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Presbyterian expressions in Southern Africa: in the context of 350 years of the Reformed tradition

ABSTRACT

This article traces the development of Presbyterianism in Southern Africa from its beginnings in the Scottish Mission to the present in terms of its heritage and legacy. It notes the formative events of the formation of the PCSA in 1897 and the Mzimba Secession. The independent though not autonomous Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa was formed in 1923. These churches boast a proud tradition of involvement both in the ecumenical movement and the struggle for social justice in South Africa.

HERITAGE

The ultimate roots of Presbyterianism in Southern Africa are to be found in the Apostolic Church and in Scottish Presbyterianism. Although mission was integral to the life of the Scottish Church,¹ the ordination of the Rev John Ross in 1823 by the Presbytery of Hamilton, and his setting apart for missionary work, came only on the eve of the Church of Scotland officially recognising the necessity of overseas mission (1824). He joined the work in the Eastern Cape at Lovedale Mission, which was established in 1823, to be followed in the early 1830s by the foundation of Burnshill, Pirie and Balfour Missions. These were missions of the Free Church of Scotland, the Glasgow Missionary Society having transferred its work to the Free Church in 1845 following the “Disruption”. By the time the Free Church of Scotland and the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland united in 1900, there were twenty-eight congregations of the Scottish mission in South Africa with 14 402 members (Hewat 1960:184). Educational work was fundamental to this mission work. The foremost educational institution was Lovedale, opened in 1841. Other institutions were opened at Mgwali (1857) and Blythswood (1877), while other missions were established in the Transkei, East Griqualand, Natal and the Transvaal.

The history of the Scottish mission was largely influenced by the formation of Mission Councils for “the maintenance, administration or independence of our Mission in South Africa” (Cory MS 14859, *Our Missions in South Africa*). This meant that general policy would be determined solely by whites in the Mission Councils while presbyteries were relegated to the role of exercising discipline predominantly over blacks as if mission was not part of their remit and concern.

Two events in the closing years of the 19th century paved the way for the formation of an independent black church. The first was the formation of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa

1 Preface to the Scots Confession of 1560.

(PCSA) in 1897 as a result of the coming together of a number of independent colonial congregations and presbyteries which had grown in South Africa since the early years of the 19th century, beginning in Cape Town. This was a predominantly white church with mission work amongst the black population. From the beginning, the work among black people was segregated and was overseen by a separate Missions Committee of the General Assembly. This was the result of a combination of factors – the perceived need for ongoing supervision, black poverty, white paternalism. This system was terminated in 1962-1963 though it is true that over the years the black section of the church grew substantially but was largely dependent on white support. Throughout this period the courts of the denomination above the Kirk Session were fully integrated.

The Mzimba Secession occurred in the context of growing resistance to colonisation, segregation and oppression in the secular sphere which resulted in black people becoming “involved in a wide range of inventive political responses and innovative forms of action” (Beinart 1984:108). However, resistance also flowed into ecclesiastical life, giving expression to “feelings of resentment which could not be easily expressed otherwise” (Duncan 1997:72). The occasion for the secession was a dispute, which arose between Rev P J Mzimba, and his presbytery following a visit he had made to Scotland during which he raised funds for a building project. The subsequent control of these funds became a serious contentious issue. However, there were more universal issues at stake including distrust and suspicion concerning contemporary events especially following the formation of the PCSA, reluctance to ordain black ministers, imported denominationalism, political unrest coupled with a growing black nationalism, missionary attitudes and racism; see James Stewart’s (Principal of Lovedale) clarion call “Whites must rule” (*Christian Express*, xxvii, Nov 1897, 1:329). In this particular instance “money and property were the precipitating factors in the quarrel between the Free Church mission and Mzimba” (Brock 1974:354) along with the presence of “a strong personality to initiate it and carry it through” (Duncan 1997:88).

These two momentous ecclesiastical events provided the context in which the Foreign Mission Committee (FMC) of the now United Free Church of Scotland² focused its attention on the future of mission policy. It clearly favoured a “united” church policy while many in the Scottish mission supported the “native” church option.

