

The process of unification of the AFM of SA

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Abstract

In this article the process of unification within the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFM of SA) is described, using the minutes from the different councils of the respective Sections of the AFM and the reminiscences of its leaders. The process was completed in April 1996, leading to a unified AFM. This happened only after many years and endeavours at different levels. At first the so-called black churches united before unity with the White Division became feasible. Many hurdles had to be overcome, not the least of which were the political prejudices and attitudes of white people. The role played by various leaders is emphasised and the question is asked whether the unification of the AFM has become a practical reality at the level of local assemblies.

Long road to unity

The AFM of SA originated in 1908 when John G. Lake and Thomas Hezmalhalch started their missionary ministry to an African church in suburban Doornfontein. The Zionist church was established by the Goodenoughs and they invited Lake and Hezmalhalch to preach at their church. Several members of the church were healed and baptised in the Spirit, especially through Lake's ministry. Before long the white employers of the black members visited the services to ask for healing, and the two missionaries accepted the invitation to pastor the Zionist churches in Bree Street, Johannesburg (Du Plessis 1977:105-6; Nel 1996:245-6; Burger 1997:177-8), after their missionary, Daniel Bryant, had left for America (Du Plessis 1984:40; Burger 1987:111; Blumhofer 1988:20). The Bree Street assembly was multiracial and English-speaking as part of the Pentecostal movement's aim to be an indigenous movement (Du Plessis 1986:42; Lake 1994:xxiv).

The multiracialism of the new church, when the Zionist assemblies in Doornfontein, Ermelo and Krugersdorp formed the AFM of SA, was lost within a short period when the joining of Afrikaans-speaking Christians gave rise to the establishment of Afrikaans assemblies (Burger 1987:207). The segregation of races that characterised the South African community was soon reflected in the AFM.

South African context

The drive towards unification in the AFM cannot be seen apart from the political and economic developments in South Africa. In the period between 1948 when DF Malan and his National Party won the elections and 1953, most of the apartheid legislation that regulated blacks' lives was passed (Van der Walt, Wiid & Geyer 1955:484-5; De Klerk 1975:241-3, 307-8; Van der Watt 1987:84-86 for discussion of laws; Giliomee 2004:451). In 1951 coloured voters were removed from the common roll (De Klerk 1975:307-8; Giliomee 2004:449-50). In 1959 HF Verwoerd removed all black representation in Parliament with the idea that blacks would be represented in their independent "homelands" (Von Paczensky 2000:82; Giliomee 2004:451). The country experienced a period of strong economic growth from 1961 to 1973 and this strengthened the hand of the Nationalist government to continue with its process of separate development (Latourette 1975:1305). In 1963 Nelson Mandela and nine others stood trial and most received life sentences for planning acts of terrorism (Mandela 1994:189). That same year the government introduced self-government for the Transkei and in this way started denying blacks living within the borders of South Africa from having any say in the government (De Klerk 1975:248-250, 319-322, 337; Davenport 1977:290). In 1966 Verwoerd was assassinated after a failed attempt in 1960 and was succeeded by BJ Vorster (De Klerk 1975:274; Davenport 1977:287, 293). The next year Steve Biko and his allies broke with the National Union of South African Students and started the Black Consciousness Movement (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007:331). In 1974 a coup in Portugal led to independence for Angola and Mozambique and the transfer of power the following year (Von Paczensky 2000:241-2) and it created expectations amongst South African blacks. A contingent of South African forces invaded Angola before the transfer of power (Von Paczensky 2000:83; Giliomee 2004:522-525). In 1977 the government banned all organisations associated with the Black Consciousness Movement and Biko died of injuries inflicted while in police custody (Davenport 1977:267).

