

# STATE OF THE UNION: THE UNITING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA, 1999-2004

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## *Abstract*

This paper will argue that the union which brought the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa into being was based on an inadequate vision of the role of the Church in Southern Africa. While it was a natural outcome of various attempts at union for over one hundred years, many untested assumptions were made concerning the process and outcome of the union. Subsequent problems have forced the UPCS to reconsider the basis of the union and to work through some of the many hurts and problems experienced.

## 1 HISTORIOGRAPHICAL COMMENT

In a context of racism, it is sometimes difficult to locate written sources for contemporary history which are comprehensive. This is due to several reasons. First, there is in South Africa a considerable amount of denial which is difficult to access and assess. Second, we live in a post-apartheid era where the structures of apartheid have been removed, but the subliminal problem remains in most of us. Third, there is a great unwillingness to talk about a subject which has become a source of shame and embarrassment in our new democracy. Fourth, church people do not easily commit racist ideas to writing or even engage in meaningful discussion. Despite this, there is an attempt in this paper to evaluate a particular case of Church union in the light of available evidence. All history is interpretation and interpretations change as time passes and new hermeneutics develop, and when new sources become available.

## 2 THE CONTEXT

The context which provides the backdrop for this paper is well described by Schreier (1992:15-16):

South Africa presents another kind of situation, where the different Christian churches have found themselves on both sides of the apartheid question, but where many of the churches have taken active roles in the struggle against apartheid. Here certain laws have been taken away, but it is still uncertain about what will take their place. Moreover, racism will continue to function despite new legislation.

A little earlier it was written:

Traditionally South African society has been divided between different groups of people. This means that present divisions run deep in the social history of the country. These divisions have almost invariably been justified or explained by religious claims and commitments, a phenomenon which remains true today ... All the religious groupings in South Africa and especially Christians are often radically divided in their perception and analysis of the social situation ... At the centre of inter-group conflict is the perception by groups that they are being unjustly treated. While such a perception may be wrong or distorted, that does not make the sense of being wrongfully treated any less real for those involved. (HSRC 1988:14-15)

Written several years before the coming of democracy, the general point is still true as is confirmed by Khabela (2000:7), concerning the church as an agent in society: "since the church does not operate in a political vacuum, there is always an underlying social-political context". This is the context for the present study where two Presbyterian churches, each with an ostensibly similar background and ethos have struggled to be faithful to their calling in reflecting the oneness of the Church universal.

### 3 THE CASE OF THE UNITING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

#### 3.1 History

The Scottish branch of southern African Presbyterianism has its origins in the early years of the nineteenth century. From its inception it came as a divided body. One stream began when a regiment of the Scottish army was posted to the Cape of Good Hope in 1806. In 1812, this group, who had formed themselves into a Calvinist society, was constituted as a congregation which became St Andrews Presbyterian Church, Cape Town. In time other 'colonial' congregations and presbyteries were established throughout the country. The other stream appeared in the Eastern Cape in 1823 when the Rev John Ross, sent by the Glasgow Missionary Society (GMS) arrived at Tyumie to begin work which eventually culminated in the opening of the Lovedale Missionary Institution in 1841. As a result of the Scottish Disruption in 1843, the GMS missionaries gave their allegiance to the Free Church of Scotland (FCS), although there was no change in the status of missionaries of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland (UPCS). These missions remained separate after the union of the Scottish churches in 1900.

In 1882 a Federal Council was formed to attempt to unite the disparate 'colonial' congregations and presbyteries which had been established since 1812. Together with the UPC missions, they came in 1897 to form the white-dominated Presbyterian Church of South Africa (PCSA), espousing the ideal of a church, embracing different races. A comment from an able 'insider'

interlocutor expresses well the social and historical ethos of the PCSA in terms of its relation to its context:

The history of the PCSA with regard to race presents a mixed picture. On the one hand it has been characterised by racial segregation, racial prejudice, paternalism and conservatism in the face of glaring injustice; on the other hand, in spite of attempts by some outsiders to paint a picture darker than it is, there have also been real attempts to take a stand against segregation and injustice. (Bax 1997:19)

Bax (1997:20-31) provides ample evidence of this despite the fact that:

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)

In 1898, the FCS mission suffered a serious setback as a result of the Mzimba Secession which had its roots, inter alia, in a desire to form an autonomous church arising out of a context of white domination and racism. This resulted in the formation of the Presbyterian Church of Africa (PCA), also known as the African Presbyterian Church (APC) which has never engaged in union negotiations and has recently become divided from within. In the long term (see Duncan 1997) this led to the formation of the black Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa (BPCSA, renamed the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa in 1979) in 1923, an autonomous black church "albeit with a strong presence and guidance of the Church of Scotland", that is, a number of Scottish missionaries (Khabela 2000:9). The UPC missions subsequently joined the BPCSA. What prevented a full union of Presbyterians at this time was the fear of domination and racism (Xapile 1994:iv). During 1956 and 1957 proposals were suggested by both churches to break the deadlock over cooperation and unity. However, both relied on the absorption of the 'mission' work by the other and proved unacceptable since "the fear of absorption was great" (Xapile 1994:23). For some time relations were maintained through mutual representation at General Assembly level. At the same time, however, both denominations cherished the ideal of a united church.