In order to resolve the issue, the United Free Church of Scotland sent a deputation to South Africa in 1920 where they met at Blythswood Institution with representatives of the PCSA, the Mission Synod of Kaffraria, the Presbyteries of Kaffraria, Mankazana and Natal and the Mission Council of Natal (these were the constituent parts of the Scottish Mission). The views of the majority supported the formation of a black church and a Commission on Union was formed to prepare for the foundation of a new black church. The convocation of Presbyterian missions met at Lovedale on the 23rd of July 1923 and received the Synod of Kaffraria, the Presbytery of Kaffraria, the Presbytery of Mankazana (and belatedly the Mission Council of Natal) into membership of the newly constituted church. The Rt Rev W Stuart, first Moderator of the General Assembly of the BPCSA, summed up the feelings of the Assembly describing the event as,

a forward step in the line of natural development and a result of earnest and prayerful deliberation, full and careful consideration of the many interests involved and persons

2 The Free Church of Scotland and the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland united to form the United Free Church of Scotland in 1900.

specially concerned ... The Church of Christ is for everyone ... irrespective of nationality, colour or tongue.³

Throughout its history, the BPCSA has had to struggle against the dominating presence of missionaries who exercised control through their Mission Council. It was independent though not autonomous. This situation remained until 1981 when the Mission Council was finally dissolved, the now RPCSA became fully responsible for its own affairs.

Various assessments have been made of the Bantu/Reformed Presbyterian Church⁴ over the years and not all of them positive (cf Van der Spuy 1971:72; Brock 1974: 60). Perhaps Rt Rev R H W Shepherd was not too far from the truth in his assessment,

The greatness of a Church does not consist in its perfection of organisation ... its financial resources. It is the spiritual life it is producing in its members ... I think we can say that these things have been produced ... But there have been failures – confusion in organisation, the desire for power, dispute and cases of discipline.⁵

LEGACY

Surprisingly enough, it is its contribution and commitment to ecumenism that is one of the main legacies of the Presbyterians to the Church. Throughout its history, the BPCSA/RPCSA demonstrated this in its mission work. Its educational institutions like Lovedale were open to those of all denominations as were the majority of its staff positions. Perhaps its greatest educational contribution was the role it played in the foundation of the South African Native College at Fort Hare in 1916, the first black university in Africa. The same was true of its medical, agricultural and industrial work. This was also clear from the Scottish Mission's involvement in the General Missionary Conferences in the early decades of the 20th century. But it was specifically as a church that its commitment was clear.

In world ecumenism, both Presbyterian churches were members of the World Council of Churches (WCC)⁶ and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC).⁷ The RPCSA has maintained close relations with the Church of Scotland and a number of its ministers have studied in Scotland. It has also related to the Presbyterian Church of the USA, the Mennonites in the USA and the Presbyterian Church in Australia. Within the African context, it was involved in the All Africa Council of Churches and made many informal relations with African churches through such contacts, particularly with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). The PCSA formed transactional links in Zambia and Zimbabwe⁸ and was actively involved in their national councils of churches. Sadly, it did not become part of the union of the Zambian churches, which now form

3 Bantu Presbyterian Church Blue Book (General Assembly minutes) BPC BB1923:39.

4 The Bantu Presbyterian Church of SA changes its name to the Reformed Presbyterian Church in SA on the 1st of January 1979.

5 BPC BB 1949 Moderatorial Address, A non-Separatist Church: The history and present position of the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa.

6 The PCSA having been involved in its predecessors, the Faith and Order and the Life and Work Movements.

7 The PCSA's links were established with one of its predecessors, the "Alliance of Reformed Churches throughout the world holding the Presbyterian system" (formed in 1877) in 1897.

8 Beginning in 1896 with the formation of a congregation in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, which became part of the PCSA in 1898.

the United Church of Zambia. It was, in addition, however, a member of the Council for World Mission, as is its successor the UPCSA.

Both denominations have been and continue to be closely involved in the South African ecumenical movement, having been active members of the Christian Council of South Africa, the South African Council of Churches (SACC), the Church Unity Commission (CUC) as well as in the regional branches of the SACC. Perhaps they were at their most effective at the local level, especially during the apartheid era. In 1960, they were represented at the historic Cottesloe Consultation organised under the auspices of the WCC.⁹ The RPCSA became member of the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa (ABRECSA), its first official contact with the Reformed tradition in South Africa. In the face of the challenge to the very existence of the Church during the years of apartheid, it was perhaps easier for a common commitment to develop as a result of the mutually experienced threat than in less troubled and threatening times such as we are now living in.

