

**The Church Unity Commission:  
South African ecumenical perspectives on ministry (1968–1983)**

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*Abstract*

The Church Unity Commission (CUC) was established in 1968 by a group of mainline English-speaking churches and two black churches in order to participate in the search for union. They were the Church of the Province of Southern Africa the United Congregational Church of South Africa, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa. These CUC churches have long since given up the prime goal of full organic unity. One constant difficulty, related to the polity issue of ministry, has overshadowed attempts at union. Five denominations had a conciliar system, while the other was episcopal. One of the five has subsequently adopted episcopacy. Despite this, significant advances have been made in attitudes towards ministry in recent years. The purpose of this article is to investigate the role of denominational differences in ministry practice during the first 15 years of the CUC's existence, discuss how these have shaped current practice and assess how they can determine future developments.

**Introduction**

“The last great question of the unity of the church is the question of the integrity and unity of its ministry” (Trotter 1987:4).

One thing is certain: the minister is still a key figure in the movement towards Church union. If he sees insuperable barriers to union, you may be sure that his congregation does as well. If he sees the full dimensions and potential of Christian union, you may be equally sure that many in his congregation will share his enthusiasm (CUC 1976).

In a way, these comments on the key role of ministry are true of the life and work of the Church Unity Commission (CUC) in South Africa, despite the fact that it was formed to promote the unity of the entire church community of its members. Over the years since its formation in 1968, the shape of this proleptic unity has altered considerably.

The CUC was birthed in the aftermath of several attempts at organic union among various “Churches *predominantly* of British *origin*” (Cragg 1982:3; Cragg 1992:27). This was a time when the power and influence of the missionary movement had almost given way to autonomous churches. It was a period when ecumenism leading to Church unity was a distinct possibility worldwide, though within a few years the ecumenical landscape had changed visibly, creating a degree of suspicion about future prospects. The heady days in world ecumenism which saw the birth of the Church of South India (CSI) in 1947 (Lyon 1998:38) and the Church of North India in 1970 (Lyon 1998:243) had passed. These unions had managed to blend presbyterian and episcopal forms of polity. In these cases, interestingly and significantly, polity was superseded by mission as the motivating factor for union:

The CSI came into being as the fruit of a commitment to mission. [Bishop] Azariah and the other Indian leaders who worked for it, believed that the Gospel took precedence over Church orders and other traditions, however hallowed, imported from the West. For them, the priority was the Church of Christ's calling to mission; mission and unity, they were convinced, belonged together. (Lyon 1998:40 & 41).

Subsequent attempts made at union were predominantly between denominations with similar forms of polity, and this is true of the Southern African context.

Within Southern Africa, one example is the negotiations which took place between churches of the Dutch Reformed family, part of which resulted in the birth of the Uniting Reformed Church in 1994 (Saayman 2009:21). Another is the negotiations which took place throughout the twentieth century

between three Presbyterian churches and the United Congregational Church of South Africa, which resulted in the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa uniting to form the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa in 1999 (Duncan 2005:195). In both of these cases, the uniting churches had presbyterian forms of polity so ministry was not an issue of the same substance. Their issues with ministry related mainly to race and to other issues, including models – not orders – of ministry and selection and training (Duncan 2005:199 & 200). Other abortive attempts were made in 1953 (Clarke 2008:114 & 115) and 1976 to reunite two churches with an episcopal form of polity; the Church of the Province of South Africa (CPSA) with the Church of England in South Africa. The latter attempt failed on differences regarding support for the World Council of Churches Programme to combat racism (Clarke 2008:319 & 320) rather than issues related to ministry.

### **Definition of ministry in the CUC context**

The subject of ministry in this context must be placed in proper reforming context, as stated in the *Third Draft of the Proposed Union* (CUC 1982:28): “Within the one Body of Christ, in which all share in his ministry and priesthood”; for “[t]his ministry is exercised by the whole Church, and is not confined to any special order of ministry within it”. Before the publication of the first draft of the plan of union, it was noted that

[t]he Church as “a royal priesthood” reminds us that [all] God’s people are priests, set aside by God to offer the sacrifice of their lives and service in the world. This “spiritual sacrifice” is not the sacrifice of the sanctuary but of the people of God at work in the world [where Christ is] the only true and inclusive representative of the people of God. (CUC 1969).

