

# The Church & investment

By Hugh Westrup

Church-going members from the business community have banded together to criticize the activities of a Christian committee on foreign investment.

Under attack is the Taskforce on the Churches and Corporate Responsibility which was formed three years ago when church officials became concerned about their involvement as shareholders in companies that do business with countries ruled by repressive governments.

The primary aim of the taskforce has been to ensure that those who exercise economic power are confronted with the extent to which they shape and influence social conditions and values. Companies with investments in Christian nations like Chile and South Africa that violate basic democratic human rights are urged to sever their economic ties.

Alarmed by the demands of the taskforce, Christian businessmen have gathered together as the Confederation of Church and Business People which received a federal charter one year ago. The confederation, located in Commerce Court, is headed by retired businessman Robert Hamilton. Seed money from several unnamed corporations was initially supplied to the group which now has over 300 members from across Canada.

Office manager for the confederation, Grant Lennie, spoke to *Excalibur* and outlined the objectives and complaints of the group.

## CONFLICTING OPINIONS

Lennie said there are conflicting opinions within the church community and that the views of the members of the taskforce do not represent those of many parishioners. He believes the churches are not democratic and fail to seek the opinions of the individual members. The confederation was formed to present an alternate point of view not being expressed in the higher levels of the church.

At present the church taskforce includes representatives from 10 Christian organizations including the Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran and United churches who meet monthly to discuss economic involvement in the north and third world countries. Renate Pratt, a former resident of Africa, is coordinator of the taskforce.

Pratt points out that she is not responsible for decision making. "Policy decisions begin at each major church assembly where social issues are discussed and resolutions bearing on corporate responsibility to be brought before the taskforce are made. What come out of the taskforce is approved by each church."

## CONFRONTATIONS

Part of Pratt's job is the presentation of the taskforce's views before management and annual shareholders' meetings. Stormy confrontations have occurred at times.

Lennie also accused the taskforce of releasing "twisted facts". He referred to a taskforce pamphlet which in describing the Chilean economy neglects to mention that the ruling junta has reduced inflation from 100% per year to 65% in 1977.

"The democratically elected socialist government totally destroyed the Chilean economy. Although we don't support the junta we have to say that they have made fantastic progress economically".

"The information we get from our sources in Chile is contradictory to what the taskforce says which I believe to be biased and slanted," said Lennie. He cited a document by the Reverend T.H. Rooke of St. Bride's Church in Mississauga who visited Chile for a month in 1977. According to Rooke, "a vast and universal sigh of relief was uttered by the majority of citizens when the



Idi Amin is alive and well in South Africa.

Allende government was overthrown. Lawlessness, disorder, violence and hooliganism seem to have been the order of the day during much of the 1,000 days of the Allende regime." Rooke says orderliness and tranquility have been restored with the major inconvenience to citizens being a curfew between two and five in the morning.

## TORTURE, REPRESSION

In contradiction to Rooke's observations, the *Toronto Globe and Mail* in an editorial of January 4th commented that "... institutionalization.... under General Pinochet.... has amounted to the institutionalization of torture, kidnapping, murder, detention without trial, repression of the rights of free speech and assembly, and denial of due process.... Obscenity, not dignity, is what the Pinochet regime means to Chile. The country's real dignity lies elsewhere."

Lennie said the philosophy of the businessmen's group is to speed change by evolution rather than revolution and that foreign investment has a liberalizing effect keeping the door open to the humanitarian values of Western nations.

Pratt counters this by pointing out that in South Africa conditions have been deteriorating. "Foreign investment has quadrupled since 1948. However, a 30-year track record shows that the conditions of blacks has worsened. The confederation's argument has no historical evidence."

Pratt made special reference to the actions of Noranda Mines Ltd. which mobilized both the business and the church communities. Noranda's decision to develop a \$350 million copper mine in Chile was the first major multinational investment since the 1973 coup d'etat and became the pacesetter for other investors. Officials in Canadian churches, many having shares in Noranda, were concerned that the deal would lend respectability to the junta. A long debate ensued amongst church leaders who had rarely criticized corporations in the past. Their collective decision was against investment.

## EMPTY SUNDAY SCHOOLS

Lennie believes the concern over business practice has created an imbalance in church affairs. "There's so much that needs attention at home declining Sunday school enrolments and church memberships".

Repeating charges from the confederations' literature, Lennie described the taskforce as "radical" and expressed disapproval that it is aligning with "reactive minority

groups" such as the Latin American Working Group. Chairman Hamilton's words were even harsher in a January interview with radio broadcaster Betty Kennedy in which he described people in the church hierarchies as "intoxicated with the exuberance of their self-appointed proximity to God."

Pratt believes the businessmen have over-reacted to the taskforce. "I didn't think it was necessary for such a group to come together in such a forceful way because we are in touch with the business community. We're not waging a broadside attack on business."

"I'm heartened that mainline journalists are in touch with us. We must have credibility. Our reactions from outside of the powerful business group have been entirely positive."

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