At various periods during the 20th century, the RPCSA and PCSA engaged in union negotiations with all of their sister Presbyterian churches and with one another. During the worst years in the struggle against apartheid, in the 1980s, the RPCSA had adopted the policy of uniting with its black sister churches as a priority. Despite earlier negotiations having been completed with the PCSA and the Tsonga Presbyterian Church (TPC) union did not take place though it was agreed that “the Basis of Union negotiations between the Presbyterian Churches be kept as an open possibility before the three churches ... [and] that the three churches be urged to maintain and extend existing areas at local, Presbytery and Assembly level”.¹⁰ Later union negotiations took place between the RPCSA and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (EPCSA)¹¹ in the early 1980s. Unfortunately these discussions failed when union was in sight, having been agreed by the RPC, through the withdrawal of the EPCSA. Sporadic attempts, beginning in 1959¹² (although there had been earlier attempts at union negotiations) and again in 1974,¹³ were made by the BPCSA to unite with the Presbyterian Church of Africa (PCA), to the extent of agreeing to prepare a draft basis of union in 1990, were hampered by the growing disunity within that denomination. The RPCSA also entered union negotiations with the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) though these came to nothing as negotiations between UCCSA and the PCSA failed.

It was at the third attempt that its negotiations between the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa and the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (PCSA) bore fruit in 1999. Earlier union negotiations had always faltered on the grounds of racism and the fear of domination on the part of the BPCSA. However, following the democratic elections of 1994, the RPCSA made a renewed approach to the PCSA feeling that this was the right time to approach a sister denomination now as an equal partner despite long held fears concerning loss of independence and white domination.

Perhaps the RPCSA's greatest ecumenical contribution was made by its deep involvement in the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa (FedSem), which was formed in 1963. The RPCSA committed the totality of its resources to the FedSem along with the other black member churches (the EPCSA and the PCA). All of the other churches involved diversified their

9 BPC BB 1960 Min 3315.

10 BPC BB 1973 Min 4572.1&2.

11 The Tsonga Presbyterian Church was renamed the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in 1980.

12 BPC BB 1959 Min 3271 agreed to consider a basis of union with the PCA in the 1960 Gen Ass.

13 BPC BB 1974 Min 4670.

theological education programmes (the Methodists, Anglicans, Congregationalists and the PCSA) predominantly on racial grounds. (They had come together to establish an ecumenical faculty at Rhodes University in 1947 for their white candidates for the ministry.) A novel ecumenical opportunity presented itself in 1987 when negotiations began with the Lutherans and Roman Catholics (and later the Evangelical Bible Seminary of South Africa) which resulted in the formation of the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Institutions. The RPCSA's commitment to ecumenism was provided with a strong challenge when the constituent mainline churches withdrew their support for FedSem and closed it in 1993. Yet, the church remained open to the opportunities of ecumenical theological education in its return to Fort Hare in 1994 and continues to do so with its recent decision to train ministers at the Universities of Stellenbosch and Pretoria which offers new possibilities of relating with our colleagues in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches as well as with our former FedSem partners. The priority of theological education in an ecumenical context is further evidenced in the two Presbyterian denominations' involvement in the National Committee on Theological Education (NCTE), the Association of Southern African Theological Institutions (ASATI) and the South African Council on Theological Education (SACTE).

Following on the missionary era, the RPCSA maintained its strong interest in the main areas of missionary endeavour – education, health, agriculture and industrial education. Through its commitment to Lovedale Press in particular, the RPCSA made a substantial contribution to education and the development of vernacular languages, particularly *isiXhosa* with its promotion of black writers from the time of Tiyo Soga. It also made a significant contribution to the production and promotion of a Xhosa Bible. The PCSA also has a proud record of involvement in matters educational since the Rev John Adamson was deeply involved in the process, which led to the establishment of the South African College (later the University of Cape Town) (Bax 1997:6).

The place and role of women in the denomination had long exercised the minds of successive General Assemblies and lower courts, and continues to do so despite women being able to be ordained to the offices of elder and ordained minister since 1977. Gender issues came to the fore with the decision to increase the profile of women in the church.¹⁴ The PCSA agreed to ordain women to the eldership in 1966-1967 and to the ministry in 1975. No person may now be excluded from any office in the church for which they have the spiritual maturity on the grounds of race, gender or youth.

