

Churches Seen Divided on Zimbabwe Rhodesia

If President Carter is feeling for the American pulse on foreign as well as domestic issues, he is finding a confusing beat within organized religion on U.S. relations with Zimbabwe Rhodesia.



Special Report

Rarely are American religious people and groups so emotional, or so divided, on a foreign policy issue of indirect national interest as they are today on whether the U.S. should lift economic sanctions against the African country.

In some quarters, the dispute is pitting grassroots thinking against church experts on international affairs. For example, in June, 11 of the United Methodist Church's regional conferences pointedly disagreed with a Washington-based denominational agency that had backed continuation of the sanctions.

American religious knowledge of and feeling about Zimbabwe Rhodesia run high for at least two reasons:

—Religious organizations have been in the forefront of efforts to assure that U.S. policy toward the former British colony supports majority rule in a land of 6.5 million blacks ruled from 1965 until June of this year by a white minority government. Average Church and synagogue members have been repeatedly encouraged to learn about the issue, and many have.

—Several key participants in the unfolding saga of Zimbabwe Rhodesia have strong religious connections. Roman Catholic and Protestant leaders in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe is the African name for the country) were among the staunchest critics of the former all-white government in Salisbury, the capital city.

For example, Roman Catholic Bishop Donal Lamont of Umtali, a native of Ireland, was expelled in 1977 for opposing racist policies. The black prime minister who came to power with a multi-racial government in June is United Methodist Bishop Abel T. Muzorewa. He is U.S.-educated, and his small Rhodesian church is an organic part of the American-based United Methodist denomination. One of the bishop's leading political opponents in Zimbabwe Rhodesia is another U.S.-educated minister, the Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole, of the United Church of Christ in Rhodesia.

Furthermore, President Carter and Congress disagree in principle on keeping or lifting the economic sanctions, and press coverage of this contest has no doubt intensified grassroots awareness of Zimbabwe Rhodesia.

U.S. refusal to recognize or, except in a few controversial instances, to permit open trade with Rhodesia for the past 14 years was part of a United Nations' plan to press for majority rule in the former colony. The advent of the Muzorewa government spurred the U.S. Senate to ask the president to lift the sanctions. Mr. Carter refused, primarily on the grounds that the conditions for such action laid down by Congress itself had not been met.

Arguments for and against the sanctions are political, economic and humanitarian, and both pro and con factions, religious or secular, agree to a large

extent on the issues dividing them. These issues are perhaps best summarized in a 1978 congressional measure called the Case-Javits amendment (named for its sponsors, Senators Clifford Case, R-N.J. and Jacob Javits, R-N.Y.).

Congress said that the president should lift the sanctions when Rhodesia had a freely elected government, open to all political parties, willing to negotiate with armed Zimbabwean liberation movements based in neighboring countries.

President Carter said those conditions have not been met by the Muzorewa government or the constitution under which it operates. The same conclusion was reached by the Governing Board of the National Council of Churches, the U.S. Catholic Conference, Lutheran World Ministries, the 1979 General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, and the United Methodist Board of Church and Society among other groups.

The American Jewish Committee is one of the few national-level agencies that has publicly agreed with the Senate resolution urging the lifting of sanctions. But various regional organizations, including 11 United Methodist Conferences spread across the country, want to end the sanctions. This view is shared by numerous individual religious leaders and by some religious publications.

Religious advocates for keeping the sanctions claim that the constitution of Zimbabwe Rhodesia was not ratified by majority vote but by the small white electorate and preserves de facto white supremacy. These advocates point out that of the 100 seats in the parliament in Salisbury, 28 are reserved for members elected by whites, who constitute only four percent of the population. They object to white control of the military, and tend to agree with Mr. Sithole's charge that the first parliament election was rigged in favor of Bishop Muzorewa's party, the United African National Council.

In short, supporters of continued U.S. sanctions say that blacks in Zimbabwe Rhodesia are not much better off under the new government than under the old. Bishop Lamont, the exiled prelate, shares that conclusion, at least to some degree.

Allowed to return to Salisbury for three weeks in June and early July, he remarked that the Muzorewa government was "unrepresentative and unjust."

Religious advocacy for ending the sanctions often cites the need to support Bishop Muzorewa in peaceful efforts toward genuine democracy in Zimbabwe Rhodesia. Give the Muzorewa government "every chance to prove itself," pleaded the widely circulated United Methodist Reporter newspaper chain in May, reflecting a more grassroots view of the proper U.S. course.

"We are distressed that our American government has elected not to recognize the new government in Zimbabwe Rhodesia," Jerry Ballard, head of the World Relief Commission of the National Association of Evangelicals said in mid-July. "Somehow our president has confused politics and human concern."

