

Humble Hunte Messiah of townships

MIKE COWARD talks to the former great West Indian Test opener Conrad Hunte, now the development coach for the United Cricket Board of Africa

CAPE TOWN: The whole world should know of the work of Conrad Hunte, who has reached the end of a remarkable and spiritual journey which began in Melbourne nearly 34 years ago.

Hunte, the consummate West Indian batsman of the 1950s and 1960s, is teaching his love of God, his love of humanity and his love of cricket to the boys and young men of the iniquitous townships in the tumultuous republic of South Africa.

Blessed with great wisdom, boundless energy and a rare charisma, Hunte is certain that his beloved game of cricket can help to bring about significant social change in the country which is nervously preparing for the first all-race elections on April 27.

Furthermore, he believes fervently that he has been specially called to serve the downtrodden, dispossessed and disadvantaged in his ministry as the national cricket development coach for the United Cricket Board of South Africa.

"I have been prepared by history and by the commitment of my faith for this moment in history. My whole upbringing has been a preparation for this moment," Hunte said.

At the age of 61, Hunte can look back on a remarkable life. He is, however, more intent on looking forward to

the new South Africa when, with the grace of his God, the colour conscious will become colour blind and a just and equitable society will emerge from the maelstrom of today.

But to fully understand the extent of his commitment there is a need to reflect on his life and times. Born into an impoverished community in Barbados, he defied considerable odds from an early age to prosper both as a student and as a cricketer.

Indeed, such was the power and majesty of his strokeplay that he soon upheld the tiny island's rich tradition for producing some of the world's foremost cricketers

and in 1957, at the age of 25, played the first of his 44 Test matches for West Indies - 10 of them against Australia.

Flushed by his success and revelling in the lifestyle of the touring international cricketer, Hunte rejoiced in being a member of Frank Worrell's incomparable team which gave the kiss-of-life to Test cricket in Australia in 1960-61.

At the same time, he sensed he was losing his self control and an inner-voice compelled him to re-evaluate his life.

By chance, in Melbourne, he encountered the Moral

Rearmament movement with its tenets of complete honesty, purity, love and unselfishness.

It was a meeting which profoundly changed his life and ultimately led to his picking up the phone at home in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1991 and offering his services to Dr Ali Bacher, the managing director of the United Cricket Board of South Africa and the inspiration of the township coaching program.

Having married a noted American journalist and television presenter, Hunte had spent the previous 12 years in Atlanta as a successful independent contractor

in financial marketing services and, during the last eight years, also had acted as honorary consul for Barbados.

"I have residency in Barbados by birth, in Britain by adoption, in America by marriage and in South Africa by choice," he says with a characteristically warm smile and a delightful high-pitched laugh.

Like Atlanta, Johannesburg is renowned for its racial tension and violence and Hunte admits to being concerned for the welfare of his wife Patricia and their three daughters Roberta, 16, Grace, 11, and Veronica, 9.

Yet Hunte himself is unafraid and he is as industrious and conspicuous in the townships as he is in his office in the leafy grounds of the Wanderers Club midway between the tree-lined and ritzy northern suburbs and the squalor of Alexandra township.

Such has been his impact nationally over the past two years that the Marylebone Cricket Club, which funds the position, is hopeful Hunte will continue in the job for many more years.

A powerful orator with a wonderful sense of humour, he has an excellent rapport with the kids as well as their

"Here we are, in a cricket and non-political situation trying to make a contribution; trying to build a truly non-racial cricket environment.

"But you have no control over the political situation. There is so much to contend with. There is the violence, the car thefts and hijackings, the lack of education, the terrible family and housing conditions and the malnutrition.

"Yet we believe we are on the right track. Research shows that cricket is the fastest growing sport in South Africa among the blacks. And by the year 2000 it will have increased five-times.

"The next step is to produce a black, and by black I mean African, Indian or Coloured, chaps of real excellence to take their place in the national side. That is the next target. The raw talent is there. Of that there is no question.

"There is no doubt cricket can be a catalyst for change and if we can create a truly non-racial cricket situation in this country, it will have a powerful effect in the wider society.

"Cricket is not the final solution for this country, of course. But it is a vehicle for change.

"I feel very blessed. I feel privileged and humble that I still have a chance long after my cricket days have finished."

Can the noble game ever have had a nobler servant?

‘Look to the day when colour conscious become colour blind.’