In 1934, a type of comity arrangement was made which was to become a serious source of dissension (Xapile 1994:21- 23). The agreement stated that the PCSA would be responsible for work in urban areas, which meant BPCSA members would become members of the PCSA while they were migrant labourers, and that the BPCSA would restrict its work to rural areas. But when white members of the PCSA moved from the cities to take over positions in the rural areas, the rule would not apply. Only the BPC would have no right to form congregations in the cities. What was significant is that many of the ministers involved were retired missionaries who transferred their allegiance to the PCSA on retirement. Yet,

In spite of the unhealthy relationship between the two churches there were some who were committed to a closer relationship in

order to overcome serious practical problems in the life and work of the church. (Xapile 1994:22)

This refers to an attempt by the PCSA minister in Dundee to form and foster a more sharing relationship with a hard-pressed BPCSA colleague in 1959.

In the same year there was an attempt by the BPCSA to initiate union negotiations. This was favourably received by the PCSA, but little progress occurred owing to problems in congregations arising out of the comity agreement (BPCSA General Assembly 1938:20). Attempts made in 1956-1957 also failed to produce fruit. In 1959, a fresh attempt was made and discussions were held to consider various options. Considerable progress was made until agreement on a final draft Basis of Union was reached. The PCSA acknowledged frankly that it was a source of serious concern on the part of the BPCSA:

We greatly regret that we do not yet meet as the united General Assembly of one united Presbyterian Church.

We wish to say we do understand some of the reasons for your reluctance to unite with us. We understand the hesitations of those who fear that even in a united Church the White members will show prejudice and discrimination against, or paternalism towards, the Black members. We understand the doubts of those who fear that the White members will assume an automatic right to all the real power in a united Church and refuse to share it fairly with Black members.

We confess that there is ground for these fears because our Church and we who are White in it have not been free of these faults in the past. (PCSA General Assembly Proceedings 1973:80)

However, in 1972 the General Assembly of the BPCSA reaffirmed its desire for union but decided in favour of continued negotiations at a reduced level of intensity (BPCSA General Assembly 1972:26). Xapile (1994:58) is certainly correct in his assessment that church unity “cannot be discussed in isolation from the experience of those involved”. The political situation certainly was a major contributing factor in the failure of unity negotiations. Following this, both denominations continued to develop local relationships with the support of both General Assemblies. It has to be noted that at various times, both denominations had been involved in union negotiations with the United Congregational Church in Southern Africa (UCCSA) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (EPCSA) [Swiss Mission], but that these has failed for similar reasons. In 1990, “the Assemblies acknowledged the past failures in relationships and committed the Churches to working towards better relationships through increased contact and cooperation” (PCSA-RPCSA Union Committee, General Assembly Report 1998).

It was a change in this same political context that was the catalyst for unity talks to be resumed: “In the spirit of national euphoria which surrounded the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the Reformed Presbyterian

Church initiated union discussions with the Presbyterian Church” (Duncan 2003:359). “It was therefore a great surprise to this (Ecumenical Relations) Committee when in 1994 the RPCSA Assembly proposed the reopening of union negotiations” (PCSA General Assembly Papers 1999:85). The history that had maintained separation now facilitated it: “They have been separated for a century by their history, which is interwoven with the history of the sub-continent” (PCSA-RPCSA Union Committee GAV Report, 1998). One of the secular motivations which embarrassed the RPCSA into action was articulated by its Moderator, when he “challenged the Assembly to consider whether the Church had not been overtaken by a secular society in its willingness to forgive past wrongs and to build a united nation” (RPCSA/PCSA Ecumenical Relations Committees [ERC] 15/7/1994:2). It was agreed at the initial meeting that negotiations regarding church structures had to be concurrent with building trust and a sense of urgency was expressed. To this end an optimistic timetable was drawn up. This was only to be amended once, to allow union to be established in 1999 rather than at an earlier date. Union was finally achieved on 26th September, 1999 in Port Elizabeth.

The Central Committee, which was set up to prepare the way for union, had operated by means of task forces and subcommittees to examine relevant areas of work in the two denominations. The 1995 General Assemblies agreed in principle on union and the Central Committee was instructed to prepare a plan of union. Along with this and the work of the committees, a Basis of Union was drawn up which was based on that first prepared in 1970 in anticipation of union between the PCSA, RPCSA and EPCSA.<sup>i</sup> The position of the UCCSA<sup>ii</sup> also had to be considered in the light of shared united congregations and the history of union attempts involving the UCCSA.

### **3.2 Early commitment**

The second meeting of the Central Committee (23/11/94) emphasised the need to make a clear commitment to the principle of union to avoid time being wasted later if one or both denominations withdrew, and to critically analyse historical issues which might impede the process of union. A scheme was devised to involve membership at all levels. A new positive attitude was demonstrated, in that mutual representation was sought in courts, worship services and meetings of both denominations and concern was expressed when this did not take place. It was, however, assumed at this early stage that the composition of General Assembly would reflect that of the PCSA for the sake of ‘effectiveness’, although what this meant was not explained.

### **3.3 Committees**

From the outset, a PCSA emphasis was introduced when it was agreed that membership of task forces be drawn from “a specific region” (RPCSA/PCSA Ecumenical Relations Committee, 15/7/94:6) rather than choosing the best people to do the work. Later, the RPCSA would choose their committee members on that basis (Min PR35 ERC 6/6/95). Yet, just prior to union, a principle was approved that: “Committees, other than the Board of Mission, should be geographically based” (Min 7.4, SCU, 28/7/99).