Persons on both sides of the sanctions question acknowledge that Bishop Muzorewa's position is complicated by the existence of a coalition of Zimbabwean liberation movements known as the Patriotic Front. Led by Robert Magabe and Joshua Nkomo, the Patriotic Front considers Bishop Muzorewa a pawn of the white minority and has vowed to bring down the new government by force.

Under the bishop, the Salisbury government has continued its way against the Patriotic Front, which is supplied in part by the Soviet Union and other Marxist states. Religious attitudes toward the continuing military conflict are complicated by controversy over an \$85,000 grant to the Patriotic Front made last year

by the World Council of Churches' Program to Combat Racism. While the WCC contends that the money was only for humanitarian aid, critics see it as political endorsement of pro-Marxist terrorists.

In response to such criticism, Dr. Philip Potter, general secretary of the World Council, recently asserted that Bishop Muzorewa is also "committing violence," and he cited reports that both the bishop and Mr. Sithole have "private armies."

The United Methodist Church is particularly torn by the situation in Zimbabwe Rhodesia. Acrimony exists on many levels within the 9.6 million member denomination on the interrelated issues of lifting sanctions and of supporting Bishop Muzorewa.

Speaking for a considerable number of United Methodists, the Dallas-based United Methodist Reporter has insisted that the bishop's government is "already more representative... than many which are recognized by the U.S." An opposing viewpoint was expressed by New World Outlook, the magazine of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries. That publication said editorially: "Reluctantly — because, after all, a brother United Methodist bishop who we greatly admire has been elected prime minister — we must conclude that it would not be wise for the United States to drop sanctions at this time."

Some United Methodists in the U.S. also wonder whether Bishop Muzorewa can provide effective leadership for his Zimbabwean church and also serve as prime minister of a volatile country. The prime minister's church-relationship seems to be less of an issue within Zimbabwe Rhodesia than it is in the West. His pre-election popularity with much of the black population appeared to be based more on his record as a nationalist and his membership in the large Shona tribe than on his episcopacy.

Contrary to some reports, Bishop Muzorewa has no large base of support as head of the United Methodist Church of Rhodesia. His Church has only about 37,000 members, and is even smaller than a second Methodist denomination, of British origin, in Zimbabwe Rhodesia.

No more than 20 to 25 percent of the Rhodesian people are Christian. Most adhere to tribal religions. About half of the Christians are Roman Catholic and half Protestant, mostly Anglican.

What prominence the United Methodist Church has in Zimbabwe Rhodesia is the result of historic missionary efforts strong in the field of education. The Church was given a large tract of land near Old Umtali by Cecil Rhodes, who colonized the area, in the early 20th century. Sections of that tract were later exchanged for other land to be used as mission stations and schools.

Any eventual U.S. decision about lifting the economic sanctions against Zimbabwe Rhodesia will be influenced in part by what the United Kingdom decides. There have been strong hints that the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is more open to recognizing the Muzorewa government than is Washington. Britain hopes for changes removing some of the privileges for whites in the constitution of Zimbabwe Rhodesia.

While no African nation has recognized the Muzorewa government, the world at large will probably go along with whatever Britain and the U.S. decide. The stakes are high: Will lifting or not lifting the sanctions preserve human life and guarantee freedom to a whole people? That is the fundamental question before nations and churches as they confront the political issues.



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Home Missioners

Joseph Fontana of Penfield and Thomas M. Lambert of Elmira and St. John Fisher College worked with the Gleanery Home Missioners this summer, the organization reported. Projects which engage summer volunteers, in Appalachia and the South, range from carpentry and plumbing to Bible school and recreation programs for disadvantaged youngsters. The volunteer operation was begun 25 years ago.

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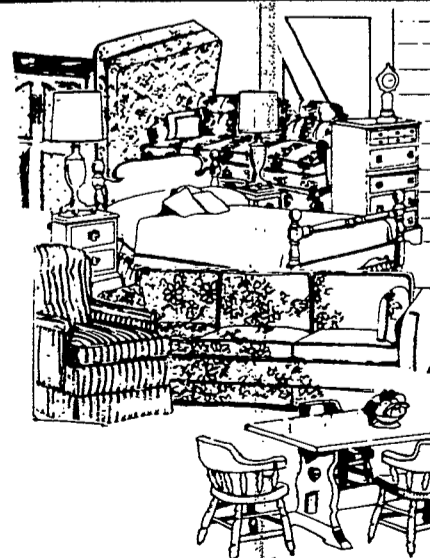
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