

Peter Campbell Kerchhoff (1934–1999)

Peter Kerchhoff, who died in July 1999 as the result of a car accident, was the organiser of the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (Pacsa) and was well known and admired among church people of all denominations and among many of those concerned with issues of social justice.

He was born in Johannesburg in August 1934, went to school at Jeppe High and, after working at African Explosives and Chemical Industries (AECI) in Modderfontein got a bursary to study at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg where he qualified as an industrial chemist. He then worked first at Kynochs in Umbogintwini, then at AECI again, and finally at Hulett Aluminium, where he was chief chemist. He also took a BCom degree part-time.

A growing concern with socio-political injustice and the inadequacy of the response to it by many Christians, particularly white Christians, led a group of people — most of whom had been members of the then banned Christian Institute — to set up Pacsa in 1979. Peter courageously gave up his job at Huletts in order to become Pacsa's full-time organiser.

Under his leadership Pacsa made an impact in several areas: it encouraged serious thought about human relations and questions of justice, it was thoroughly ecumenical and developed interdenominational and inter-faith spirituality (though Pacsa members retained their denominational allegiances), and it got involved in specific activities.

During the period of intense state repression in the eighties, the Pacsa office became known as a place where victims of police and other violence or harassment could seek refuge. It was no doubt largely as a result of Pacsa's achievement in this area that Peter Kerchhoff was detained for three-and-a-half months in 1986. The police held him in solitary confinement and interrogated him for many weeks. They could not believe that a true Christian would have so much interest in the poor and the oppressed, and tried earnestly to get him to admit that he was a 'communist'.

He was also involved, over the years, in a wide range of social-justice and church initiatives. He played leading roles in the local branches of the Institute of Race Relations, the Detainees' Support Committee, the Advice Office, the End Conscription Campaign, the Dependents' Conference and, more recently, Amnesty International. He was also a founder member of the Association for African Rural Advancement (Afra), the Pietermaritzburg Urban Ministry Project (Pump), the Council of Churches and the Natal Church Leaders Group, of which he was secretary and treasurer for many years.

He was also involved in a variety of community projects, in trade union affairs, including the Sarmcol strike at Mpophomeni, and in the crisis committee at the time of the Seven Days War in 1990. He was a member of the National Justice and Reconciliation Commission of the Anglican Church, where he was particularly active on the question of forced removals. In the eighties he was a member of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and in the 1994 election he was a prominent local representative of the Independent Electoral Commission. In 1995 he was ordained as a deacon in the Anglican Church.



Peter Kerchhoff

(Photograph: The Natal Witness)

Since 1990, under Peter's leadership, Pacsa has modified its role in obvious ways, but it has continued to seek theoretical and practical ways in which dedicated Christians and other concerned people can make a creative contribution to the exciting but worrying society in which we live. A list of the activities and involvements of Peter Kerchhoff gives one a lively sense of his great energy and enthusiasm. But it tells one little of his warmth, his openness, his unfailing good humour, his strength and his compassion. He generated an enormous amount of caring thought and activity — he was a true leader — and yet he was amazingly self-effacing. His heart and soul were wholly in the work that he was doing and in the people he was working with: the kudos was of no interest to him at all.

The many people who admired and loved him are devastated by his sudden disappearance from the scene. He leaves his wife Joan, four daughters and five grandchildren.

COLIN GARDNER
(By courtesy of *The Natal Witness*.)