### **3.4 Manual**

It was at this meeting that the RPCSA delegation raised the possibility of adopting the PCSA Manual since it was more up to date ( Min PR38.6 ERC 6/6/95). This was later affirmed on the 19-10/3/96. However, this became a prime issue following union, as was the case in Amatola Presbytery (see below):

During the union negotiations the RPCSA delegates proposed in good faith that the PCSA Manual be used after the union as the Interim Manual; however it became a weapon of domination, in the view of some, because of their lack of knowledge and experience of it ... Meanwhile the Executive Committee pleads for sensitivity in the application of the Manual by the Presbytery, especially where issues of culture or custom are concerned. (Min Interviews 7, Ex Com, SCU, 21 July 2000).

This was difficult owing to different perceptions of the function of the Manual and the manner it was applied, even racially:

The legal framework does not help us because it requires one group to change, and it leaves the other group in a comfort zone where they are not required to change. The acid test of a loving relationship is the willingness of married partners to change and adjust for the sake of one another, because they love one another. (Statement by concerned members [of the Presbytery of Amatola] to the Ex Com of the SCU, East London, 23 July 2000:2)

For many in the RPCSA the agreement to use the PCSA Manual came to be perceived as “a psychological way of preparing us for absorption into the PCSA” (Min PR160.k, UNCC, 9/6/98).

The pastoral nature of church discipline was often overlooked, especially as far as ministers experiencing marriage difficulties were concerned. This neglect would lead to substantial changes being implemented relating to ministerial marriage and divorce following union. A grave concern was that, when the Manual was applied, white ministers were treated more leniently than black ministers.

### **3.5 Structures**

As noted above, there was an early tendency to assume that the structures of the PCSA would become normative for the uniting church, that is, in terms of committee membership. This was continued in the matter of evangelists where it was noted that: “they may be able to fit into one of the new categories in the PCSA’s Church Growth Plan” (Min PR 84 corrected in Min PR94, UNCC, 29/10/96). It is clear that the PCSA was continuing to formulate plans despite being involved in union negotiations. Yet, in the discussion on the terms of office of elders, great lengths were gone to in order to avoid potential conflict:

It was noted that:

The Central Committee had previously agreed that it was desirable that no major changes be made in either Church in the period immediately before union, but that this could not be made binding on the General Assemblies; and

that these and other changes which were to have been discussed at the 1996 PCSA General Assembly touched on sensitive areas which could complicate or compromise union negotiations. (Min PR96, UNCC, 29/10/96)

### **3.6 Property**

There was also an early assumption that properties would be held in the same manner as prior to union, for example, RPCSA properties would be vested in the trustees of the new denomination, as would those of the PCSA (whose title deeds were held by the General Assembly and properties acquired following union).

However:

congregations that presently owned their own properties should not be forced to transfer these to the Uniting Church as it was possible that the rights given to PCSA congregations by their constitutions would have to be carried over into the new church. (Min PR96.a.(i)(j). UNCC 29/10/96)

fixed property formerly held by other courts and congregations of the PCSA shall become the property of the corresponding bodies of the Uniting Church. (Basis of Union 9(b))

The issue of land, already an extremely sensitive issue, was to be bypassed in a similar manner. The Business Committee of the RPCSA registered its concern that it was “unfair in expecting only the RPC to register all its property in the name of the General Assembly of the Uniting Church when the PCSA was not required to do the same” (Min PR126.b.iv, UNCC, 6/5/97). This situation had arisen partly as the result of the Group Areas Act and had caused the PCSA to give congregations involved their own constitutions:

Which gave them legal rights and status which they had never had before. This constitution gave congregations the right to leave the PCSA with their property, provided they went through a lengthy process involving consultation with the Presbytery ... the Assembly [subsequently] approved a new version of the Constitution without the severance clause, but had to rely on persuasion, because it could not force congregations to adopt the new constitution. (Min PR 135.e, UNCC, 18/11/97)

This provided a mechanism for congregations which were not prepared to enter a union to leave. The same apartheid legislation had posed a problem

for the RPCSA, since the Church of Scotland had had to retain ownership of properties occupied by blacks in areas zoned for white occupation, but these transfers were virtually complete by this time. However, the very fact that union was in process post-1994 indicates that the situation had altered radically and required new legislation. As it was, since most of the property whose title deeds were in the hands of individual congregations were white congregations, this was seen as a potential escape route for those congregations which might wish to withdraw from this union - which brought a majority black church into being. In 1996, the General Assembly of the PCSA had, however, determined that all new registrations of fixed property should be in the name of the denomination. A number of congregations refused to sign the new constitution, while even more ignored the request of the General Assembly. This issue, had it been taken up and dealt with effectively, could have provided a rallying point of commitment for the union and may have resolved some of the issues which have since impeded the process of union.

### **3.7 Ministry**

In terms of ministry, there were clear differences on part-time/self-supporting ministry, ministerial divorce and payment of stipends (Basis of Union 8). In time, these would become contentious matters. But trouble erupted at the uniting Assembly:

The closing General Assembly of the PCSA subverted the proposals of the Special Commission by discussing a document and bringing proposals which was prepared for the Assembly of the UPCSA, not the PCSA ie, they remained and voted as the PCSA. (State of the Union sa (2000):1)

This happened because changes were being proposed to the PCSA's process of selecting and training ministers. It led to an impasse in the Assembly that threatened the nascent unity of the brand new denomination. This was unfortunate since "... [g]iven the complex situation of our histories, this can make ministry difficult. We are relatively young democracies and have the Apartheid and colonial legacies with us" (Masango 2000:5). Ministry was, therefore, a critical issue in the union.