The *First Draft of the Plan of Union* (1972) describes this ministry as formal (ordained) and “spontaneous and informal” (CUC 1972a:13). It also describes all ministry as “charismatic in that it depends upon the grace of God and is sustained by his Spirit for the building up of the Church and for its mission in the world”. This ministry is also referred to as a “general ministry” or “the priesthood of all believers” (CUC 1972a:25). The First Draft made it clear “that it is the duty and privilege of every member to share in this ministry” (CUC 1972a:13) by virtue of their baptism. The minister is “part of the people of God and can enjoy no higher status than that of a Christian” (CUC 1972a:25). The emphasis on participation by the laity was affirmed through the decision to form Regional Unity Commissions: “The emphasis is on the layman [sic] (including women and young people). No more than one third of each Regional Commission may be composed of ordained persons” (CUC 1970a). This was a challenge to the structures which had elected the CUC by appointing only seven laypersons out of 44 members (CUC 1970a). It has to be noted that, apart from – yet in addition to – women and young people, a most significant component of the general ministry of the South African Church consisted of black people.

### The black context for unity

An important ministry issue that was only considered very indirectly related to racial appointments in ministry. Under the heading “Racial reconciliation and church unity seen as interrelated” was the statement “Church Union is not only the uniting of different denominations but the rediscovery of the wholeness of the Church” (CUC 1972b). It is little wonder that black people felt alienated from the topic of Church unity when the substance of the problem could not even be articulated.

A problem arose out of the priority given to union over dealing with racism:

Indeed, at a time of tragic divisions in the world and in our own society, not least of all because of racism, the unity of the Church becomes an imperative, for only when the church demonstrates the reconciliation of the Gospel in its own life transcending the traditions of history and the divisions of society, can it credibly proclaim peace and reconciliation to the world. (CUC 1972a:3)

It may well be asked: for whom was it imperative? Certainly not for black people, who from an early stage dismissed the CUC as irrelevant. A few years later, in 1976, a common charge heard at regional conferences was:

There is no unity between Black and White in the existing Churches. Unity between the races in the existing Churches is more important in the South African context than the union of separated denominations. (CUC 1976:4)

The Church could have focused on this as a priority before tackling the subsidiary issue of unity and have remained true to the Gospel imperative. By 1976, at the time of the Soweto tragedy, it was recognised that unity within the Church was no longer the priority, for: “The Church ought to be more concerned about the total salvation of humankind in a just and free society” (CUC 1976:1), since Church union had been relegated to “an insignificant place on church agendas, especially for black Christians” (Cragg [sa]:1). However, no commitment to achieve this in a practical sense was undertaken other than a recognition “that the unity of the Church should be the sign and the symbol of the unity of mankind. At the moment it’s not” (CUC 1976:1). Though it was agreed that “Black-White issues are crucial it was also stated that ‘these added dimensions’, which though implicit in the *Declaration of Intention* have not been particularly explicit in the modus operandi of the CUC” (CUC 1976:5).

While black churches and black members had been involved in the work of the CUC since its beginning, it was clear that the voice of blacks had not been heard nor their concerns acted upon. Obstacles to unity from a black perspective included:

- 1 the denominations themselves are divided along racial lines even in the so-called multi-racial churches
- 2 denominational barriers are historic accidents which are irrelevant. We would like to see more *action* towards a united church and less discussion (CUC 1978:23).

On a more positive note, it referred to the base factor of “those who have accepted Christ as their Lord and Saviour” and affirmed:

- (a) In the life of the Church this means an acceptance of the membership, baptism and ministry of the various denominations. We have no right to reject anyone who claims with us a common loyalty to Christ.
- (b) To say that other ministers are not properly ordained is meaningless for us. For we believe that the true Christian ministry is a ministry that reflects the ministry of Christ, serves God’s people and relevantly meets the situation in which they are, whoever exercises it, and we believe that this conviction ought to be translated into practice in our church life (CUC 1978: 24).

This made it clear that black and white people in the CUC were operating from entirely different premises: “It appeared as if when whites thought of Church unity they thought primarily of the unity of whites in the different denominations and only secondarily of the unity of all Christians” (CUC 1978:23). This was an authentic perception on the part of black people.

Ministry issues in the black community came to the fore at a consultation on racism held at Hammanskraal in 1980. Despite the fact that black people had occupied leadership positions in member churches, nonracial ministry remained the order of the day, in theory if not in practice, for all the member churches. A consultation of the South African Council of Churches on racism in 1980 resulted in a statement which noted “reluctance on the part of white Christians to translate the commitment [to union] into visible action [and] is likely to lead to further divisions within the Church” (CUC 1980:31), and challenged the churches to purge themselves of their racist attitudes in order to avoid the formation of a black confessing church. This, of course, impacted directly on issues of ministry because the placing of ministers was racially determined.

