

Interview with Pauline Webb by Margaret Ling, 7 November 2013, for the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee project Forward to Freedom
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Margaret Ling: This is Margaret Ling speaking, it's Thursday 7 November. I'm about to interview Pauline Webb and we're sitting in Pauline's living room in Wembley. I should also say that the interview we're about to do is for the Anti-Apartheid Movement Forward to Freedom History Project.

Pauline could you give me your full name?

Pauline Webb: Pauline Mary Webb.

ML: And when and where were you born?

PW: In Wembley, just a few yards away from here, (*inaudible*) Road. I was born in Wembley but I was only a baby when we left here, so that's why I always thought I would come back to Wembley one day.

ML: And what did you do for a living?

PW: I began as a teacher, and then I became an organiser for the Methodist Church Overseas Division, when I was responsible for the work in the Caribbean and in West Africa, so moving people around in those areas. And then I went to the BBC in the World Service, I worked for the BBC World Service, in charge of religious programmes for the BBC World Service.

ML: Could you tell us when and how you first became aware of the situation in Southern Africa?

PW: Yes, I think it was ... I had become very much involved through the World Council of Churches, which I was active in, in what we called the Programme to Combat Racism, and I became very concerned about racism, as one of the great evils of our time. And then I remember reading *Naught for Your Comfort*, of course, and met Trevor Huddleston, and became very much involved – yes, and became aware of the situation in South Africa particularly, yes.

ML: When was that, can you remember?

PW: When was *Naught for Your Comfort* written? Just a minute, can I just have a look at something – I think I've written about this somewhere. [*Goes to bookshelf to try to find relevant passage in her autobiography, World-Wide Webb.*]

ML: Well, it doesn't matter – it was basically the late '50s or early '60s? We don't need the particular year, just trying to locate it in the broad sweep of history.

PW: I know I mentioned particularly *Naught for Your Comfort* making a big impression on me. Stupid, it's a bit difficult to remember years.

ML: No, it doesn't matter about the particular year. Shall we skip that one?

PW: Yes, I think so.

ML: Don't worry about it, I shouldn't have asked that, I told you that I didn't want specific dates but I was just trying to get the broad... OK, are we ready to go on?

ML: Pauline, can you tell me why you felt you had to do something about the situation in Southern Africa?

PW: Well, as I say I think it was partly *Naught for Your Comfort* that made me think about that, and I realised that ... I met several people who were exiled in this country, you know, who were from South Africa, so I knew how bad the situation was. And it was so contrary to me to all understanding, that you should be able to divide people on the grounds of their race or their colour or anything else. So yes, it was really through the World Council of Churches emphasis on this Programme to Combat Racism, so the involvement in South Africa came out of that combating of racism.

ML: How did you first become involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement in particular?

PW: Well, as I say, it was when I realised how bad the situation was in South Africa. And yes, I just became aware of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in this country, yes.

ML: I believe you attended the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches ...

PW: I did indeed, yes.

ML: Which I think was in 1968 in Sweden?

PW: Yes, in Uppsala, yes.

ML: Could you say a little bit about that and what its impact was on the churches?

PW: Oh dear, yes, it's all in [*referring to her autobiography*].

ML: Well, just in general. Because I think that led to the setting up of the Programme to Combat Racism.

PW: It did, now who was it? Somebody should have been the preacher and when they didn't ... they'd been assassinated. Who was it? Would it have been Martin Luther King would it? No.

ML: I don't know the details but I think for the first time there were quite a number of delegates at that Assembly from the global South.

PW: That's right, that's right. Oh yes, there were. But hadn't Martin Luther King been ... was it after he'd been killed or something? Oh dear, I wish I'd read this before you came.

ML: We don't need to go into the particulars.

PW: I remember it so well.

ML: Perhaps you could say a little bit about ... looking back, what do you feel was the impact of that Assembly, the events of that time?