### **3.8 General Assembly Office**

For the first time an issue which would become problematic raised its head - the location of the General Assembly office (Min PR20 (b) ERC 23/11/94). This became one of the most contentious issues of the union and one that caused 'heated debate' (Min PR126.b.iii, UNCC, 6/5/97) because, among other reasons, after a number of concessions were agreed by the RPCSA (see below), this matter became a focus for the expression of serious discontent with the process leading towards union. The Basis of Union (7) stated: "The office of the General Assembly of the Uniting Church shall be situated in a new (emphasis mine) venue, to be determined by the Special Commission, until such time as the Assembly may move it elsewhere."



At the time of writing (January 2005) this clause has not been honoured: the committee charged with this task has “constantly procrastinated and subverted attempts to bring this issue to resolution” (State of the Union sa [2000]:1). The decision to base the office for a period of two years following union (Min 21, Special Commission on Union [SCU], 10/2/99) gave the staff of the PCSA a clear advantage over the RPCSA staff who were based in the RPCSA Head Office in Umtata. In the event, all PCSA staff who applied for posts in the UPCSAs were appointed (Min A, Ex Com, SCU, 7/6/99). A late application was received at the time from one RPCSA office staff member. However, the applicant was considered unsuitable for the post applied for, although it was agreed that: “it would be helpful to find a member of the RPCSA to fill at least one of the remaining positions” (Chief Accountant, Secretary to the Ministry Secretary and Driver) (Min A, Ex Com, SCU, 7/6/99).

### 3.9 Communication

A decision to keep associations informed of progress through the official channels of the denominations (Min PR 82, Union Negotiations Central Committee [UNCC], 19-20/3/96), rather than from the Negotiations Committee directly may have been unfortunate in the light of difficulties that would emerge later (cf Min PR 96.n, UNCC 29/10/96). Throughout the process towards union there was a concern:

that information needed to be given to members of the Churches about the union negotiations and the proposals for union, because it seemed that in many cases ministers were not passing on the information that had come to them. It might therefore be necessary to appoint people to visit the presbyteries. (Min PR115.13, UNCC, 19/2/97)

The issue of communication was dealt with later and presbyteries were charged with this responsibility (Min PR116, UNCC, 19/2/97). Following the subsequent General Assemblies, there was still a feeling “that the information was not getting through” (Min PR137, UNCC, 18/11/97). This matter was kept before the committee and its successor, the Special Commission on Union, has subsequently been cited by various groups on occasion as a reason for difficulties within the union (even when there is evidence to the contrary).

### 3.10 Fears

But there were other matters of concern that surfaced during negotiations. These were described as

- *3.10.1 Emotional problems*

It was observed, for example, that on the part of the RPC there was a fear that the proposed union may lead to domination by the predominantly white PCSA. On the other hand, the white members of the PCSA were coming into the union with the feeling that, as a result of the introduction of the new political set up, they have lost everything. (Min PR 127.3.a, UNCC 6/5/97)”

The RPCSA’s concern was a longstanding concern that always surfaced in union talks. The PCSA’s worries focussed on an external concern which reflects a view of the church as a place of safety and security from change and anxiety. Hendricks (1999:334) has drawn the paradoxical conclusion that the church “is the last stronghold where the ‘old ways’ could be preserved. Others are of the opinion that it should be the first place to transform”. This would broadly describe the PCSA and RPCSA’s attitudes to union. Nonetheless, account was taken of the fact “that racial divisions were still very much a feature of the church, as of society, that it was the church’s calling to break these down, but it was clear that this would take time” (Min PR137, UNCC, 18/11/97). However, the PCSA Centenary Congress (1997) had taken account of part of its past history: “the PCSA needed to repent of the way it had treated the UCCSA in union negotiations with that Church, apparently

with the idea that the same should not happen again in the present negotiations”<sup>iii</sup>.

- *3.10.2 Associations*

Although the merger of associations had been discussed frequently, by July 1999, two months before union, only the mens' associations had made any progress towards union, although both the womens' and mens' associations had initiated union talks on their own. The Special Commission later apologised to the General Assembly for failing to initiate the union of the church associations.

In the meantime, a serious problem arose within the bounds of the Presbytery of Amatola concerning the union of the womens' organisations. This related to the role of ministers' wives in the respective former denominations. This matter quickly escalated into a denominational concern focussed on the issue of racism and cultural difference. The Executive Committee of the SCU misunderstood the root of the matter: “a tendency to turn local issues into denominational problems ... which unnecessarily undermines the union” (Min Interviews 5, Ex Com, SCU, 21 July 2000) [see below]. The issues were indeed local but they were occurring throughout the new denomination although in a less spectacular manner than in Amatola:

We know that there are a sizeable number of ministers, elders, and members of the former RPCSA outside the bounds of the Presbytery of Amatola who are equally concerned about the state of the union. (Statement to the Ex Com of the SCU, East London, 23 July 2000:1).