In 1978 P.W. Botha became Prime Minister and a few months later abolished curbs on black labour, permitted black trade unions and accepted the inclusion of trade unions with black members in the formal labour bargaining system (Giliomee 2004:537). In 1981 South Africa embarked on a campaign of destabilisation of the

region to achieve its security objectives and the next year it introduced a new system of black local government that was widely rejected because blacks had not been consulted (Giliomee 2004:550; Seegers 2007:390). A new Constitution with a Tricameral Parliament and separate houses for whites, coloureds and Indians was introduced in 1984 (Von Paczensky 2000:468). The system triggered widespread resistance and led to an urban uprising beginning in Sebokeng on the East Rand (Krog 1998:77). The unrest spread to most parts of the country and in 1985 the government imposed a partial state of emergency (Seegers 2007:382-383). Foreign banks refused to roll over loans, many governments imposed sanctions against South Africa and the security situation worsened, prompting the government to impose a general state of emergency the next year (Seegers 2007:392).

In 1988 an informal group of government officials started talking to Mandela in prison (Pillay & Hofmeyr 1991:299; Mandela 1994:507, 513-518). In 1989 F.W. de Klerk became State President and released several ANC leaders from jail. The next year he lifted the ban on the ANC and several other organisations and released Mandela from Robben Island. Early the following year all-party negotiations began and the government abolished all apartheid laws (Welsch 2007:406-407). The first democratic elections were held in April 1994 and the ANC won the election by nearly two-thirds of the votes and formed a Government of National Unity with Mandela as the first President of a democratic South Africa (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007:306).

AFM and the ideal of unity

As explained, shortly after its inception the AFM developed along racial lines as was the custom among white South Africans, especially Afrikaans-speaking people. White people took the lead in the church where assemblies were defined along racial lines. The office bearers of the AFM and the district leaders were all whites, and they represented the “under age” Indian, black and coloured assemblies under their “tutelage”.

The AFM traditionally did not participate in political activities due to the Pentecostal movement’s apathy regarding earthly affairs. It awaited the second coming in a premillennialist sense as the Church was seen as having “a key role in the approaching climax of history as the means by which God was preparing the ‘bride’, the church, to meet her Lord” (Du Plessis 1970:47; cf. Lake 1978:28-9; Anderson 1979:195; Dayton 1987:28). The AFM supported the Nationalist government in order to seek previously denied recognition and social respectability for the AFM (Clark & Lederle 1989:86).

The first move towards church unity within the AFM came in 1974 when guidelines were drawn up for the further development of the “daughter-churches” (Millard 1994:265). This was followed by a resolution later that year that the Coloured Church should develop parallel with the White Church and form one Executive Council¹ in the near future (Minutes of the Central Missionary Committee, 28 November 1974, 1).

The White Executive Council decided to call upon the mother and daughter churches of the AFM to dedicate a special time of fasting and prayer from January to March 1975 for the saving of souls, regaining of the healing ministry, regaining of sanctification among members, as well as the realisation of unity in the Church of South Africa. The Department of Evangelisation was appointed to promote this time of dedication (Minutes of the White Executive Council, 18 October 1974, 8391).

Coloured and Indian Executive Councils

In 1976 the Coloured Section was allowed to choose their own district chairpersons for the first time (Van Staden 1980:12). Together the chairpersons formed the Coloured Executive Council (Central Missionary Committee, 20 May 1976, 1). The Indian Section followed in 1978 (General Missionary Council, 26 July 1978), and the Black Section in 1980, having been granted permission to elect their own chairpersons (General Missionary Council, 26 November 1980). That gave the Executive Councils of the different Sections of the Church more power to act on behalf of their own people and strengthened their ability to struggle for unity within the AFM. However, the Moderator of the different Executive Councils was the Missions Director, who was appointed by the White Executive Council and was always a white pastor.

