

16 April 90 SW/201/2032/102

18.4.90

Marjatta,

Please read through this letter from Christopher Merrett and immediately share with other comrades of the library staff. We need to respond and send advice to him soon. I've sent a copy to Nokululeko, and will be sending you a report I wrote for the Education Department. Give all my strongest regards.



University of Natal

Library

P.O. Box 375 Pietermaritzburg 3200 South Africa
Telephone (0331) 63320 Fax (0331) 63497
Telegrams University Telex 643719

Joseph Reilly
P O Box 233
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010

6 April 1990

a close colleague of mine from Minnesota

Dear Joseph,

I was very pleased and excited to receive a letter from you, having heard of you via Sandy Berman. Thank you for recommending me for the Immroth Award - I regard this as an honour indeed.

You are absolutely correct about the dearth of progressive writing on South African librarianship. A few years ago I tried to get out of the profession and into university administration because of this, and other factors. I am glad I did not because things are changing and there has been an influx of progressive thinking people into the profession of late. Some of them are not very good librarians and this worries me a lot - the people of South Africa deserve the best in this and other ways. We are about to launch a new journal called Innovation to cater for writing which is progressive in content and gives an opportunity to young librarians whose work would otherwise not appear in print. The editorial collective comprises a group of Pietermaritzburg librarians, but in due course we would like to assemble a group of international editorial advisors. Some details are enclosed.

It is good to know that people like you are working so assiduously from outside to further the cause of South African liberation, and progressive people are very grateful for this. It is a poor reflection on librarians that up to now there has been no positive move towards a progressive association. Ten years ago the situation was so gloomy that the few progressive in the profession turned their backs on the situation and got involved in more promising causes. In my case, for instance, from 1980 until last year I was involved as an activist in non-racial (SACOS) sport, JASA (the academic staff association of this university which affiliated to the UDF in 1983), and Pmb Descom (detainees' support work). At present I am active only in the last and have turned towards the promising trends in our profession.

The University of Natal rejects apartheid.
It is an equal opportunities,
affirmative action University.

Last October five librarians met one evening in Durban and started the process of setting up an association of progressive librarians for Natal. Since then three meetings have taken place in Durban or Pietermaritzburg, involving over 50 people in all. At present a small committee has been mandated to draw up a constitution for discussion and this work is developing reasonably quickly. The idea is to launch the new association officially in July of this year with a day-long programme in Durban. I suspect it will affiliate itself to the Mass Democratic Movement, but this is not inevitable. There will be liberal and Black Consciousness elements which will want to remain unaffiliated - they have already revealed themselves in the preliminary meetings.

This year we must establish links soon in the building of the new organization!

I am enclosing the latest document relating to the new association which is of course very much a draft and for your interest only at present. As for the rest of the country I am not sure what is happening - we hear from time to time of initiatives in Cape Town and Johannesburg. My guess is that events will move fastest of all in Natal as the left is less divided here than elsewhere in the country. This is for historical reasons, but also because we face a massive problem in the form of Inkatha and cannot afford to be disunited. In some ways Inkatha does us a favour. I believe people are aware of the urgency involved in the development of the new organization especially in terms of forging links with comrades outside the country.

The ANC is already active in this area and we are waiting for an office to open in Pietermaritzburg so that we can start the political work necessary for South Africa's ^{TOTAL} future. Almost all my professionally qualified colleagues in this library are progressively inclined and as a group we would love to establish contact with people at SOMAFCO. Is there any way you can help us to achieve a link? I have no doubt that conventional communication would be interfered with but there are ways and means around that. Legally there is no reason why we cannot work as closely as possible.

It's up to you! I feel confident about these people. Perhaps we should go ahead and send them a communique?

It was also good to hear that you are planning some action re the IFLA conference in August. I have been in contact with the Bis group of Scandinavian librarians and pointed out to them that the case against SAILIS and its members from within SA can only be made by an organization, not by individuals. I hope that several members of the new association from Durban (Philip van Zijl, Desi Liversage and Cathy Stadler) will be in Stockholm with a message from the group. I'll give them your name and hope that they make contact. I am prepared to write something myself, but believe that a document from a democratic association would be far more appropriate. SAILIS is a devious and reactionary organization and it is imperative that it is cut off from international contact and sympathy as soon as possible. There are deep tensions within SAILIS at present which could lead to the emergence of a more liberal regime interested in the perpetuation of the status quo under a more 'acceptable' facade. This has to be watched carefully.

He wrote the other enclosure I don't know enough about the EPU to express confidence.

The situation in South Africa is both challenging and dangerous. The old days were much easier to cope with in a way. Now, for the first time we are up

Again, this is a real danger. The movement must aid this new group. We'll then push the international library community to give it recognition.

against clever right wing politicians - the fascists were easier to counter-attack as they behaved so stupidly. I am sure De Klerk is intending to form an powerful coalition of conservative forces spanning all communities which could play a far more influential role in South Africa than the DTA does in Namibia. The SA establishment seems to have learned important lessons from the Namibian experience which are going to be a major challenge to democratic forces.

I'll pass on to you any relevant documents which come my way. Please keep in contact and all the very best in your important work.

Yours in the struggle,

Christopher

Christopher Merrett
Deputy University Librarian

PS Apologies for typing errors!