The problem with the womens' union was cited by the SCU as ‘general dissatisfaction with the union’ (Min SCU, 21 November 2000). The Womens' Christian Association (WCA) of the RPCSA claimed that they had not been adequately respected and consulted during the period leading to union. While procedures had been put in place for consultation, clearly these had failed as can be seen in the section on Communication above (see Min 2 (b), SCU, 10 February 2001). Furthermore, the WCA in the RPCSA had a different relationship with its General Assembly from the Womens' Association (WA) of the PCSA. In practice, it had its own general meeting and was more independent, although it remained under the authority of the General Assembly. It also had difficulty understanding the urgency for union, given that the WA of the PCSA functioned as two movements, uniformed (black) and non-uniformed (white). Relating to difficulties with the union of the womens' organisations, the WCA of the RPCSA was treated with a degree of contempt:

We find it difficult to sit comfortably in a body that seems to treat the WCA [mothers of the church] as some confused organisation that does not know what it is doing. Those who are African will know that an insult to your mother goes much deeper than an insult to oneself. It should therefore not appear strange that the issue of the poor treatment of the WCA in our Presbytery became the breaking point for us. (Concerned Group Statement 2000:5)

Problems arose between other associations in the process of coming together. The Youth Fellowships operated under different structures and issues of uniform and age restrictions emerged. Serious difficulties, regarding the proposed 'Articles of Association', led to a deadlock for a while. Later on, the men's organisations also suffered from dissension relating to issues of uniform and this has threatened their unity.

The role of the Presbyterian Black Leadership Consultation (PBLC) of the PCSA was problematic in two senses. First, it had no counterpart in the RPCSA (which was a black church and needed no such organisation) and second, because its constitution had been regularly rejected within the PCSA "because of the clause that restricted membership to Black people" (Min Ex Com, SCU, 20 February 2002) and consequently gave white people no power over it, except perhaps through allocating its annual budget.

- *3.10.3 Presbytery problems*

While some regarded the problem in Amatola Presbytery as a local one, local to the womens' associations or local to one presbytery, many within the bounds of that presbytery believed that there were outstanding issues related to the principles on which the union was based (see Concerned Group Statement). With particular regard to Amatola, the Special Commission on Union declared that some members of Presbytery believe that there is an uneasy peace at the moment rather than a genuine reconciliation' (UPCSA Supplementary Papers, General Assembly, 2004:378). And even the Special Commission on Union admitted that "there have been tensions in some presbyteries". There were also problems in Central Cape Presbytery, but it was in Umtata Presbytery that a particularly severe problem arose.

This had its origin in a dispute which arose between two former RPCSA ministers and their Sessions which occurred prior to union and which was never satisfactorily resolved, although a false reconciliation had been effected in order to prevent both ministers from being appointed to congregations outside the presbytery. This became a prolonged dispute between the two ministers and the Presbytery of Umtata. As a result both ministers resigned and withdrew with their congregations to reconstitute the RPCSA. Legal proceedings were instituted against them by the church to evict them from the manse they occupied and from the church buildings themselves. This was cited as problem arising out of the union, which was only partly true. Legal proceedings were suspended early in 2004 on the initiative of the newly appointed General Secretary and then the subsequent General Assembly sanctioned an attempt at reconciliation.

- *3.10.4 Racism*

Throughout the denomination, there was a perception among white members that racism was not an issue<sup>iv</sup> (cf Duncan 2003:363). The problem was not simply the problem of one presbytery. "The problem existed in embryo during negotiations towards union. It was manifested in numerous examples of superiority, which are traceable to racial arrogance" (State of the Union sa:1).

In addition, other presbyteries were “experiencing similar tensions which ... have been expressed differently, eg [non or] irregular attendance at and/or non-participation in meetings” (State of the Union sa:2). What made Amatola significant was that the new presbytery was an amalgamation of two strong presbyteries of the former denominations, the one totally black and the other multi-racial yet dominated by whites. This meant that different value systems were in operation. One of the conclusions of the Ex Com of the SCU was that:

‘baggage’ carried over from the old Presbyteries has contributed to distrust and division, eg incidents of fraud and black-white divisions in the [former] King William’s Town Presbytery and memories on the part of former RPC members of ill-treatment by whites in the past. (Min Interviews 6, Ex Com, SCU, 21 July 2000)

The nature of the baggage is not defined, but obviously relates to the issue of racism (ie ‘black-white divisions’). There was a common understanding on the part of former PCSA members that, in the UPCS, many aspects of the PCSA would simply be continued, eg in the method of administration of Amatola Presbytery and payment of ministers (the former Ciskei Presbytery had its own method of paying annual bonuses to ministers sanctioned by the law of the RPCSA (BPCSA 1958:18 [12]) involving what was interpreted by PCSA ministers as misappropriation of church funds), without such matters ever being discussed by the Presbytery. But the problem had both a structural (as has been demonstrated) and relationship aspect:

What we are experiencing is that there is no meaningful contact between the black and white congregations ... Instead of being joyful in the union we see ourselves battling all the time with undermining and a sense of superiority from our brothers and sisters who make us feel that everything done by the RPCSA in the past is sub-standard or questionable ...

Racism is tearing our nation apart. It will tear this union apart unless we face it and address it. Some of us have spent all our adult life struggling against racism in society and we do not see ourselves having any role in a Church that sits comfortably with racist practices ... We see no visible attempts to tackle this wall of separation with urgency and commitment. (Statement 2000:6)

This was true in fact. The Uniting Presbyterian Church is “a church that operates within two cultures: Western culture and African cultures” (Masango 2000:5). But there was no need for this to hamper the development of racial unity. The matter was next officially raised in the Moderator’s Address in 2003:

Racism is an inherent spiritual problem rooted deep in lives (sic) and experience ... What needs to be realised is that racism is not easily rooted out of the human psyche. For many, it is the result of a successfully inbred process. There is a need for a more focussed and well-organised effort which will practically transform the day-to-day reality of church life. (Duncan 2003:363 cf Mpako 1999:235-240)

Little heed was paid to the challenge made except that the next Moderator arranged for a workshop on racism to take place at the beginning of the 2004 General Assembly. The only problem was that this only touched the commissioners to that Assembly, around one hundred and twenty people.