The White Executive Committee half-heartedly appointed a committee in 1977 to formulate a policy about the future of the Coloured Section, after several coloured leaders had become vocal about the effects of apartheid on the Coloured AFM (Burger & Nel 2008:406). The White Executive Council decided, on advice of this committee, to recommend to the Workers’ Council that a joint Executive Council be created which would exist alongside the Executive Councils of the Coloured and White Churches. Coloureds and whites would be represented on a proportional basis and would treat issues that concerned the joint affairs of coloureds and whites (White Executive Council, 22 November 1977, 8895). Proportional representation would guarantee that whites

¹ The Executive Council was responsible for the business of the AFM when the Workers’ Council was not in session. The chairpersons of the different districts (later called regions) and the national office bearers elected by the Workers’ Council formed the Executive Council, and the Workers’ Council was constituted of representatives of all assemblies. Today the Workers’ Council is called the National Business Meeting and the Executive Council is called the National Leadership Forum.

stayed in control as they were in the majority. The White Workers' Council did not accept this recommendation (Burger & Nel 2008:406).

On 16 June 1976, Soweto (the black city south of Johannesburg) received international publicity when 20 000 pupils took to the streets to protest against the compulsory use of Afrikaans in their school education (Van der Watt 1987:116; Pillay & Hofmeyr 1991:295; Giliomee & Mbenga 2007:320). At that time fifteen times more was spent on a white child's education than on that of a black child (Giliomee 2004:457). The pupils were good-humoured, highly spirited and excited when the police rushed to the scene, and the pupils taunted the police who responded by firing teargas. In the next moment shots were fired at the children, without warning, and this resulted in children being killed, causing widespread international anger (Shubane 2007:362-4). The youth would not accept the political lethargy of their parents and a new Black Consciousness Movement started (Shubane 2007:355).

During the course of 1977, a collective meeting of the Coloured and White Executive Councils was held at Sarepta in the Cape (White Executive Council, 19 September 1977, 8857). At this meeting, the Coloured Executive Council pointed out that the idea of the Sections of the Church existing as different legal personae with one shared constitution was not the ideal they had in mind, but that they would accept the proposal for the time being, and requested that a proposal of that order be defined for the Coloured Workers' Council scheduled for September (White Executive Council, 19 August 1980).

The White Workers' Council had already in 1976 made a statement of policy in which they declared that the Coloured and White Sections should eventually become one (White Executive Council, 19 August 1980). This objective was taken further in 1980 when a committee was appointed that would include all Indian, coloured and white Executive Council members to work out proposals to further the unity process (White Workers' Council Minutes 1976, 336). At that point in time the Black Section was still excluded from the unity talks, just as in the case of the Tricameral Parliament of the day (Giliomee 2004:555). It was merely stated by the White Church that the same unity principles would be applied to the Black Section "at an appropriate time" in the future (Burger & Nel 2008:407).

"Unity in the Church"

In 1979, the White Executive Council discussed the possibility of an inclusive General Council (the name was still to be decided) that would decide on a constitution and spiritual matters such as training of pastors and spiritual conferences. The White Church at the same time entrenched its autonomy by declaring that all other matters would remain as they were. A body would also be established to decide on the buying and selling of properties and acquiring of bonds. Such matters would then no longer be dealt with at the level of the Executive Council, but by a general body. At the same time the White Executive Council decided to write to the Coloured Section asking for their patience in a process that was highly complicated and very sensitive (White Executive Council, 31 October 1979, 9209).

At the next meeting of the White Executive Council the Chair ruled that a stormy discussion about the process of unity be halted and the Council decided that the Church existing as a unity was a Biblical principle. The implication was clear: no division was allowed in the Church based on colour. It was further resolved that, even though the White AFM accepted the principle as an ideal, it would not be possible to apply it at the present moment for practical reasons. The pace at which the process would be completed needed to be determined by contact and communication with the other Sections (White Executive Council, 21 November 1979, 9224-5).