Black Christians were more concerned with disunity “in a race-ridden and divided South Africa” (CUC 1982:25). The withdrawal of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1982, and later the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, was symptomatic of the disillusionment of black people with the lack of integration in and between churches of the CUC. The Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa [of which the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa was a member] addressed a letter to the CUC (1983:4) emphasising that “the search for unity in the Church cannot be separated from the quest for social justice in society, for Christ calls his Church in South Africa to be a sign of the new humanity in him, of real hope for the future”. This led directly to the appointment of a committee on Africanisation. Sadly, the committee yielded no significant results in time. Black people were not the only group to feel alienated through the work of the CUC.

Another large segment of the South African Church was also neglected, bringing issues of gender to the fore in the discussion on ministry.

### **Gender issues**

During this period, there was an additional problem because the Anglican bishops were not in a position to ordain women or recognise those ordained in other denominations. Cragg (1982:5) held the opinion, shared by other participating denominations, that this constituted “a mistaken order of priorities”. The position of women in 1972 (CUC 1972a:30) was that there was no theological obstacle, but that the problems were of a “practical” nature. Suggit (1978:36) had stated that there was a possibility that women had been ordained in New Testament times. It was recognised that some of the CUC churches already ordained women.

The 1978 Grahamstown consultation raised new possibilities concerning member churches’ acceptance of one another’s ordination and the appointment of ministers to charges in any member church. The first proposition was entrenched in the covenant: “To recognise as ordained ministers in each Covenanting Church as true ministers of the Word and Sacraments, as having the commission of Christ and the authority and approval of each of the covenanting Churches” (CUC 1978:17). This, naturally, raised a significant issue for the CPSA since any such recognition would automatically be extended to include lady ministers.

It was reported to the CUC in 1981 that a letter had been received from the CPSA bishops relating to the ordination and recognition of women in terms of the Covenant. This was a crucial issue, and it is interesting to note that while the bishops had been aware of the implications of mutual recognition from the establishment of the CUC in 1968, it had taken them this long to articulate their problem. While they could remain intransigent on the subject of bishops, the other churches would remain equally intransigent on the subject of ladies in ordained ministry. The CUC referred the issue for a further “examination of the Biblical and theological issues involved” (CUC 1981:17). This could be interpreted primarily as a delaying tactic, since even the Anglicans had admitted that they had no difficulty with these grounds. However, there was considerable discussion within the CPSA at this time concerning this very issue. It was reported to the churches in 1983 (CUC 1983:2) that “such a proposal was passed by each of the houses of laity, clergy and bishops, but did not obtain the overall two-thirds majority required”. This resulted in a letter being sent to the CUC from 74 members of the CPSA, stating that they remained “committed to seeking that unity which is our Lord’s will”. This was in addition to “most of the members of the Provincial Synod”. The failure of the Covenant and subsequent events in South Africa relegated this issue to the background. The later decision of the CPSA to ordain women has altered the landscape significantly.

So far, this article has dealt with issues relating to the wider ministry of the Church. Yet, within “this general ministry some are called by God and ordained by the Church for particular ministries” (CUC 1970a).

### **The ordained ministry**

The *Plan of Union: First Draft* (CUC 1972a) was completed in 1971 and discussed the controversial issues of representative priesthood, patterns of ministry, apostolic succession and ordination. At this early time there was a recognition of the ministry of each denomination as “a real and effective ministry of the Word and Sacraments” marked by the “value of our several traditions”. There was a further understanding that union would be the result of “God’s grace through deeper understanding and obedience to the truth” in the recognition that “all have sought to be faithful to the life and practice of the early Church and that we have done this in various ways according to our interpretations of the Scriptures” (CUC 1970b). This alludes to the continuance of the threefold ministry organised in such a manner as to take account of the historic tradition of the Church, insights gained at the Reformation and the contemporary ecclesiastical context (CUC 1972a:13). Bishops are to exercise a ministry that is constitutional, historic, pastoral and prophetic, but are not to “function in isolation from the Church” (CUC 1972:13). The same functions are allocated to the presbyter. Deacons are to exercise pastoral and other roles in ministry in line with the reforming concept of the elder. The threefold ministry did not in itself pose a problem because the Presbyterians exercised the same form of ministry, though in a different sense of minister, elder and deacon compared with bishop, priest and deacon. However, Watson (1978:61) does challenge the facile assumption that the threefold ministry was the sole norm in the New Testament, as the Pastoral Epistles suggest a twofold ministry of presbyter-bishop and deacon while the Acts of the Apostles suggests a single ministry supported by a “group type”. Out of this context arose the form of apostolic succession of the episcopal ministry.