PW: Well, as I say, it made me aware of what a terrible evil racism is, when you judge a person by their colour or their race, rather than as a fellow human being. You know, this Programme to Combat Racism became the driving part of my life really. And of course we ran into quite a lot of controversy about it because where it involved armed struggle, where people, liberation movements in Southern Africa, we were accused of supporting their violence, you see, but you know, we were saying that ... we thought that that was a great hypocrisy on the part of many Western nations to be so opposed to violence, when it was elsewhere, when we've already fought so many wars in defence of our own interests, you know. So it involved the discussion about violence and it involved the discussion about, as I say, judging people by some other criteria other than the fact that they were just fellow human beings, you know.

ML: Was that quite a controversy within the churches?

PW: Oh yes, great. The World Council of Churches got into a lot of trouble because of the Programme to Combat Racism. Oh yes, I was having to face that all over the place. I mean, people used to heckle when I was preaching, you know, about supporting these liberation movements in Southern Africa, and you know, all that kind of thing. I mean, they lumped the whole anti-apartheid struggle, really, as part of ... with the liberation movements, and all that, you see.

ML: You were involved in the Methodist Church?

PW: Yes, I was involved ...

ML: Perhaps you could say a bit more about what was the position of the Methodist Church on the Programme and what was the debate?

PW: Yes, on the whole we were fortunate, we had a lot of support. Colin Morris, who was the General Secretary of the Missionary Society, he himself had worked in Zambia for many years and was very committed on the whole race issue, so he was a big support. So that helped us a lot, yes.

ML: Where did the Methodist Church fit within the church as a whole, the different denominations? How did the Methodist Church compare to the other denominations in its ...

PW: Well, I mean it's always been sort of ecumenical in the sense that it wants to relate to all the other churches, but I think in Methodism there's always been a very strong stand on social issues, and on ... yes, there is. And it has taken up controversial issues, yes.

ML: I believe you served as a Vice-Moderator of the World Council of Churches?

PW: Yes, I did.

ML: What did that entail? Could you say something about that, and how the World Council of Churches became involved in the struggle, how did that involvement develop?

PW: Well, as I say, it came out of the Programme to Combat Racism, and as Vice-Moderator I was constantly being asked to defend our position in being, in supporting Anti-Apartheid or anything like that, because it was seen as ... so yes, it was constant politics, it was the thing people were [*inaudible*] all the time, I mean, it was a hot issue all the time. And as I say, I used to ... people used to sometimes heckle when I was preaching, or they'd stand outside with banners and things like that, you know, saying we were supporting violent revolution and all that kind of thing. It became in our opponents' minds, it became all bound up with the idea of violence, you know.

ML: Were you heckled by Methodists?

PW: Oh yes, well, in Methodist ... yes, but I think, yes, I suppose some of them were Methodists. But not by the Methodist Conference itself, no. They were on the whole supportive.

ML: How did it change over the years?

PW: And the boycotts of course, the boycott of investment itself in South Africa, that became very ... boycotting, buying goods from South Africa, that was all part of the campaign as it were, yes.

ML: Was that also a controversial issue?

PW: Yes, it was [*inaudible*] And we did all sorts of daft things, demonstrative things, like, I remember going into a bank, into the banks, and finding all the withdrawal slips, you know, they were there for people to withdraw money, and writing on them 'All loans to South Africa, withdraw all money from South Africa', you know, so it was that kind of protest movement all the time, it was seen as a protest movement. And that was all part of Anti-Apartheid, you see, as well.

ML: What kind of impact did it have, do you think, looking back?

PW: Yes, I think it did arouse awareness, I mean, it kept the issue alive, it kept people aware that ... yes, it was one of the big issues of the time, wasn't it, anti-apartheid? I mean, people were aware of it as an issue, yes, and people took up positions on it, yes.

ML: Looking back, can you see how the attitudes within the church changed over the time you were involved? Can you say a bit about that?

PW: Well, yes, I think in a way we won the case, in time and when ... oh dear, I wish I could remember more details ... but when they could see what it was doing to people, and when some of the things had happened, when people were quite obviously being ... I mean, people like Colin Winter of course, helped us to be aware of what was happening, you know. And yes, I think people gradually became aware of it, and yes, it was regarded as one of the evils of the time, apartheid.