### **3.11 Concerns about the union**

These problems were given classic expression within the already cited problems of Amatola Presbytery, whose basic principle was encapsulated in a statement submitted to the SCU:

We expect that we will be judged and condemned for not suffering silently and for raising in such a frank manner the uncomfortable matters we address in this statement. But we believe that it is part of our Christian responsibility to speak the truth in love, even when it hurts to do so. We believe that it is unChristian to pretend and say: Peace! Peace! Where there is no peace. We raise these matters with deep respect for the Church and with love for it. We would like union between the RPCSA and PCSA to be a fulfilling relationship of love for which we praise Christ; and not a loveless marriage which we will endure for the rest of our lives because we fear a public scandal of separation. (Statement 2000:1)

The Concerned Group believed that the Amatola incident with the WCA and WA was merely a symptom of a 'dysfunctional union' and a catalyst for reflection.

Negative attitudes towards the union on the part of the PCSA were cited as a matter of concern: "There has been a demonstrable lack of respect for the traditions, institutions and views of the RPCSA" (State of the Union sa [2000]:1). There was also an awareness that members of the PCSA viewed the RPCSA as desiring union because it was facing a financial crisis, was in administrative chaos and its ministers were seeking to benefit from its wealthy pension fund. The RPCSA gave an assurance that it did want to benefit from that to which it had not contributed "[a]lthough it could have insisted that the mind of Christ in Acts 4:32 requires that we promote a spirit of sharing within the Body of Christ" (Statement 2000:2). The willingness to make concessions for the sake of union was also cited as a matter of concern (Statement 2000:3). Yet,

[i]n the process of doing this we have unfortunately communicated what has been interpreted by some brothers and sisters in PCSA members as a sign that we were desperate to unite with the PCSA at all cost ... (Statement 2000:3)

This was related to the issue of relative poverty:

... the RPCSA had dignity in its poverty ... never begged for handouts but it lived out of the generous giving of the poorest of the poor who have been most loyal to the Church ... As a church whose

members belonged to the discriminated and exploited black section of the South African community, it could not compete with the PCSA ... The RPCSA had a different wealth, which is not measured by investments and bank balances. It was a spiritual wealth that manifested itself in its dignity in worship, the service it rendered to the community, and the enormous respect it enjoyed in the ecumenical fellowship of churches and the eyes of the people. (Statement 2000:3)

I say 'relative poverty' because the RPCSA did have substantial investments and assets to offset its bank overdraft, many of which have been realised and used to offset cash flow problems in the UPCS without due acknowledgement as to their source. It is interesting that at no time was the socioeconomic issue of how the PCSA became a wealthy church raised and interrogated.

The "fear of absorption into PCSA structures and ways" (Min PR136, UNCC, 18/11/97), was a constant theme that manifested itself. The WCA expressed this clearly: "union with the PCSA is more an absorption of the RPCSA than genuine union" (see Min 2 (b), SCU, 10 February 2001). The Concerned Group were explicit in their view of this matter:

The identity, the culture, and the ways of doing things which the RPCSA members were used to and held dear, are disappearing. The PCSA, on the other hand, is remaining exactly as it was before September 1999. The RPCSA is being recreated into the image of the PCSA ... We request the Special Commission on Union to do a small exercise and list on a piece of paper things that have changed in the former PCSA and compare that list to things that have changed in the former RPCSA, and to answer the question honestly and truthfully of whether this union is not heavily biased in favour of the PCSA. (Statement 2000:3-4)

As far as can be ascertained, little or no change took place in the PCSA while certain changes occurred in the RPCSA that involved giving up its General Assembly office and personnel. This included having to accept non-ministerial office staff for the Presbyterian Employees' Pension Fund, the time of General Assembly, the composition of the General Assembly, the method of the election of General Assembly Moderator, the attendance of the Womens' Annual Conference at the General Assembly, its meetings procedure (Westminster style voting vs. consensus approach) and accepting the practice of allowing notices of motion to be made at the General Assembly, the Manual of Law, Practice and Procedure, different types of congregations, geographically based committees, the method of collecting assessments, the method of paying stipends, the ownership of property, the system of selecting candidates for ministry, the representation of elders at Presbytery, the presence of associates at meetings excluding Sessions, accepting the possibility of electing an elder as General Assembly Moderator and, finally, the Order of Lay Preachers.

The lack of an attitude and desire for reconciliation was significant. The Concerned Group in Amatola Presbytery claimed:

We desire union with the PCSA and we need it desperately. It is not only timely for us to move into a new century and into a transforming South Africa as a united body, but most importantly we believe that the Lord of the Church wants it to be united. But that union must be genuine union. Both partners must loose (sic) something very dear in order to embrace the new. This is not happening in this union. (Statement 2000:4)

There appeared to be little desire that a 'new creation' (2 Cor 5:17) come into being despite the view of the Union Committee that:

Unity is admittedly in the main a consciousness of our present, existential unity in Christ, but this does not deny the need for our social and religious structures to reflect our unity in Christ. (PCSA-RPCSA Union Committee, General Assembly Report, 1998)

However, in reality there was little sign of reconciliation brought about by being 'in Christ'. What appears to be the case was that both sides in unity talks had brought a defensive attitude to negotiations, and both sides wanted to give up as little as possible in the uniting church. A more open and transparent approach of bringing and offering the best in each tradition, with a committed desire to create a 'new being' would have made sacrifice far easier and would have caused far less stress.

