Bearing Witness Against Oppression:

Returning from South African Trip Rev. Paul Santmire Wants to be 'A Voice for the Voiceless"

by Bill Doak

H. Paul Santmire, pastor of Grace Lutheran Church on the corner of Niles and Woodland streets in Asylum Hill, has a knack for getting himself into trouble with foreign military governments.

Actually, it is his photography while on fact-finding trips to less-than-liberated areas of the world that has earned the Asylum Hill pastor the wrath of suspicious military men. The first came several years ago, as Rev. Santmire was photographing a village in East Germany. A military patrol came marching through.

"I took a picture of them because it would make a good 'local color'," said Santmire in his office. "The young corporal in charge marched right over, took my camera and zip-pulled all the film out."

The Rev. Santmire's latest irreverance had the potential to become much more serious. One of 17 clergy and lay people, Santmire, travelling with a study group on a 21-day tour of South Africa, was sitting in the back of a small bus going into Soweto, a black township occupied by South African government troops. Santmire turned to get a photograph out the back window.

"A solider spotted me, and they detained us and confiscated all our cameras," said Santmire. 'They wanted to know why we were there, who we were, and what our intentions were," he said. The group was detained at the police station until a lieutenant in the army, who had studied in the United States, became interested in where they were from and returned their cameras.

A photograph Santmire took of the troops jumping out of their "Hippos", or armored personnel carriers, appeared in the Hartford Courant Oct. 20.

Rev. Santmire will show more of his photos of his trip Nov. 17 at 3 p.m. at Grace Lutheran Church. The free slide show is open to the community.

But, as Americans, the problems experienced by Rev. Santmire and his fellow travellers were only temporary inconveniences in a part of the world where repression in the norm.

"I had been planning this trip for a lifetime," said Santmire, who was accepted on the "study seminar" by the Lutheran Church of America and then had to raise funds to pay for the trip. He spent one week in Johannesburg/Soweto, a week in the Cape Town province of Kimberly, and a week in Namibia and its capitol, Windhoek. The group travelled with special permits which allowed them to tour the townships, now occupied in a declared state of emergency, and the war zone in the northern providence of Namibia.

"In each place we visited, you enter into two worlds — the white, developed world such as Johannesburg, which could be any city in the U.S. — and the black townships that exist to provide a work force. The contrast between the developed, affluent world of the city and the ignorance and poverty of the occupied townships is startling."

Santmire said he heard many tales of brutalization. Frequently, random shootings by troops driving by the townships in personnel carriers would occur. Soweto parents expressed a general fear of leaving children behind when they travelled to

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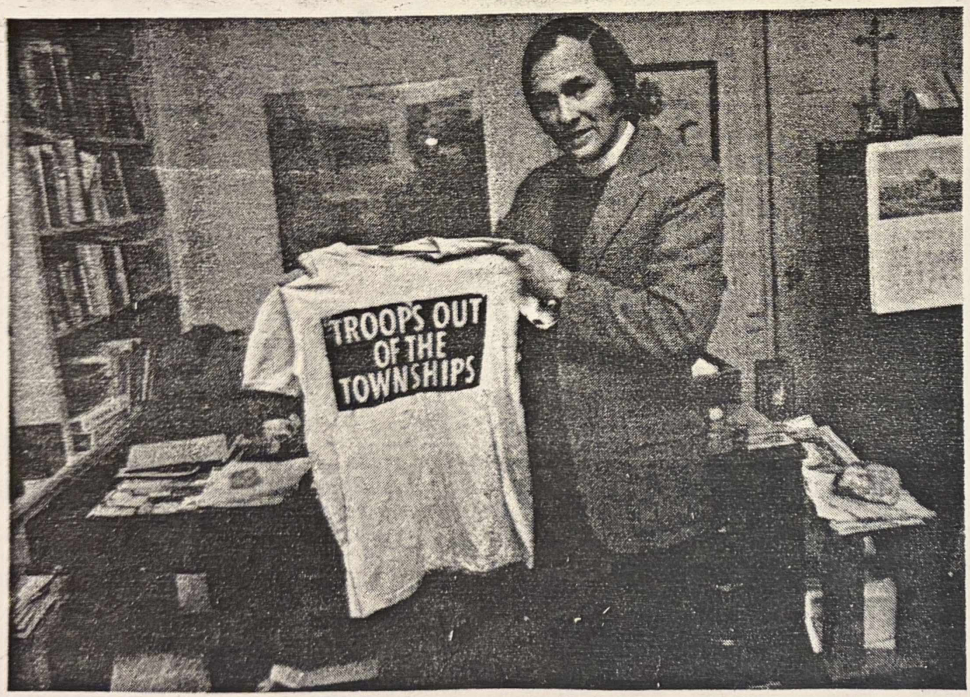