The definitive document, called "Unity in the Church", which had been drawn up by the Committee for Doctrine, Ethics and Liturgy of the White Section, was approved by the White Workers' Council in 1980 (White Workers' Council 1980, 557). This study was discussed with the Coloured Section, and F.P. Möller, leader of the White AFM, explained the terms and conditions at their Executive Council (White Executive Council, 28 July 1978, 9016; Jooste s.a.:131-132). It was also sent to other churches and institutions for their perusal and comment (White Executive Council, 20 September 1978, 9081). In the terms of this document all discriminatory words in the constitution of the White Section would be removed and all Sections of the AFM were urged to work together to the point where there would be only one Church with one constitution (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:391). All the Sections of the AFM supported the resolution to unite when, in 1980, they accepted the document, "Unity in the Church". The principle was: "Scripture does not allow Division in the church, among other things on racial grounds" (General Missionary Council Minutes, 17 September 1980, 3).

The Coloured Executive Council took the lead in the practical implementation of the church unity process and immediately demanded one constitution, one legal persona, one Workers' Council, one Executive Council and open membership in the AFM (Botes 1980).

Despite the resolution to unite, the White AFM decided that people of colour should not be encouraged to attend the Jimmy Swaggart campaign at the AFM's conference grounds at Maranatha Park in 1979 (White Executive Council, 26 September 1979, 9194). And a request by Rhema Bible Church in 1980 to have multiracial services at Maranatha Park was refused for the same reason, as formulated: the conference grounds

did not have the necessary facilities for multiracial gatherings (in apartheid days it was necessary to provide separate toilet facilities for whites and non-whites); there was no adequate reason and need for such a conference and the dates would coincide with the period when preparations had to be made for the AFM's General Conference (White Executive Council, 17 September 1980, Resolution 1.14). The White Executive Council resolved that no policy had been determined by the AFM relating to multiracial worship services, and that all future applications for multiracial services at Maranatha Park would be declined on practical grounds (White Executive Council, 3 July 1980, Resolution 432; cf. also Du Toit et al. 2002:65-69).

In 1981 the Coloured Workers' Council angrily decided, after heated discussions, to halt negotiations about unity until practical proposals were formulated by the whites to give shape to unification which would further the unity of the Body and concur with the ideals accepted in 1980. It also decided that it would uphold the status quo under protest (Burger & Nel 2008:409). The White Executive Council took note of the resolutions of the Coloured Church and decided to concentrate on building better relationships with the Coloured Section in the joint annual meeting of the two Executive Councils (White Executive Council, 25 November 1981, Resolution 690/924). The White Workers' Council again committed itself to the Biblical ideal of unity, but without proposing any practical steps to realise it (White Executive Council, 5 August 1981, Resolution 441/917).

Open membership

Co-operation between the coloureds and whites floundered because the whites were not moving as fast as the coloureds expected them to. Thus the Missionary Advisory Board counselled the White Executive Council that open membership should be accepted within the AFM. This issue now became the major point of disagreement between the whites and coloureds. Whereas members of the daughter churches were not regarded as "adherents" of the AFM as in the past (Burger & Nel 2008:60), they were not allowed to become members of the White AFM. Instead of dealing with the issue, the White Executive Council decided that in terms of the resolutions of the White Workers' Council about the unity of the Church, the Coloured AFM did not give enough consideration to issues that were critical, such as inequality of theological training between pastors of the different Sections, the need for healthy relationships and for free expression of religious convictions and experiences which differed between cultural groups. It was necessary, the Council insisted, that the emphasis should shift from the constitutional to the spiritual aspects of unity, and that the White and Coloured Executive Councils should seek ways to promote spiritual unity before discussing structural unity any further. This frustrated the coloured leaders when the issue of open membership was sidelined, as perceived by the coloureds, to an ad hoc committee established to draw up a condensed constitution for the Church (White Executive Council, 24 November 1982, Resolution 82/25.1.1). Eventually the White Executive Council referred the issue of open membership to the Council for Doctrine, Ethics and Liturgy with the argument that it was a theological and ethical issue. The latter Council was to describe and define the concept and determine what the practical implications of such a resolution would be for the AFM (White Executive Council, 25 January 1983, Resolution 024).