A helpful discussion of apostolic succession emphasised the universal nature of succession “in the faith, witness, life and commission of the apostles” (*Ministry*§14) (CUC 1972a:28), rather than the personal succession of the episcopacy. Newbigin (1960:153) affirmed this emphasis: “Nothing can quite compensate for the fact that there is no single case recorded in the literature of the first century in which an apostle indisputably transmitted his apostolic authority to a successor.”

Accompanying the First Draft were study documents on Ministry and Word and Sacraments. The document on Ministry declared that entry into the “ministerial priesthood” (CUC 1972a:25), as complementary to the general ministry, is by ordination through prayer and the laying on of hands. The relationship between the general ministry of the Church and “special ministries” is described in terms of representation. Again affirming the ordained minister as part of, and integral to, the ministry of the entire people of God, it was recognised that the difference conferred by ordination is that the ordained person stands in a representative capacity between God and the people of God. The Ministry document stressed collegiality at each level. This was clearly to conform to a reforming understanding of ministry and reduce some of the Presbyterian opposition to this form of threefold ministry. It was also stressed that it was the collegial body that ordains (CUC 1972a:27).

Yet the ordained exercise a representative ministry which depends on God’s call and the authorisation of the whole Church. Since the New Testament does not promote a single form of ministry, then either the priesthood of all believers was the order of the day, the matter was unimportant, or diversity was acceptable. The main determinant seems to have been context (time, place and circumstances). This allows freedom to the Church to order its ministry (CUC 1972a:27 & 28), which is a gift to the ecumenical impetus towards unity. However, a threefold order of bishop, presbyter and deacon was envisaged by the CUC (1972a:27 & 28). Apostolic succession was viewed in a broad perspective (CUC 1972a:28) as belonging to the entire Church. Various issues were eschewed at this time, including methods of ordination and the minister of ordination.

While the subject of ministry was not explicitly stated in the original aims of the CUC, major ministerial obstacles to union related to episcopacy, the mutual recognition of ministries and the reconciliation of ordained ministers emerged. These “have dominated the work of the Commission throughout its existence” (Cragg 1982:4). This issue was raised by the Anglicans of the CPSA, and it left ministers and members from other churches with the impression that their ministries, sacraments and even membership were somewhat less than Christian (Cragg 1982:4). So in the main it was issues relating to differing understandings of ministry that caused problems in union negotiations.

### **Obstacles to union**

The first 1972 *Plan of Union* (revised in 1975 as the *Second Draft*) (CUC 1975) envisaged a threefold ministry in an episcopally ordered church with a four-tiered structure which would include Local Church, Diocesan Synod, Regional Conference and General Assembly. The plan was not well received and the only significant response came from the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (PCSA):

In view of the fact that five of the six churches in the CUC have not, and have not had, a personal episcopacy as part of their system of Church government, and these churches

comprise the large majority of Christians committed to the search for union, the Assembly records its conviction that the search for union should be in terms of a conciliar basis which shall not include the office of bishop. (CUC 1976:5)

The Standing Committee of the CPSA responded:

The greater part of the Christian Church for the greater part of its history has held episcopacy to be part of Christ's purpose for his Church. This Committee therefore hopes that the PCSA will with us and other Churches continue to examine the doctrine and practice of episcopacy. We believe that the office of a bishop is consistent with a conciliar form of government (CUC 1976:5).

At this time, the PCSA view was based on a purely South African assessment of the situation which would exclude bishops, while the Anglicans operated from a universal and traditional base which was prepared to include a conciliar component.

A subsequent document, *Why Bishops? A biblical and theological study* (CUC 1976:13–18) was prepared. This document relied heavily on the fact that bishops were not absolutely excluded from the thinking of the Reformers, but that their objection was to the abuses perpetrated by the unreformed episcopacy. Problematically, the document relies on contested areas such as the false and unchallenged assumption that Clement of Rome was a bishop of Rome, while there is no internal or external evidence in his letter (c96–97CE) to the Corinthian Christian community (Richardson 1953:33–73) that this was so. In fact, Clement uses the terms “bishop” and “presbyter” interchangeably (Richardson 1953:64). The article is further complicated by the assumption that Bishop Ignatius of Antioch's concept of monarchical episcopacy was in continuity with Clement (CUC 1976:14). However, Ignatius was a representative of the Eastern Church tradition while Clement represented the Western Roman tradition. Holliday (2010:49–53) points out the diversity in the development of the office of presbyter-bishop, but is clear that “[i]nitially, bishops were presbyters” (Holliday 2010:49).