The RPCSA had a proud record of resistance to injustice in the South African context, not only as a denomination but also, as the result of individual and congregational commitment. The deliverances of General Assembly are often a poor guide to the actual process of resistance, yet they bear intellectual witness to the struggle against manifest evils in society. The words of Rev G T Vika, spoken in 1974, may express more of the actual truth for that time, “Apart from a few Christian protesters in isolated cases the Church has done nothing to improve the position of our unjust society.”¹⁵ This was written in the context of “current events, which pose a challenge to the Church in this country, and call for it to declare its stand in the face of what seems to be a church-state confrontation”. Hence the policy of terminating the practice of sending “loyal addresses” to the State President, regularly followed since 1923, due to them being remitted to the Department of Bantu Administration. Such action was regarded as a deep insult since such action originated in the addresses, which came from a black church.

14 BPC BB 1997 Min 6678.

15 BPC BB 1974:49-53. Moderatorial Address “Whither Bantu Presbyterian Church?”

Notwithstanding the above, successive General Assemblies at the very least took note of and objected to matters which were of national and international interest and concern, including the Group Areas Act, influx control, unrest in universities, conscientious objection, bannings and the role of ministers as marriage officers, unrest in Natal, capital punishment¹⁶ as well as its strong response to the Bantu Education Act which seriously affected its educational work. Cumulatively, these were part of the General Assembly's repeated "stand against apartheid as a heresy and the source of violence, hatred and oppression in our country".¹⁷ Perhaps the closest the denomination came to actual physical participation in the struggle was in the formation of the Standing For the Truth Committee with its remit "to discuss the witness of the RPC against apartheid and formulate proposals to promote this"¹⁸ with the further concern that since "at most of our Assemblies resolutions on the socio-political problems are passed without sufficient knowledge and information hence the reluctance to implement those decisions on a grassroots level" it was agreed that the Social Responsibility Committee should report on the state of the nation annually at General Assembly.¹⁹

The Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa has also developed a proud record of involvement in social and political issues. As long ago as 1812, Rev George Thom, a Presbyterian minister in Cape Town, participated actively in the fight against the slave trade. His successor, Dr John Philip was also a renowned social activist in the fight against the racism of his day, as was George Morgan, minister at Somerset East. This tradition has continued in the church. In 1962, Rev Rob Robertson established the first racially integrated congregation since 1948 in East London with General Assembly support to "so reverse the whole trend towards greater segregation that had been underway for so long" (Bax 1997:22 referring to the work of Venter 1994:13-38). He later established a similar congregation, St Anthony's in Johannesburg. Robertson was also a pioneer of non-violent resistance to apartheid.

However, it would be true to say that up until the late 1960s, the PCSA's approach to the encroaching effects of apartheid was muted,

In spite of the protests it did make the Church never thought at this stage of moving from the comfort zone of such statements of protest to the more difficult and costly path of action. For instance, no thought had been given to joining in any of the early demonstrations against apartheid like the defiance campaign in 1953: the leaders of the Church were white and conservative, and that would have dirtied the Church's hands with too direct involvement in politics. Thus the Church's opposition to apartheid was for long limited to words, without any thought of what action could be taken (Bax 1997:22).

An example of the change was a crisis, which arose in 1970 with the decision of the World Council of Churches Programme to combat Racism to make grants to a number of organisations including the ANC and PAC. The State President applied strong pressure to the churches in an attempt to force them to give up their membership of the WCC. The General Assembly of the PCSA was the first church council to meet following this attempt and, after strong debate, agreed to remain a member²⁰ despite agreeing to dissent from the support of violence and suspending its financial

16 BPC BB 1947 Min 2050; 1958 Min 3146; 1963 Min 3564.5; 1972 Min 4495; 1974 Min 4738; 1977 Min 5135; 1978 Min 5191; 1989 Min 6195.