ML: Can you remember particular incidents or events that really had an impact on people's attitudes?

PW: Oh dear, I wish I could remember all this, isn't it stupid, you see, it's what it is when you're old, you forget these things. I mean, I wrote so much about this in here, but *[consults autobiography]* ... can't find it *[inaudible]*, I should have read this before you came. I wish I'd read this book through before you came.

ML: Well, you mentioned the paying-in slips as one campaign, do any of the other campaigns come to mind?

PW: Well, the boycotting of, you know, not buying South African oranges, all that kind of thing, you know, you didn't have to buy South African. Yes, I mean, the boycott, I think that was my main, my only experience of boycott like that, but it, yes, you boycotted anything to do with South Africa as a protest against apartheid.

ML: Can you say a bit about your role within the Anti-Apartheid Movement, I think, were you on the Executive?

PW: Of Anti-Apartheid? No, I don't think I was on the Committee at all, no, I don't remember being on the Committee.

ML: I can't remember, I'm asking you!

PW: No, I don't think I was actually on ... I mean, I always attended anti-apartheid meetings and I used to go to the demonstrations in, you know, in the centre of London, you know, those things ... in that meeting *[refers to photo of Trafalgar Square platform speakers in the 70s]*, that was fairly typical, that sort of thing, yes.

ML: This is a picture of you sitting on the platform in Trafalgar Square. Can you remember particular demonstrations? Can you remember the atmosphere? Can you say a bit more about that?

PW: Oh yes, I can remember that. I can remember very well, when we had major speakers, Abdul Minty and people like that, and as you say, Bob Hughes ... *[interruption by knocks on ceiling]* Who's that? Hello? It's not on my door, is it, I don't think? No, I haven't got a bell on the door. Abdul Minty and people like that, and yes, Bob Hughes was always very supportive, and ... yes, I went to a lot of these big meetings, we always seemed to be having big meetings in central London, in Trafalgar Square.

ML: Can you remember anything about the atmosphere of those times? Any particular incidents that you remember?

PW: Well, I can remember that the opposition was quite strong. You know, you had to be ... you had to counter opposition, people who felt we were, as I say, we were supporting violence, we wanted violent revolution and all that, they tended to accuse us of this all the time, and they would tell us that really, South Africa was a very fairly run country, and, you know, why were we making this particular fuss about apartheid? About yes, you know, that people were happy to live there and so on, you know? Yes, there was opposition to it, yes, there was opposition to it.

ML: I think you were involved in the Anti-Apartheid Women's Committee?

PW: Not on the Women's Committee, I don't remember being on the Committee, I might have been.

ML: Well, I think you were a great support, you were a supporter of the Anti-Apartheid Movement Women's Committee. You did speak at an Anti-Apartheid Movement women's conference in 1976, I think?

PW: Yes, I think I did. I don't remember that, I'm sorry. I mean, I often spoke about apartheid, I mean, that was one of my themes, often. Yes, I often spoke about it, just as I ... because the Programme to Combat Racism was such a ... it was the thing I felt so strongly about, yes.

ML: Did you feel that the Women's Committee was particularly important? Can you remember?

PW: Well, yes.

ML: Why was that?

PW: Because I felt women had, within, we already, I mean, women already know what it's like to be prejudiced against, they know what sexism is about, so they ought to be just as aware of what racism is about, you know, when you are, when the thing that's, the fact that you're a woman is so important that people think they can tell you what sort of jobs you ought to do or where you ought to live or all that kind of thing. Similarly, that's the kind of, it's very similar discrimination to the discrimination of racism, so I think, yes, I think women ought to be able to understand about apartheid, they ought to be able to understand what racism is.

ML: Do you feel that the Anti-Apartheid Movement Women's Committee, did it make an impact, and what sort of impact?

PW: Yes, I think it probably did. I mean, the Anti-Apartheid Movement anyway, yes, I don't know about the women making a special impact, but certainly, I mean, I was glad that, to be part of that, yes.