"What was scary was when I watched the news on television — before the news blackout — and saw a woman with the same shirt bloodied and being dragged off by the police," said Rev. Paul Santmire. (Doak photo)

Grace Lutheran's Pastor Bears Witness to South African Struggle

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work — the children might not be there when they returned.

"The township is like a prison where the warden can come and go. It's state terrorism," said the reverend. "The daily oppression of living in those townships .... we talked to men who were living in 'hostels', a room this size," he said pointing to the walls of his 10×12 ft. office, "shared by 15 men with a stove and cold water outside."

Santmire said that, under the 'homelands' policy, blacks were stripped of their South African citizenship and herded into small, arid areas.

"We complain of Asylum Hill's high infant mortality rate of 33 per 1,000 babies compared 8 per 1,000 for the state of Connecticut, but in those townships the infant mortality rate can be 230 per 1,000 births," he said.

One township outside of Cape Town called Crossroads was described by Santmire as "the equal of every squatter's village." Crossroads is a shack village in swampland without electricity or plumbing where bulldozers occasionally come out and plow under large areas of the shantytown when the population grows too large.

At the resettlement area of Onverwacht, Santmire said 200,000 live in a wasteland where there are only two doctors.

"And they are not there at night," said Santmire. The Asylum Hill pastor spent his time photographing the people who talked to him and about whom he has stories to tell.

"I wanted to be able to talk about apartheid in terms of individual stories. This was the value of this trip," he added.

He was surprised to find out, for example, that most whites he met through his contacts in the church were opposed to the apartheid system. "But very few of them are willing to take the initiative," he said. However he added that some white students are opposed to the draft-mandatory for 16-year-old white males — and a group of white mothers of soldiers marched into Soweto to protest the draft.

"But very little is done in terms of protest. The troops presence is powerful," he said, "but there are signs that the infrastructure is collapsing."

Santmire said that one of the most moving moments of his trip was meeting a Lutheran pastor in Soweto who told of his 16-year-old daughter's death.

"She had been burned alive as a collaborator because her boyfriend was a policeman."

The violence in the townships is symptomatic of a government policy to set groups against each other. Santmire called it "horizontal violence."

The townships, Santmire said were "essentially the same thing America did with the Indians. The difference was that the colonists were dealing with very few Indians. In South Africa the government is trying to get rid of 'black spots' by making everyone a citizen of a township", plus the fact, he noted, the white supremacist government makes the laws perpetuating the system.

But there was a positive side to his travel to South Africa, Santmire said.

"The vitality of the Christian churches, witnessing their support for each other was inspiring," he said. "They are Christians living in an apostolic time — being threatened, thrown to the lions they are called upon to stand up for their faith."

Santmire also witnessed the signing of the Kiros Document, a statement from 151 theologians attacking "the state theology of repression of the Dutch Reform church but also attacking church theology for being too interested in reconcilliation and peace." The Kiros — Greek for 'crisis' — Document also advocates the right of self-defense. Nobel Laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu refused to sign the statements saying that "those of us who stand for non-violence are being left behind, standing at the sides of things," Santmire paraphrased.

Santmire feels changed by his trip.

"This enormous evil is being done in the name of civilization and Christianity like it hasn't been since Nazi times."

Along with bearing witness as "a voice for the voiceless" Santmire also feels that the issues of apartheid are "not all that much different from the issues the poor have to deal with in this neighborhood."

"We have *defacto* segregation. A lot of poor don't have access to housing. The third world as it exists in South Africa also exists in our own neighborhood," Santmire said.