

Dry Bones: The Unification of Presbyterian Churches in Southern Africa

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Introduction

In South Africa “Called to be the One Church” is not just an ecclesiological imperative; it is integrally a call to political, economic and social justice. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu, our most famous South African member of the Faith and Order Plenary Commission once said, “Apartheid is too strong for the divided churches.”

Christianity begins in South Africa as a divided community. The colonial missionaries exported to our land all the deep divisions of European Christianity, the kinds of division that Faith and Order has so long sought to overcome. But we experienced new kinds of division in the mid-nineteenth century, when in some churches whites would no longer receive Holy Communion with their black sisters and brothers. The sin of racism led to a new kind of Christian disunity, one that caused divisions within churches, not just between them, particularly amongst the Dutch Reformed family of churches. . The roots of political apartheid in the 20th century were deeply imbedded in the ecclesial apartheid of the nineteenth. The apartheid laws in turn accentuated the divisions in the churches.

The ecumenical movement, with its Call to be the One Church, touched South Africa as in other parts of the world. There was urgency in our churches, and yet there was also a indigenous South African foundation from which to respond to the ecumenical call.

The roots of ecumenism—God’s “call to be the One Church”—in the churches in southern Africa historically can be traced to the education and training of clergy, in particular the self-trained black clergy. These men were a significant force in the growth of the church in Africa. The integration of the self-trained black clergy into recognized mainstream Protestant congregations occurred through apprenticeship and training provided by theologians educated in graduate. Despite the rejection of African religious customs by the missionaries, many of these informally trained early black clergy banded together. They had their own knowledge-base from which to draw and share with their colleagues. As a result, cooperative learning structures within the churches produced a diverse African leadership.

In South Africa, this same trend continued in many of the mission schools, which became important centres of ethnic interaction. Institutions such as Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa (Fedsem, 1963-1975), the University of Fort Hare and the Lovedale Mission Institute used traditional African forms of education as an entry point for evangelical and pastoral formation, irrespective of ethnic origins. This resulted in a black clergy that transcended ethnic boundaries. In other words, cross-cultural study and living has fostered a spirit of cooperative work among clergy from different ethnic groups. This tradition of solidarity, regardless of ethnicity, continued through the colonial period and well into the life of independent African nations. This meant that clergy were exposed to different theological, doctrinal, and denominational orientations. This multilateral foundation can be regarded as one of the original wellsprings of South African ecumenism. The growth of these institutions was important and

opened a window of Christian unity because students trained together and developed a trusting community. Schools such as Fedsem became a blessing because we lived and trained together. Little did we know that the seminary was training ecumenical leaders. It made us determine to fight both apartheid and denominationalism because they were weakening the churches voice in fighting apartheid. We were determined to fight denominationalism which allowed the structures of apartheid to divide us further. It was not always easy. Tension was experienced between black and white clergy, but interracial tensions also abounded. Those of us who were new to ordained ministry were frustrated by this attitude of separateness. Our mission was to train and work together.

That the leadership of our churches had a formation that was basically ecumenical was crucial to effective cooperation of all members of our churches in the struggle against apartheid. The indigenous multilateral cooperation amongst the African leaders made participation in other multilateral contexts easy for us, such as the World Council of Churches and the South African Council of Churches.

The role of the anti-apartheid churches, the place of ecumenism, the place of the WCC in the overthrowing of apartheid is well-enough known, and need not be rehearsed here.

The years since the fall of apartheid in 1994 have been a time of truth and reconciliation not only for South Africa as a nation, but also for its churches, which have taken up the call to be one church again. The aims of Faith and Order to “proclaim the oneness of the church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship” (By-laws of Faith and Order, 3.1) is lived out in particular way in the divided churches of South Africa today. Since the divisions requiring immediate healing are not those of the classic Faith and Order agenda, but the division of racism from the apartheid regime between and within families of churches, the ecumenical methodology is different. This quest for unity, however, does bear upon the functions of Faith and Order as expressed in our By-laws, namely “to study such questions of faith, order and worship as bear on this aim and to examine such social, cultural, political, racial and other factors as affect the unity of the church” (By-laws of Faith and Order, 3.2.a).

The Call to be One Church in the South African context is not only a deep part of the healing of the wounds from the past, but opens for us the path to the future. Given the history of Christianity in Africa and this growing tenet on what it means to be a modern Christian, the contemporary issue of denominational unification in Africa, especially in the Presbyterian Church in southern Africa, became unavoidable.

Modern Christianity, coupled with the idea of what it means to be a new South African—one who embraces a multiracial and multiethnic society has inspired many denominations to unite with churches that had previously seceded from the original church.