ML: Can you describe what you think were the high points and low points within the churches' involvement in the anti-apartheid campaign? Anything that particularly depressed you, or excited you, can you remember?

PW: Well the low point was always this business of them associating it with violence, or with wanting violent change, you know, so we were always accused of trying to foment this, you know. Yes, I would say that was one of the ... people seemed to think that any talk about trying to overthrow the regime in South Africa, or trying to change the regime in South Africa, meant that we were advocating violent revolution, yes.

ML: Can you remember particular incidents?

PW: I'm trying to think who it was who ... I should have read this before you came. I remember the numbers of time I had to say that, when ... you know, you'd receive letters from people saying, you know, why are you associated with this revolutionary movement or something, you know, and it would be, and that Christians must always be absolutely peaceful, and seeking change by peaceful means. Then it would say, you know, it would be signed by someone, it would say 'Lieutenant-Colonel (retired)', you know *[laughs]*. How hypocritical that is, you would absolutely condemn violence, although you've been part of the most violent wars in history, really, you know.

ML: How did you reply to people like that?

PW: Oh, pretty strongly. *[Laughs]* Yes, I would write that I found it ironic that anyone who's been involved in the world war, for instance, would now condemn any other, any kind of *[inaudible]* to change things by active force, you know.

ML: Did you ever get a reply back again?

PW: Not often! *[laughs]* No, I don't think so. No, but it was a debate very very often you were involved in, I was very often involved in, yes.

ML: And can you ...

PW: You got tired of hearing the same arguments, you know.

ML: Can you remember high points, times when you felt that really the campaign was making a breakthrough?

PW: Well I think in a way Nelson Mandela himself was a great part of that, wasn't it. When he showed such strength of character and so on, that you know, people ... he ... people could see that he was not just a rebel, you know, but he had a real strength of character. So I think Nelson Mandela really did make a big impression on people.

That's an awful noise, isn't it? I don't know who that is. I don't know where that's coming from.

ML: You've got a photo here of you meeting Mandela. Can you remember that?

PW: Oh, absolutely.

ML: Can you tell us a bit more about that? [Noise interference, exchange inaudible] I think they must be putting up hammering, pictures or something. I think it's your neighbour putting up a picture. They're banging the wall, it's not your door. They're banging the wall, aren't they?

...

ML: Well, I'm going to start again and ask you that question again, just while it's quiet. Pauline, you've got a picture here of you meeting Nelson Mandela. Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

PW: Yes. Actually, I did meet him a couple of times. And the first time, I was refused entry to South Africa, and you know, I went, I was stopped at the airport, and not allowed to go into the country. That was – I can't remember what year that was. But some friends asked me if I'd like to go for a car ride with them, and they did take me to Soweto and they took us in. And Mandela was there, it was just after he'd been released, and Winnie was still with him then. So we met them both and that was very interesting. And then the next time was at the World Council of Churches Assembly when we had actually invited – it was after, this was after the independence, after the change. And we had invited Mbeki to come as a speaker. And then we got, at the last minute we got a message to say he wasn't able to come but would we accept Mandela as a substitute? *[laughs]* So I had to introduce Mandela to the whole Assembly and of course that was wonderful. And then he spoke. He spoke very warmly of the support he'd had from churches, and how he'd felt that we were supporting him in the struggle, yes.

ML: When you first met him in Soweto, can you remember what was said, what you asked him, how did he reply, can you remember anything about that?

PW: Well, instantly, I was so moved, and even then, I thought... I felt I was in the presence of a great person and ...

ML: How did he come across as a person?

PW: Oh, very friendly, very gracious, Quiet, yes, no, a very friendly person. But he had a dignity about him that impressed me enormously, yes.

ML: Can you remember anything that was said?

PW: Oh dear. No, not precise words. But, no, he was so friendly. No, he was friendly you see, he was ... and he was very appreciative of those of us who'd been part of the struggle really, he knew a bit of protest movements, he knew all about Anti-Apartheid of course. Yes, so he was very appreciative of all that.