Areas where each party had to accept change, or where the status quo remained or that caused little conflict, included presbytery boundaries and pension funds.<sup>v</sup>

### **3.12 The Skuilkloof eleven**

As the result of an acknowledgement that things in the union were not progressing smoothly, a meeting was convened on the 11-12 March 2003 at the Skuilkloof Retreat Centre. This meeting consisted of groups of leaders from both former denominations and was called on the initiative of the Session of St Columba's, Parktown congregation. A management consultant, Tim Hough, facilitated the discussions. The precipitating factor was a financial crisis to which was added concerns about the management of the denomination. It was agreed that, "in general, the 'uniting' process has hardly begun with significant cultural gaps remaining between the two groups" (Min Initial Findings, 9, Informal Retreat, March 11-12, 2002). This was later confirmed by the Special Committee on Reformation (Report to General Assembly, 2003, UPCS Papers for General Assembly 1999):

The preparation for our union was poor; certainly not as deep or thorough as it could have been. But our uniting is proving to be the Lord's instrument to weigh and sift our idolatries. What do we, what will we, hold so dearly that it comes and stays between us and His will for the Church ...?



However, it became clear that the financial crisis was itself a symptom of a deeper spiritual crisis in the denomination. Notwithstanding this, the first decision was to propose a vision “to build an integrated, relevant and thriving church in Southern Africa” with three strategic imperatives:

- Build a united denomination
- Derive value for the Presbyterian franchise as a whole
- Increase the incomes of the poorest congregations

This body had neither power nor the authority to do any of this, so it operated through the Finance Committee which presented its ideas and proposals to the 2002 General Assembly. This Assembly agreed to appoint a Special Committee on Reformation to consider bringing proposals to the forthcoming Executive Commission and 2003 General Assembly “to map out a plan for the reformation and possible restructuring of our denomination” and “to devise a plan that will facilitate a reformation of the spiritual life, work and mission of the UPCSA and facilitate the establishment of sound and effective managerial and financial structures” (Min 3.2, Progress Report from Special Committee on Reformation [SCR] to Executive Commission, 6 November 2002).

A critical issue that arose out of the work of the Skuilkloof Eleven was a comment that Zambia and Zimbabwe were a drain on the resources of the denomination. This caused a serious upset in the 2002 General Assembly and sensitive handling was needed to restore peace. However, this incident revealed how tenuous racial issues were and how much reconciliation had eluded the former PCSA and, subsequently, the UPCSA. Arising out of a consultation held in Zimbabwe, it was reported: “The reality and level of racial and gender discrimination and paternalism within the UPCSA is very serious and causes much pain.” Again: “relationships need to be serviced adequately” (Report to General Assembly, 2003, UPCSA Papers for General Assembly, 204).

### **3.13 Special Committee on Reformation**

The context apart from that defined above was described as “ignorance, prejudice and rumour-mongering that seems to find its way around the denomination far more efficiently than the ‘official’ information required to make our system of governance work” (ibid). Learning from the union process, the Special Committee decided to make good communication a priority. The first official communication threw down the gauntlet: “Will we have the courage to change - reform?” (Botsis to All Ministers, Session Clerks and Presbytery Clerks, 15 January 2003). However, the communication problem was serious at the level of the congregations, because many did not submit financial and statistical returns which were necessary for budgeting and assessment purposes.

The Reformation Committee worked with the understanding of reformation as ‘when something out of the kernel of the Gospel transforms the way we do things’ (Min 6, Special Committee on Reformation [SCR], 19-20 May 2003). It later brought the challenge to the General Assembly:

... will the UPCSA (...) have the courage to abandon what is not good and reform and keep on reforming so we become and remain a Church in Southern Africa which is a thing of beauty in God's hands: a body which lives with prophetic authority and has a loving and healing effect on the communities we serve. (Report to General Assembly, 2003, UPCSA Papers for General Assembly, 1999)

This was related to the important matter of relationships because this was crucial to any reform, renewal or reconciliation. The command to 'love one another' had to be given serious attention and practical expression. This was fundamental to the proposed Code of Conduct for Ministers:

I will seek to be Christlike in my attitude and behaviour toward all people of every gender, race, age, class or creed (7);

I will seek to share the gospel with people inside and outside the Church, with evangelistic zeal and with love and compassion (12);

I will proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord of life, uphold the ideal of a just and morally responsible society and do what I can to move people to work towards one (13);

I will strive to be reconciled to anyone who is estranged from me (18);

I will seek to promote racial harmony in my own congregation and the wider community (20). (Report to General Assembly, 2003, UPCSA Papers for General Assembly: 214-217)

Issues which were considered by the Reformation Committee included the financial situation (which it was discovered was not as critical as the Skuilkloof Eleven had suggested, although there was a need to focus on the control of expenditure, assessments and giving), a Code of Conduct for Ministers (and renewal of ordination vows), denominational identity (congregational renewal of covenant, introduction of Reformation Sunday and celebration of the birthday of the denomination), Presbytery boundaries and organisation, the restructuring and staffing of the General Assembly Office, congregational integration, changes to probation for ministerial candidates, models of ministry and the transnational nature of the UPCSA. From this it became clear that spiritual, financial and structural issues were closely interlinked:

Seriously adjust one and the other two will turn as well. But to tamper with or reform any one means having to deal with the effects on the other also. (Report to General Assembly 2003, UPCSA Papers for General Assembly, 1999)

The issue of renewal was constantly before the committee. It took up the matter under five headings:

- Personal renewal
- Corporate renewal

- Theological renewal
- Missiological renewal
- Structural renewal (Pool, Special Committee on Reformation, May 2003).