In 1982, the Indian Section made enquiries about progress in drawing up the constitution. The Director of Missions was told by the White Church that the process had been halted due to the negative attitude of the Coloured Section. The White Executive Council decided to appoint a new committee to draw up a condensed constitution in draft form, which would be valid for all Sections (White Executive Council, 9 June 1982, Resolution 311.A 82/16.3).

In 1982 the coloureds also claimed the right to appoint their own Moderator. Previously the White Executive Council had appointed the Missions Director on the recommendation of the Missionary Council, and the Missions Director served *ex officio* as Moderator of the three daughter churches and Chair of their higher councils. The White Executive Council decided not to allow the coloureds the right to appoint their own Moderator, but to uphold the existing Church law (White Executive Council, 24 November 1982, Resolution 747/82/25.2.3).

In 1983 the study about open membership drawn up by the Council for Doctrine, Ethics and Liturgy served at the White Workers' Council and was accepted (Study, Algemene lidmaatskap, LEL 095/11/3/1983; Resolution WR/029/30/3/83 of 1983 White Workers' Council). The study implied that the diversity within the Church of Jesus Christ was emphasised even though the unity might not be ignored. Principles that needed to be kept in mind when the Church decided about membership were good order, mutual acceptance and love, the upliftment of one another and the promotion of the Kingdom of God. Unity without consideration of these principles would be impossible and destructive. The recommendation was accepted that any Church law prohibiting believers of the same Church from worshipping in any assembly be scrapped in order to reveal the true unity of the body of Christ. To promote true unity it would, however, be necessary to respect the other Biblical principles that determined good order in the Church. Therefore it was essential that local assembly boards be given the mandate to decide about any application for membership because this board was responsible for the good order in the assembly. The reality had to be accepted that people could worship separately and still experience the unity of the body of Christ. However, no law was to be used to compel people to worship in a

certain assembly. The problem of “people with political agendas applying for membership in White assemblies” was emphasised, but the Council was of the opinion that the problem should be kept at bay through the assembly board’s right to limit membership. In a press statement at the end of the White Workers’ Council, which lasted from 28 to 31 March 1983, the AFM declared:

There is no Biblical ground to determine by way of Church regulation that people of different colour, race, language or culture should worship in different assemblies. Such a regulation would be contrary to the unity of the church ... The idea of unity is however not the only idea in terms of the existence of the church. There are also Biblical principles of love and mutual acceptance of members that determine the expression of the community of believers ... It is important that there should be at all times good order in the functioning of the church (1 Cor. 14:40) in order to remove points of friction and conflict (White Workers’ Council, 2 April 1983, 36-7).

Some white members and pastors predicted a schism if the White AFM “threw open its doors” to blacks, expressing strong feelings of conservative members, especially in rural areas. The Coloured and Indian Sections reacted with a joint Declaration of Intent to co-operate for full spiritual and structural unity, but the Director of Missions reported at the White Executive Council that many of the Indian AFM’s leaders doubted the feasibility of such an amalgamation (Burger & Nel 2008:412).

The White Executive Council decided that it could not implement the resolution of the White Workers’ Council about open membership without a new constitution that would be valid for all Sections of the Church (White Executive Council, 23 November 1983, 173, Resolution 83/28.5) and it requested the permission of the White Workers’ Council to proceed with the process of drawing up a joint constitution. At no stage had the idea been entertained that the Black Section should be part of those negotiations. In 1984 a letter (dated 6 February) from the Black Section informed the White Section that it would be willing to co-operate in establishing a new constitution in order to promote greater unity in the Church (White Executive Council, 21 March 1984, 2, Resolution 84/6.1). The letter received scant attention and the White AFM did not even respond to it.

The White Executive Council requested the General Secretary in August 1984 to inform the other Sections that it supported the principle of one constitution for the whole Church, that it should draw up such a constitution and that representatives of the other Section would in time be invited to take part in the process (White Executive Council, 8 August 1984, 61-2, Resolution 84/16.1), but that the Black Section should be treated differently because a large proportion of black members functioned under constitutions in the homelands where they lived (Burger & Nel 2008:413). A proposed Committee for Unity would be assembled from representatives of the different Sections.