ML: Was that your first visit to South Africa?

PW: Yes. I wasn't allowed, you see. And then the next time I went, of course, I could go, I was free then, I could go ...

ML: Can you remember anything about the impression that the country made on you?

PW: Well, (A), it's a very beautiful country of course. But, no (B), I was horrified by the fact, I remember that we were going to go ...it's all a bit vague in my memory now, we came off the boat we were on, and we were going to go on a tour or something, and there were separate buses, we were on our way to India, and there were separate buses for us, that was so the Indians could go in one bus and we went in the other one. And we thought, I mean, we just refused, we said we were not going on the tour then, because, yes, we were travelling together – yes, that was when I was going to India. But it hit me, this actually does divide people up, you know. And we just refused to go, we said, no, we're not going to go on a tour if we've got to be separated. Well, that's ridiculous.

ML: What happened?

PW: Well, we just didn't go. *[laughs]* Probably a very negative response!

ML: You didn't get your tour?

PW: No, we didn't get the tour.

ML: Can you remember anything else about the visit, things that impressed you, like that? You said it horrified you, can you remember anything?

PW: Yes, I met several people who were in exile in England, you know, who couldn't live in their own country. So that always disturbed me, you know, people who felt that they couldn't live in South Africa. And well, people who'd intermarried, the ban on intermarriage, and all that kind of thing, concerned me. I mean, I wasn't involved in that personally, but I knew people who were under pressure because they'd married across the races. Those sorts of things.

ML: Looking back, you were involved in the struggle over a long time. How do you think it changed you as a person?

PW: Well I think I learned through it, yes. I think I did learn a lot through it. I think I learned that, you know, none of these issues are as simple as they seem, first, and you realise you're touching very deep roots in people when you start challenging their recognition of other people's worth. Yes, I think it changed me because I did realise it was a very crucial issue, it wasn't just a political, it wasn't just something to do with the way you run a country but it's the way you view your fellow human-beings.

ML: How did it change you as a person do you think?

PW: I think I grew through it, yes. I think my understanding, my theological understanding grew through it, yes, I would say so, yes.

ML: Can you say a bit more about that?

PW: I think I became more and more committed as a Christian to thinking that, and indeed as a Methodist, to thinking that ... you know, who was it said, 'I look upon the whole world as my parish'. I mean, you know, you've got to see the whole world, the whole of humanity, as a whole, and once you start trying to divide people on grounds of race or sex or gender or anything else, you're destroying their reality of what humanity is about. You know, you're destroying God's creation.

ML: Looking back now, it's nearly 20 years since the elections. What does it all mean for you now?

PW: Well, I mean, you hear about things that have gone wrong, but then, I mean, political systems are all flawed in a way, aren't they? I don't think, we've not yet found a perfect political system, have we? But it's not as, I mean it seems to me, I get letters from friends in South Africa and I mean, obviously the situation has changed for the better, yes, I would say that, but I mean, as I say no place is perfect and political systems, I mean they're probably, they've also got to develop and [inaudible] live with their own past, really, and overcoming it, yes.

ML: What would you say to people – that's a very tough question isn't it? How do you live with your past? Is there any advice you would give them from your own experience? From your own learning that you were referring to earlier on?

PW: Well of course I mean I tend to think theologically as well, and so to try to work out what it means to believe that God has created the human race of one stock, and that if you really believe that, then you've got to see that being worked out in the way you treat people but also the way in which the State treats people. You know, you've got to see it, it becomes the kind of political system that I can see that, yes, I mean for me ultimately it's a theological issue as well as a political one, yes. How you see humanity, what you think, what it means to be a human being, really.

ML: Do you have any regrets about your involvement?

PW: Oh, none at all, no. I mean I'd do it all again, yes, I mean, in a way you quite enjoy the struggle, well it wasn't a struggle, you quite enjoy the debate at the time, you know? I always enjoy debate, I would enjoy it now really. You know, when you hear the news sometimes, people just being put out of work, or you know, and nothing being done about it, then that really, you get the same kind of anger, you know.