17 BPC BB 1984 Min 5886.3.

18 BPC BB 1989 Min 6198.

19 BPC BB 1990 Min 6262.1.

20 PCSA BB 1970:16, 18, 60-63, 178f.

contributions. This was significant because it paved the way for other denominations to follow suit. It is interesting to note the negative views of commentators with regard to the PCSA resolution (cf Villa-Vicencio 1988:112; Adonis 1994:279). They are certainly biased and selective in terms of the decisions reached. Perhaps this is due to the clear perception of the PCSA as a conservative white-dominated church, even from within, and the conditional nature of support for the WCC in terms of hesitation with regard to practical action; perhaps it also reflects the dissonance between word and action on the part of Presbyterian Christians, a not uncommon failing among the faithful of all denominations.²¹

The PCSA took a courageous step in 1973 when it approved a new “Declaration of Faith for our Church Today” as a “response ... to specific problems in the Church and in our society ... the heresy of racism as an ideology and a false interpretation of the Scriptures that denies the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the social and political areas of life”.²² Bax (1997:23) comments, “[I]t reaffirmed the Reformed principle of the ‘prophetic’ relevance of the gospel for society and politics – against the stream of Christian thinking and behaviour that sought to disengage the gospel from politics.” The PCSA, along with the Dutch Reformed Mission Church with its Belhar Confession (1982), was the only denomination to adopt a contextual confessional statement, which acknowledged apartheid and its theological justification as establishing a *status confessionis*.

Perhaps the most critical issue that the PCSA dealt with was the matter of conscientious objection. From 1971, the General Assembly supported the right of conscientious objection on political and pacifist grounds. Rev Douglas Bax supported by Rev Rob Robertson, PCSA delegates to the 1974 Conference of the SACC, were responsible for the “Hammanskraal Resolution” calling on individual members to consider refusing to do national service. This became an extremely controversial matter in the PCSA, though in 1990 its General Assembly expressed its “repentance that our Church failed to take a clear, strong stand long ago in favour of conscientious objection to serving in an army that was used to defend the apartheid system by military threat and action” (PCSA BB 1990:183, 188). “No other church wrestled as much as it did with the issue of conscientious objection in terms other than those of pacifism, for instance. It also took the lead in moving from verbal protest to civil disobedience” (Bax 1997:35 n 48). Only the UCCSA took a similar stand. The denomination also took a strong stand in the matter of civil disobedience and other controversial issues;²³ this cost it dearly in some ways as these decisions caused many individuals and several congregations to break with the denomination.

The seemingly ambivalent approach of the PCSA to matters political was a common and problematic feature of the witness of the English-speaking churches historically (Cochrane 1987) and remained so during the years of apartheid (Villa-Vicencio 1988). Perhaps this might be attributed, at least in part to their being “broad churches” demonstrating a broad range of theological, liturgical and even political perspectives within the one denomination. Bax (1997:31) lamented the inability of the PCSA “to move onto a united black majority Church ahead of the democratisation of the body politic” and concluded that “a serious question mark does hang over the head of the commitment of the PCSA to non-racialism”. He also acknowledged the existence

21 This was not the first or the last such reaction.

22 UPCSA BB 1999:105.

23 Including the “church clause” in the Native Laws Amendment Bill, the General Laws Amendment Bill, influx control, detention without trial parts of the Suppression of Communism Act, the amended Criminal Procedures Act, The Message to the People of South Africa, Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (SPRO-CAS), the prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, the Group Areas and Urban Areas Acts, bannings and the Kairos Document.

of a “conservative wing” within the church, a feature of all churches (1997:23). This group was able to exploit divisions among black commissioners to General Assembly and often barred or weakened resolutions concerning apartheid. Problems of racialism were also evident in the formation of the Black Ministers’ Consultation in 1985²⁴ as a challenge to racism and an expression of black solidarity in a white-dominated church.

CONCLUSION

Both denominations have adopted strong attitudes towards many issues associated with apartheid. However, translating these decisions taken at the highest level of the denomination into local actions has proved most difficult,

the effect of Assembly resolutions had only a limited impact even within the church, at the level of local congregations. Many ministers failed to convey to their congregations what the Assembly had resolved on controversial issues, partly out of a lack of concern and partly for fear of alienating members (Bax 1997:30).

Despite many failures in faith and action the Presbyterian churches, which now constitute the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa, have borne a considerable witness, which is out of proportion to their size, compared with other South African denominations, of which we can be justly proud.

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24 Renamed the Presbyterian Black Leaders’ Consultation (PBLC) in 1987.

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