

Mesenbring shares hope for peace

by Gary Dhillon

David Mesenbring's photograph in last Thursday's Gateway does not do him justice.

The large black and white photograph which advertised his lecture on the *Heresy of Apartheid* showed a pair of excited eyes peering between a bowl-cut hairstyle and a dark beard. The image that immediately came to mind was of a driven prophet carrying the frenzied message of truth from the people of South Africa. An image which, no doubt, scared more people away than attracted them to his lecture.

In person Mesenbring's eyes are deep blue and his manner for more human than what that poor photograph suggests. And the message he spreads is not a pulpit-pounding sermon but a general overview of Apartheid; from its Church roots to its political nature.

This interest in the importance of

history in understanding a nation stems from an insight Mesenbring had while working with Vietnamese refugees in 1975.

He though he understood the Vietnamese without knowing anything about their history, culture or language, he thought, like so many other Americans, that he understood the Vietnamese from the American perspective alone.

Soon after that time Mesenbring applied for and got a job in the black seminary in one of the bantustans in South Africa. He took with him to this new job a new respect for the importance of studying the culture before making judgements on an entire nation.

He learned South Africa customs, history and one of the languages, Xhosa, and he now travels around North America trying to share that knowledge with others.

Could you give a synopsis of your lecture

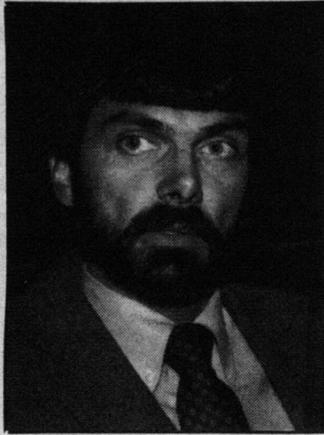


Photo Left Stout

Mesenbring: "There is no time left."

What I did was share first of all that apartheid began in the Churches. It's not a political problem that I as a Christian am concerned to get mixed up with, but rather a theological heresy that began in the white Dutch Reform churches in 1850's and has now spread into the political realm.

Then I shared my concern that we are going to lose what little community we have with black South Africans, over the issue of violence. North Americans are so quick to execute negative judgements against people who take up an armed struggle. I said I though there was a great danger that we were going to jump to quick conclusions against the black South Africans when they, as is inevitable, begin to resort more and more to

armed methods of getting their right to vote. That led me to want to share a history of blacks who have tried to operate non-violently and what happened when they did.

And then a short interview with Winnie Mandela was shown on videotape.

She addresses this same issue of how she, at first, had never pulled a trigger and then came to realize the necessity of defending herself.

So are you saying there are no more peaceful alternatives left.

No. I'm saying black South Africans have after 50 years of commitment to non-violence have come to the conclusion that they, on their own, don't have a peaceful alternative.

But black leaders still point out that the only peaceful way left to avoid growing bloodshed is economic sanctions. Their call for us is to embargo South Africa is the last possible way in which the situation can be changed with the minimum of violence. They're at war already. So there is no time left for a peaceful solution. I mean the time of peace ended quite a while ago. But in terms of ending the violence with a minimum of violence now, the most effective way is probably through economic sanctions.

What do you think will happen to the white population if the blacks gain their independence.

We don't need to assue the only way whites can stay in Africa is as the dominant class. Look what happened in Zimbabwe when the

blacks took over. They asked the whites to stay.

The irony of the situation is that the whites don't realize if they were to effect some kind of relatively peaceful transition they could preserve their extraordinary way of life. Whites in Zimbabwe are living better today than you and I are in terms of access to servants and all kinds of privileges; because of that long standing superior education, because of the social status that goes with being the elite. These things continue.

But won't there be some pent-up hostility among the blacks over the way they have been treated.

I haven't seen it in Zimbabwe. This is one of the things that results from our ignorance about Africa. We don't realize to what extent Africa has extraordinary interpersonal strengths within its culture. A lot of anthropologists, missionaries and people who have gotten to know Africa really well talk about the African capacity for forgiveness and say that in Africa there appears to be now a genuinely greater capacity for forgiveness than you could find in any Western culture.

This has been my own experience. I know it sounds very idealistic but I tell you it has shown up from a number of anthropologists and other people who have gotten to know Africa very well. I think Africa has some cultural orientation, some human interpersonal strengths which are its great gifts to the human family.

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