

Making theology real in South Africa

While the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) justified apartheid through false prophesy, many churches challenged this unchristian system of racial oppression. As General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, Archbishop Tutu used the church as a platform for the struggle for human rights and led church leaders onto the streets to protest against apartheid.

MONITOR STAND

THEME TWO