What is clear is that in contradistinction to the Western Church based in Rome, monarchical episcopacy was established in the Eastern Church by the beginning of the second century CE. Watson (1978:65) raised a pertinent question in this regard:

[I]f continuity is so important why is it that in the crucial period of the first and second centuries it cannot be established everywhere and in every time (only in Irenaeus?). In fact what was important was the continuity of the message *actually* sustained in the teaching, life and worship of Christians from age to age.

Clearly, the issue of ministry would dominate any discussion related to organic union, particularly with regard to “conciliar episcopacy” (CUC 1976). Certainly, there was a CUC commitment that “there is no scope for a sacerdotal episcopacy in the United Church” (CUC 1976:6). Further detailed discussion was deferred until after the matter of mutual recognition of ministries was resolved. It was recognised that negative attitudes towards episcopacy were largely determined by the histories of churches in Europe, that episcopal polity was a threat to conciliar forms of church government and an antipathy to power being exercised by individuals (CUC 1981:9). This has been compounded by “the seemingly autocratic behaviour of some modern bishops” (Cragg 1992:32). One might wonder how this can happen if an advantage of the episcopal system is that it possesses “a conciliar structure which subjects bishops to the mind and judgment of the church” (Cragg 1992:32); for the authority of bishops is restricted by canon law and is ultimately subject to Provincial Synod (CUC 1981:10) in theory, at least.<sup>1</sup> The CUC recommended that a united church has bishops as one of its orders within a conciliar structure as a means of promoting the visible unity of the Church and its mission, among other things. These “bodies are also entrusted with the oversight of God's flock, and the Bishop must observe the provisions of the Constitution with regard to their powers and functions” (CUC 1976:18). Commenting on the Covenant, Joe Wing, secretary to the CUC (Wing 1982:32), expressed the view that the ministry of bishops should be subject to review in order to ensure that they are fulfilling their role. However, ministries of personal oversight have been a feature of the non-Anglican covenanting denominations, though not necessarily in a continuous sense (CUC 1981:11 & 12). Despite being “independent of official position”, informal means of exercising moral authority and personal influence have added value despite their strong commitment to corporate forms of pastoral care.

<sup>1</sup> A more recent example of this is the bishops' ban on clergy joining political parties, which was “imposed without prior consultation and announced without a supporting rationale” in February 1990 (Allen 2006:320).

One development that seemed to make room for progress was a suggestion from the Anglican Bishop of Natal that ministers of CUC denominations might be invited to preside at the sacrament of Holy Communion in Anglican churches where a resident priest is absent (CUC 1976). This automatically gave mutual recognition in practice and provided a solution to the lack of ordained ministers to celebrate the sacrament, compounded by the great distances many others had to travel frequently to administer the sacrament.

A major advance on the subject of ministry occurred with the agreement on *The Declaration of Intention* in 1973, which affirmed:

We acknowledge that the ministry of each communion is a real and effective ministry of the Word and Sacraments', and undertook 'to seek agreement on a common form of ministry of Word and Sacraments, with due regard to those patterns of ministry and oversight to which God has already led us. (CUC 1972a:6).

This was a healing move, though it fell short of full acceptance and mutual interchangeability of ministries. Certainly, organic union could not take place in this situation, where there was no mutual recognition of members and ministers. The meaning of "with due regard" was not specific, so it is difficult to evaluate exactly how much consideration was to be given to existing patterns of ministry. Each denomination would naturally feel compelled to promote its own interpretation. A theological consultation on "Ministry and Membership" was called for in 1978 to consider the matter. This led to a decision to prepare a covenant which allowed for the mutual recognition of members. However, the same recognition of existing ministries was more problematic. While the non-Anglican members were in favour of recognition following prayer and the laying on of hands, the Anglicans wanted a general laying on of hands with the assertion that no re-ordination was implied. This view prevailed, and the following affirmation, seeing the participants as:

ministers of the Word and Sacraments  
in the Church of Christ  
by virtue of ordination in our separated Churches,

was included prior to the laying on of hands. (CUC 1980:20)

Regarding existing ministries, the *Third Draft of the Covenant* stated:

We covenant ... to reconcile them by giving and receiving a share in the ministerial successions of all the Covenanting Churches through the laying on of hands with prayer for the renewal of the gift of ministry received in their ordination. (CUC 1980:17).