ML: Do you still feel angry?

PW: Yes, I do about some things, yes. I mean, I'm still interested in trying to change the world, yes.

ML: Do you think there's lessons from the Anti-Apartheid Movement that are applicable to situations today?

PW: Well, not just in the Movement, I think from the calibre of the people who got involved in it really, I think Mandela himself, but that kind of strength of character, that refuses to accept the situation but at the same time retains a sort of integrity themselves, that's so important, yes.

ML: [inaudible] that strength of character in people involved in struggles today?

PW: Some people, yes, I mean, yes, obviously, I belong to a political party and all the rest of it and I see faults in them, I mean I don't see the perfect political party in this country or anywhere, but I mean, you live with the weaknesses in a way, don't you, but you try and find the best way of overcoming them, the best way of making it a just society.

ML: I've asked you lots of questions. I just wonder if there's anything you'd like to say that I haven't asked you.

PW: I think the anti-apartheid struggle was one of the most important struggles of the century, well, of my lifetime, anyway, yes. I mean, I think being involved in anti-apartheid struggle was the most important thing I was involved in, yes.

ML: Why was it one of the most important struggles?

PW: Because, as I say it's so basic, for me, I know it sounds funny to say it was a theological issue, but it was, it was part of what it means to me to be a Christian, means to be involved in recognising the full humanity and equality and dignity of all people.

ML: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

PW: I'm grateful for all the colleagues and the allies you meet in these struggles. I mean, you meet people with whom you don't necessarily agree on every issue about everything, but people have this basic commitment to the things that you think matter most. There are great colleagues. I mean, even looking at a picture like the one you showed me [*Trafalgar Square platform*] you remember the people who were there, I mean, some of them in a way of course they're much more [*inaudible*] me, but to be part of their company was important. Yes, I would say I was inspired by how much people were giving of themselves, and how much some of them did suffer for it, did have to put up with through it, you know.

ML: Thank you.

[Rest of tape does not form part of interview - failed to switch off at the end - with the exception of the following:]

ML: Pauline, one question I missed out, I believe that you were involved in the Inter-Faith Colloquium on Apartheid that Bishop Huddleston organised for the Anti-Apartheid Movement, in 1984, and I just would like to ask you, do you have memories of that?

PW: Yes, I remember there was one, yes. Because I always admired everything that Bishop Huddleston did, anyway. And yes, I do remember that. It was, I remember that particularly because for me, it was striking a theological note as well, I mean, in all faiths. Most of the great faiths acknowledge the fact of humanity being one body, you know, the dividing of humanity on grounds of race or sex or anything else is contrary to what the whole purpose of creation was, you know. I mean, that's a clumsy way of putting it, I don't know how to put it, but I suppose because it was a theological as well as a political issue really, yes. I would say that was what struck me.

ML: And wider than just Christianity?

PW: Oh yes, certainly, wider than just Christianity, yes.

ML: Looking back, do you think that event had an impact?

PW: I don't remember hearing a lot about it, but I do remember being there and I remember, yes, I thought it was very good, I thought it was interesting that we could talk about it with people of other faiths as well.

ML: Can you remember anything that came out of it later?

PW: I can't honestly say.

ML: with communication with these other religious communities?

PW: Well, yes, I've been on lots of inter-faith things, yes. Well, that's another argument really. But I mean, yes, I do a lot of inter-faith work as well. At least I used to. And again, learning to respect other faiths is a very important issue and you do find, again, that there's a common – even under the faiths, all the faiths, there's this common realisation that humanity is one body, and to divide it is in some way to destroy a very important part of life, and you find that common even in Muslim against the Jew and all that, it's all part of that same dividing of people.

ML: And you're still involved in that kind of thing now?

PW: Well yes, I do go to some inter-faith discussions. We had a women's inter-faith conference for women, on inter-faith things, yes, that was some time ago now, that was in Canada, I went to that. Yes, I've been to some very good things on that, yes.

ML: Thank you.