Faced with the pressures of globalisation and abject poverty—all common legacies of colonialism—not to mention more recent developments such as the HIV Aids pandemic, recent xenophobic violence, migration from other parts of Africa, the growing economic recession, and the like, the churches must unite in order to fight these challenges, no less than they did against apartheid. More generally put, no one can exist alone and certainly not during a tumultuous time like this one. However, with the growing incorporation and acceptance of western concepts, like individualism that render ideas of community irrelevant, Africans have not relied on their own traditional systems to guide them.

Traditional ideas of community have only recently been elevated in our fight against poverty. Many African churches and communities have banded together, using the concept of “communalism” to fight poverty. In the midst of these problems, we have discovered the importance and necessity of a united church under God’s domain. Granting primacy to God, rather than to denominational differences, has reminded us that we are sisters and brothers in Christ. Our want and desire to fight issues such as apartheid, colonialism, poverty and disease has united us. In other words, regardless of racial, ethnic, national, gender, or denominational identity, or even whether a person is ordained minister or a layperson, all are created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore Christ is Lord and Saviour of all.

The Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa

The movement towards the healing of the divided churches is experienced in different ways by different churches in South Africa. My own experience comes from the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa. It is this particular context that I would like to address. The ecumenical journeys of other South African churches, particularly the United Reformed Church, are essential part of God’s call to be the one Church. But I can only speak out of the experience of my own church family.

The Presbyterian churches in southern Africa worked to become a united church. It is important to remember that the story of unity among Presbyterians took its course during apartheid and its aftermath. As a result, the legacy of apartheid’s racial tensions was cultivated and in some churches sustained. These racial tensions produced a culture of distrust and miscommunication among these different churches. Apartheid immensely impeded the possibilities of a healthy and constructive union.

My personal experiences have taught me that critique should always be honest but couched in the language of love and understanding. This experience has allowed me to reflect on my own Christian identity, making me more empathetic towards different people’s experiences. This is not to say that our discussions on Church unity were easy. There were many times where the clergy had to suspend discussions of unity. During these times, I kept in mind my grandmother’s adage that “differences should not always be concealed and smoothed over. Instead, true beauty produced by rough textures offers a unique patchwork of experiences.” She would say to us, we must agree to disagree agreeably. These simple insights in ordinary and plain words unravelled the complicated charged readings of church politics. Looking back at our union discussions, I can say that the ecumenical path to unity is an existential dialogue. Before it becomes a dialogue of theological and doctrinal issues, views and perspectives, it must become a living encounter of people in different denominations.

The union of the Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa and the Reformed Presbyterian Church is an important example of preserving diversity while also making unity more viable. The divisions of this family of churches, and the efforts to find unity, go back to the first half of the twentieth century. The possibility of unification entered denominational discussions in the early 1930s. At that time there were four different Presbyterian churches in South Africa. Each of the churches had different roots; they included the Presbyterian Church in southern Africa (PCSA), the Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPC), and the Presbyterian Church of Africa (PCA), and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa (EPCSA). The PCSA, a predominantly white church with some black congregations, was intended for white settlers and soldiers from Scotland. It came into existence in South Africa in 1897. The RPC also developed from the missionary work of the Church of Scotland. Although the two churches had the same theological

roots, the RPC was originally intended for the African population. It was established prior to the twentieth century but became independent in 1923. The PCA, originally a part of the PCSA, established a church organized by missionary-educated and trained African clergy in 1921. It broke away due to mistreatment of African clergy. The EPCSA, on the other hand, originated from the missionary work of the Swiss Mission Church. As a result of these different origins, different churches emerged. Clergy investment in Presbyterian unity vacillated over time depending on different ministers' theological orientation and personal commitment to church unity.

Union talks used to be on and off, depending on the racial tensions faced by the four Presbyterian churches. At one point the PCSA was challenged to hand over all the black congregations to the Presbyterian Church of Africa. When the black congregations refused they were labelled "white minded" by some ministers. Tension between black congregations and ministers escalated the disagreement on union. At that time the leaders of union negotiation within PCSA were whites together with two Africans. The idea was to bring the other three churches to have fellowship with the so-called white church, but not to merge with it in an organic union. The other churches reminded PCSA that they were churches not committees, and therefore negotiations must be taken seriously. Discussions were called off for a long period. At one point some whites within our church were opening expressed concern about the security of pension funds in a united church, as well as fears that the other three African Presbyterian churches would be a financial burden. This insult in turn led the three churches to stop negotiations.

In the 1990 the RPC challenged the PCSA to resume negotiations on church unity. This was done by the new group that had been trained at Fedsam. I was privileged to serve as convener of union negotiations from PCSA. The Rev D. Soga was elected by RPC as a co-convener. As the ne co-conveners, we were convinced that it was God's will for churches to unite.