Nonetheless, such an affirmation paved the way for mutual recognition. An example of this in action was the permission granted by Anglican bishops for their priests to concelebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion with ministers of other churches (Carmichael 1979:21). For instance, this was enacted at the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa from the mid-1980s. The 1978 Grahamstown consultation had raised new possibilities concerning the acceptance of one another's ordination and the appointment of ministers to charges in any of the member churches. The first proposition was entrenched in the Covenant: "To recognise as ordained ministers in each Covenanting Church as true ministers of the Word and Sacraments, as having the commission of Christ and the authority and approval of each of the covenanting Churches" (CUC 1978:17). The procedure adopted to enact this was that all future ordinations would be conducted by all the covenanting churches, in order that the ordained should be recognised as ministers fully recognised by all the churches (CUC 1978:17). All of the participating denominations accepted the Covenant except the Anglicans, who would only accept the theological clauses once the CPSA had approved a plan for visible union.

### **Canon Michael Carmichael's distinctive contribution**

Carmichael made a significant contribution to the debate on ministry by providing a theological rationale for ordination based on the 1979 statement on the mutual recognition of ministries found in the *Second Draft of the Covenant*. Here the process of reconciliation was compared with the recognition and acceptance of ordinations in one branch of an undivided church with other parts of that church. Even with participation through the laying on of hands, ordination confers general authority and approval for ministry to be exercised in another part of the Church. This is not the same as the

Church's authority to minister or the call of God along with Christ's commission, which are integral to ordination. The act of reconciliation offers the recognition previously withheld through separation.

Carmichael (1979:14) noted that there is no problem of recognition of ministries when the Church is united; the ordained minister "is implicitly recognised by every other part of the Church and is accepted as if the ordination had been performed by it". Though separate from the act of ordination, recognition is significant for the unity of the Church and the ordained ministry. Even division does not affect the unity or authority of the Church Universal, for "surely Christ has not been divided" (1Cor 1:13) and "there is one body" (Eph 4:4) in spite of division, for the grace of God is its source. In a context of division, this recognition can no longer be assumed, but can be withheld as an issue of either faith or order. This is because it becomes a matter of authority within a particular denomination. As a result, all ministries are defective because they limit the minister's sphere of authority. The restoration of unity provides the opportunity for mutual recognition of existing ministries on the ratification of the Covenant, and of future ministries at ordination, by the participation of all of the covenanting churches. Nonepiscopal churches had no problem with accepting authority from the CPSA to minister in the CPSA, as long as this was done by an act on the same terms as CPSA priests received authority. That is, they recognised this as a juridical act which comes from the authority of a particular denomination. While it appeared that the CPSA was intransigent, Cragg (1992:40) argued that change was possible because the Anglicans "had been forced to modify their position on intercommunion and to recognise that its refusal was a juridical act and not a matter of theological principle". The pressure of the call of unity was achieving the same in the case of ordination. With regard to the ordaining officer, Carmichael (1979:23) agreed that this was also a juridical matter because the essence of the role was that it involved a representative of the Church. The historic role of the bishop had been fractured at the Reformation and had become two streams, episcopal and presbyterial. Presbyterial ordination had been a feature of "the medieval Church with papal permission" (Cragg 1992:40), where it had been considered "not as a dogmatic necessity but as a regular practice" (Suggitt 1978:40, note 38). The issue of historic succession was affirmed, in that the minister of ordination was himself already ordained and possessed the authority of his church to ordain in its own and in Christ's name. Mutual recognition would heal the wound caused by the rupture at the Reformation.

The issue was: did Anglicans recognise their nonepiscopal brothers and sisters as being within the Church of God? This would involve an acceptance of their baptism into membership in the Church of Christ. This would lead to the subsequent question: did they accept their ordination as recipients of God's calling and grace? This was the issue that produced a crisis in 1979. At this point, the nonepiscopal church representatives made it abundantly clear that "if the CPSA finds itself unable to recognise their ordained ministers, this will be the end of the Church Unity Commission" (Carmichael 1979:23).