This became the remit of the Priorities and Resources Committee post-2003.

In terms of structural renewal, it was noted that the PCSA had attempted this at various times, but unsuccessfully: “The only really successful restructuring came during the Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries” (Pool 2003). However, these past failures did not daunt the committee or the Executive Commission.

Linked to this are the Mission and Vision Statements of the UPCSA approved by the General Assembly in 2002:

#### *Mission Statement*

The Mission of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa is to:

Bear witness to the saving gospel of Jesus Christ to all who do not now believe in Him;

Build up the believers in faith, hope and love through the ministry of the Holy Spirit;

Be faithful through our teaching and practice in proclaiming the sovereign rule of God in all social, economic, political and ecological relationships. [Derived from this was a set of denominational priorities cf Report of Priorities & Resources, UPCSA General Assembly Papers, 2004:155-156]

#### *Vision Statement*

Our vision for the UPCSA is of a Church which is One:

- in obedience to its Sovereign Lord
- in celebrating its living heritage as a Reformed Church in Southern Africa
- in celebrating its cultural diversity
- in addressing injustices and poverty in church and society
- in providing a model of racial reconciliation.

From this it would seem that reconciliation was the culmination of the vision rather than the starting point. There was a declared need for vulnerable relationships to be formed, for repentance, forgiveness, a reconciliation that is “grounded in our love for Jesus” and greater than that “of the world” (Report of Priorities & Resources, UPCSA General Assembly Papers, 2004:155-156). As has been stated little has been done in this regard to date.

Yet a prophetic word was offered to the General Assembly relating to reconciliation:

We believe that as a church we are being called to kneel before Christ and place into His hands our traditions and our agendas so that He may redeem them from idolatry and self will. We believe that we need to develop a new culture of habit and thought in which we express rather than suppress our joy in what God has given us in the Lord. In order to achieve this we need a 'change of our culture of habit and thought' and a desire to 'pursue the things that make for peace'. (Report of Priorities & Resources, UPCSA General Assembly Papers, 2004:158)

#### **4 ASSESSMENT OF UNION, REFORMATION AND RENEWAL IN THE UPCSA**

Throughout the union process, the UPCSA has remained true to the *semper reformanda* principle of the Reformation, although not always consciously. For example, it provided for post-union problems by maintaining the Special Commission on Union in place for a period until 2004. Some in the denomination had the discernment to recognise and express concern that all was far from well and acted to avoid the sin of slothfulness by diagnosing the problem, analysing its origins and acting to alleviate its effects. However, this is a time-consuming process which requires much energy and commitment. It is also important to try to avoid superficial interpretations of the situation, that is, by ignoring or denying the role of racism. It is also a slow process. Colleagues in the Church of Scotland remind us that some problems of the union of 1929 which brought the present Church of Scotland into being are still being worked through.

Growth in union is a by-product of getting used to the 'Other' and often the beneficiaries in this process are the few involved in negotiations and discussions. It requires commitment to working through problems and issues which can be a painful process that requires a willingness to sacrifice. The early stages of union involve a decline of missionary fervour and an increase in introversion as energies are redirected towards a shorter term objective. An initial centrifugal move (towards another denomination in search of union) leads to a centripetal result (a narrow focus on the process of union).

There is a need for a shared commitment and solidarity to be developed and articulated. Otherwise problems in communication and consultation will continue to arise, even if they are only perceived problems. Regular 'reality checks' can help in this process.

The process of union began with a clear vision of a new church in a new South Africa, but with no clear vision of the role of the church in South African society. There was no clear focus beyond structural union, despite the lack of an agreed constitution. This raises serious questions about the church's role in the transformation of society, especially when it cannot get its own house in order. A new society cannot come to birth if the pains and hurts of the birth process are not attended to.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Despite the emergence of significant serious problems in the early years of union, there is a will to work to resolve these issues, although it is clear that some have given up hope (as the Umtata problem suggests). Yet we live in a context marked by hope, and in a nation and continent where hope is a great motivation to work towards God's kingdom.

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Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (RPCSA) and Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (PCSA) Ecumenical Relations Committees.

PCSA-RPCSA Union Talks Committees on Union (Union Negotiations Central Committee, UNCC).

Special Commission on Union (SCU).

Basis of Union.

(All these are held in the archive of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, Joe Wing Centre, 150 Caroline Street, (PO Box 96188) Brixton, 2019 (gensec@presbyterian.org.za).

- The following (personal papers) are also in the possession of the author

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## ENDNOTES

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1 Tsonga Presbyterian Church renamed Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, 1982.

2 United Congregational Church in Southern Africa (UCCSA).

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- 3 The UCCSA had been deeply hurt by the PCSA's withdrawal from union negotiations with them in the 1980s.
  - 4 This is possibly related to the general unwillingness to recognise and admit to the existence of racism in the post-1994 period (see Min 2(b), SCU, 10 February 2001) - "there was 'still a lot of racism in the country as a whole and in the Church'".
  - 5 This had the potential to become a serious impediment to union as some in the PCSA viewed the RPCSA support for union as a means of getting access to PCSA funds. The RPCSA made it clear they did not see the PCSA pension fund as a source of finance for themselves.