We analyzed the work done by our predecessors. This analysis gave us a way of moving forward. Financial issues were raised again by some white members of our denomination. The RPC responded by saying: "we should divide our pension fund among ourselves and then start a new fund together"¹ There was no way we could stop the discussions because of financial problems. At that meeting, different committees were created in order to deal with work (e.g., polity, associations, pension fund contributions etc). They all reported at the committee of union talk. As the discussions continued we asked that transparency operate in all committees. We should be honest in sharing our strengths and weaknesses. Our caution to ourselves is that we also cannot afford to hamper or lose the impact of public witness by that which takes us away from the heart of the Gospel message of unity and salvation. We need to be honest and sincere in who, what and where we are? This certainly will unable us to avoid the pretences.

Looking back at our discussions I realize that our churches may not have been financially strong but we were proud of what we had achieved as black churches within the country. Ironically, this discussion brought relief to some of our white members, especially those who were concerned about pension funds and financial burdens if they united with poor denominations. Reading the minutes of African Mission Committee I realize that the problem was the fear of Africans gaining the ascendancy within a united church. According to the rumours circulating around, the Africans were going to be majority members, with the result that they would control finances of the new denomination. This problem confronted us seriously. As discussions were going on I received letters from my colleagues regarding pensions. We had to address this issue. If we did not address these problems within the church there was no way we could speak prophetically

¹ Discussions during the meetings of the joint negotiations committee

with one voice to the apartheid government. If the churches could not face its own problems, then we had nothing to say to the country, let alone the oppressed. In other words, we would have lost our prophetic voice and ministry.

In 1998 our committee prepared a report on the work of union. Emotions were high as union was being discussed. One of the senior leaders remarked “you will never make anything of this union: like the 1929 union talks in Scotland, oil and water will not mix².”

Those who came from Fedsem kept saying “we are busy quarrelling and have forgotten the requirements of union as Christ will for us. We ought to desire it and work towards it”. I kept thinking: who would be excited to unite with people who have such a deeply racist and tribal attitudes. My thoughts wondered again, and then I remembered that in 1973 union negotiations broke down due to PCSA voting against union with the Congregationalists over political manoeuvring and fear of a black majority. I recall the convenor thanking members of his committee with tears in his eyes. I was so grieved by this move. It appeared to me that we were about to commit the same mistake in the discussion amongst the Reformed churches. As we were discussing Church union, the country was burning; riots and violence were the order of the day. Several seminarians stood up and spoke for union with deep passion. I am reminded of Farley who said: “unity is rooted in God’s love. God connected God self to the people and to the world in love” (Farley 1983:48) In other words, the love of God embraces all human beings, irrespective of religion, race and colour.

As discussions were warming up I saw some ministers supporting the idea of unity. Yes, it was unity that began at Seminary, where we were taught on how to live, work and love each another. How could union talks fail? If it did, it would have meant that we were not truthful to each other. The English have an expression: “straight talk does not break any friendship.” This was the time when we needed to share with those who wanted to stop union because their self-centredness.

We voted for union in 1998 and proposed that the next General Assembly beheld jointly in Port Elizabeth in 1999. We met separately for the first three days in order to conclude the work our former churches. On the fourth day we processed together into hall and began worship. People were singing, dancing as we were worshipping God together—a God who had brought us close together again. I think God smiled on that day. Yes after sixty years of discussions we finally were united!

One part of our journey is completed, and we will never be the same. In other words, our journey of union points us to start negotiations with the remaining two Presbyterians. This time we should treat PCA and EPCSA with dignity, because we have learned from the above discussed union. We are following this route because of the name we chose when we united. We consciously included the other two Presbyterian Churches - hence the name “Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa”: This signals our hope to continue discussions of union with the other two Presbyterian churches in southern Africa.

Conclusion

The Call to be One Church from the South African experience of apartheid and its aftermath in general, and from the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa’s context in particular may at first seem to have little to do with this gathering in Crete of Faith and Order theologians from

² Discussions took place on the floor of Assembly in 1998 prior to the two churches union in the following year.

around the world, and from so many different denominations. The Orthodox Academy of Crete is so different from the world of the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa. But we are linked to one another.

Our work this week on issues of ecclesiology, sources of authority, and moral discernment belong to the same response to God's call to be the one Church. In our South African context, we were inspired by the historic calling of Faith and Order to "proclaim the oneness of the church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship."

May the Commission on Faith and Order, and the all the churches you represent, be inspired by our longing for unity, and by our hard work to begin to heal the divisions in the Body of Christ, that required no less than organic unity as the sign of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, so that we may be one, as Christ and the Father are one, so that the world may believe.