The matter of the laying on of hands was claimed by Anglicans to be an issue of order and in no way represented a repudiation of existing ordained status. Ordination in separated churches was defective by being limited to a denomination, and could only be made universal by being supplemented by "an act of the same order as ordination (prayer for the gift on ministry with laying on of hands)" (Carmichael 1979:21). All of the other churches considered this unacceptable since their ministry already possessed authority by virtue of ordination. Therefore, this was viewed simply as a juridical act, authority for which lay within the powers of each denomination. The same is true of ordination by a bishop as a representative of the Church Universal. The Reformation achieved the same result by appointing a presbyter to represent the Church. The critical issue here seems to be not who ordains but agreement on the issue of the meaning and understanding of ordination. In any case, it had already been agreed (CUC 1972a:29) that the laying on of hands was an integral part of the rite of ordination. Therefore, if the matter of re-ordination was sensitive, it would have been more sensitive to avoid it in the recognition of ministries by substituting alternative signs of reconciliation such as the giving of the peace and the concelebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion. Regarding recognition, since this is also a juridical act, it requires no further rite to effect it (Carmichael 1979:23). The presence of bishops does not legitimise God's action in ordination. If there is no prior recognition of ordained status, then all subsequent participation is superfluous. This raised the question of the necessity of a liturgical act accompanied with prayer and laying on of hands if this was simply a juridical matter. Carmichael argued that since this was a matter of historic division and was an issue concerning a part of the rite of ordination, that is the ordaining minister, ministers representing the two historic traditions should therefore come together in a healing of the breach which would pave the way for future ordinations where all had accepted shared participation. The rite would also provide considerable spiritual significance as an act of mutual submission, of confession and forgiveness for division, of blessing on future ministry, of identification with one another and personal commitment to overcoming past divisions.



Carmichael (1979:26 & 27) offered a personal view on the subject of the laying on of hands by beginning with a disclaimer, as he was “breaking new ground and may on the one hand be misunderstood or on the other hand simply be erroneous”. He laid particular emphasis on the comparable event of laying on of hands by “what might be called supernumerary participants in an ordination” (Carmichael 1979:26). These are other bishops or priests whose presence and participation indicate that the ordinand is received into their priestly fellowship. At that time, the laying on of hands would signify retrospectively what, due to division, could not be signified before, so as ‘to make a delayed act of identification and unity with these past ordinations’ (Carmichael 1979:26). This would then have been on a level with the laying on of hands in future ordinations. This argument lacks historical verification and logic, as we are not aware of any examples of retrospective actions regarding ordination. Further, future ordinations would be different in essence from those previously ordained since ordination was already an accomplished act and could only be celebrated once. Was it true that “if any Church feels bound to reject this understanding of mutual laying on of hands at the Service of Recognition by the same token it must also reject participation in one another’s future ordinations” (Carmichael 1979:26)? How did this relate to Carmichael’s (1979:25) earlier assertion that there were alternative options with regard to recognition?

Carmichael further claimed support from Anglican/Roman Catholic thinking, as expressed in Section 16 of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) *Agreed Statement on Ministry and Ordination*. Because bishops were

representatives of their churches in fidelity to the teaching and mission of the apostles and are members of the Episcopal college, their participation also ensures the historical continuity of this church with the apostolic church and of its bishop with the original apostolic ministry. The communion of the churches in mission, faith and holiness, through time and space, is thus symbolised and maintained by the bishop. (ARCIC 1982:38).

Here we have a significant divergence from a reforming understanding of apostolic succession which is not vested in individuals but in faithfulness to the teaching of the apostles “through time and space”. Suggitt (1978:39) was careful to point out that second-century apostolic succession aimed “to stress the unity of the whole Church and the purity of its teaching [which] has been obscured by travesties which liken it to some kind of unbroken electrical circuit”.

Mutual laying on of hands provided a confusing and controversial solution to the issue. In nonepiscopal ordinations the act of ordination with laying on of hands is followed by the giving of the right hand of fellowship as a token of acceptance into the college of ordained ministers. For example, the *Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa Ordinal* (PCSA 1984:205.17.E) placed the right hand of fellowship after ordination with the laying on of hands and induction to a pastoral charge, and prior to the newly ordained minister taking his or her place as a member of the presbytery:

Brother *A*, we welcome you into this ministry with joy. ...  
*The Moderator invites the Presbytery to give the minister and his family the right hand of fellowship.*  
 Brother *A*, I invite you to take your place as a member of this Presbytery.

An earlier version (PCSA 1928:112) used the words “We give you the right hand of fellowship, to take part with us in this ministry”. This is a more appropriate act which avoids the possibility of division. The problem with appointing representative persons is that ordination in some nonepiscopal traditions is not the act of an individual but of a court/council of the denomination, which includes ordained elders as well as ministers, though the elders do not lay hands. Laying on of hands is associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit in ordination, so Carmichael’s proposal presumes that this prior gift needs to be renewed.

By the time of the rejection of the Covenant by the CPSA in 1983, the PCSA had taken a significant step in 1982 by withdrawing its objection to a united church with an episcopal structure on condition that assurances were given on “the nature and function of episcopacy in a United Church, and the relationship of a personal episcopacy to conciliar structures” (CUC 1983:4).

A *Third Draft of the Plan of Union* was prepared on the basis that while the CPSA was not able to approve the Covenant, it was because the required majority had not been attained. It was during this time that the World Council of Churches document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* appeared (1982). This draft produced disappointing responses from the churches, particularly in the light of the deteriorating political situation in South Africa.

### **Concluding comments**

It is perplexing to note the lack of will to compromise on the issue of episcopacy when there was a clear lack of exactitude on this matter in the ministry of the New Testament and the early Church. This makes one wonder why denominations are so closed to other forms and expressions of ministry. The predominance of episcopal patterns in the subsequent development of patterns of ministry in the larger part of the Church Universal is historically significant. In this regard it is a matter of concern to note the degree to which ministry models which appear to have originated in Asia Minor and were transported to Europe have operated and continue to operate to the detriment of developing South African church polity in a twentieth-century context. There was no serious attempt to design and implement a distinctively South African Church. Further, the constant promotion of the idea of the bishop as an individual personal focus of unity gives the impression that bodies such as councils cannot also represent a focus of unity.

There appeared at times to be a lack of trust and integrity in the operations of some member churches of the CUC, leading to a “give with one hand and take away with the other” approach. For example:

No form of ministry, however ancient, may be regarded as normative for the Church of a later age, though the Church must always take account of the forms of the ministry of the past in order to understand the needs of the present. (CUC 1972a:26).

A significant question that needs to be considered is: what went wrong in ministry at the level of the laity? Regional commissions failed. Here lay participation could have been very influential, particularly through black participation. By 1976, it was acknowledged that Regional Conferences have “aroused little enthusiasm” (CUC 1976:3), perhaps not surprisingly in that particular year when many blacks were preoccupied with more pressing concerns. These concerns were not new, nor would they dissipate in years to come. Perhaps this was because the pre-eminence of the debate on ordained ministry obscured the vitality and necessity of considering the role of the general ministry of the Church, as well as broader racial issues of national importance which were relegated to the periphery of the CUC’s concerns. In addition, there was a clear perception on the part of black Christians that the work of the CUC was akin to fiddling while Rome was incinerated.

More than 25 years after the period under consideration, there has been remarkably little change in the situation, particularly for black Christians. Increasing black leadership in the CUC churches has not significantly altered the situation. Nor has the increasing influx of black members into traditionally white congregations made a substantial difference in attitudes. This may be largely a matter of geography, with white people still being unwilling to enter black townships for reasons of security. To a large extent, clergy are still placed racially/geographically. It was a rather late response when, in 2000, the related challenges of reconciliation and culture were identified. It would have been more helpful if these matters had taken precedence at the beginning of the CUC’s life, which may possibly have yielded different responses (CUC 2000/2001:3).

The one significant advance has been the mutual acceptance of ministries, which has permitted the exercise of ministerial functions in any of the participating denominations. However, this still falls short of full reconciliation and interchangeability (CUC 2000/2001:2). Other than this, one has to consider whether or not the project was ever feasible in terms of ministry. The years since indicate that while some areas of the CUC’s work such as the Women’s Committee have met with some success (CUC 2000/2001:5), the goal of full organic unity was never a real option.

In the general sphere of ecumenism, a significant issue relates to the manner of approach to Church unity. The predominant approach tends to be protectionist, i.e. how can churches unite by retaining as much of their historical traditions as possible and making the minimum of concessions to other traditions? This approach is focused on maintaining the past and allowing it to dominate the present and future. The other, and perhaps more positive, approach is participatory (Kärkkäinen 2002:59); i.e. what can each participating denomination offer to the discussion regarding the structure and nature of a united Church? This approach allows the past to inform the debate and offers an emerging participatory model which is not imposed, and which is a dynamic possibility rather than a static patchwork of former denominations. The problem remains that, even today, we seem to have learned so little from the past in matters of practical ecumenism.

In the wider sphere of ecumenism, it is difficult to conceive of a future in the new democratic South Africa where there will be many ecumenical advances which do not take account of the

relationship of mainline Christianity to churches of the Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions and of Christianity to other faiths.

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