At their next meeting the White Executive Council decided that one Executive Council for whites, Indians and coloureds should be established and that representation on this Council should be proportionate to numbers of members (in order to ensure white majority in the Council). An ad hoc committee was given the power to negotiate with representatives of the Indian and Coloured Sections, but it was decided that the negotiations with the Indians and coloureds should be held independently (White Executive Committee, 20 November 1984, 131, Resolution 84/27.4).

The coloureds and Indians objected strongly because the blacks were not included in the negotiations. The whites were following the government strategy: Blacks living within South Africa had civil and voting rights in homelands and independent states, but were not regarded as citizens of South Africa. The White Executive Council reaffirmed that the other Sections were thinking about open membership in terms that were unacceptable to the White Section and that unification would be impossible under these circumstances, given the large majority that black members of the AFM formed. The whites decided to await more positive and “constructive” proposals from the coloureds and Indians before discussing the issue again (White Workers’ Council, 1 April 1985, 4-5, 8a).

Constitutional work

The Committee for Unity was established in 1986 with representation from all four Sections and it played a pivotal role in the development of a single constitution for the Church, a watershed for the process of unification in the AFM. At the same time the General Synod of the Coloured “daughter church” of the Dutch Reformed Church accepted the Confession of Belhar on 6 October 1986 which announced a *status confessionis* on apartheid, condemning it as heresy (Lubbe 2001:45; Adonis 2001:131, 142-4; Du Toit et al. 2002:214). Before long, tension developed between the coloureds and whites about property, leading to affirmation of the resolution that mortgaging of property of the non-white Sections of the AFM should not occur without the permission of the White Church (White Executive Council, 16 September 1986, 568, Resolution 326). It was clear that the White Section did not really trust the leaders of the other Sections and their ability to conduct their own business.

On 19 November 1986 the Committee for Unity was again convened to consider a proposed interim constitution which was adopted after some minor changes and circulated to all four Sections of the Church. The Coloured, Black and Indian Sections accepted the interim constitution in their 1987 Workers' Councils, while the White Workers' Council rejected it (Burger & Nel 2008:414) for the reason that the whites were not comfortable with the powers to be vested in the proposed Presbytery, an inclusive Council representing the coloureds, Indians and whites. For instance, in 1987 the Executive Council of the White Section still had to approve all business transactions of the other Sections (White Executive Council, 24 June 1987, 800, Resolution 87/16).

During 1987 the Missions Director reported that problems existed in the Coloured Section (White Executive Council, 16 September 1987, 856-7, Resolution 87/24.4) and that the Coloured Workers' Council would probably accept a no confidence vote in Pastor Edgar Gschwend, the Missions Director and Moderator of the Coloured Section. The Chair of the White Executive Council thought that such a motion would be out of order in terms of the Church law and should be ruled as unacceptable should it occur. Some coloured assemblies were thinking of breaking ties with the White AFM, Gschwend warned. The office bearers of the White AFM were invited to attend the Coloured Workers' Council (White Executive Council, 24 June 1987, 803, Resolution 303-4). In the end no such motion was proposed.

The White Executive Council called a joint meeting of pastors from all four Sections for 11 and 12 August 1987, followed by a joint meeting of the Executive Councils on 13 and 14 August, with the purpose of discussing liturgy, the pastorate, the vision of the Church and the report of the Committee for Unity on new structures. Invitations were sent to the general secretaries of the other Sections as well as to all district committees, but the Coloured and Indian Sections did not respond. Many black representatives came and a report was given at the next meeting of the White Executive Council that discussions had been held in a good spirit (White Executive Council, 6 September 1987, 853, Resolution 87/20.3). Later that year, the Coloured Section decided at their Workers' Council that unity should rather be sought with the Indian and Black Sections of the AFM, based on the principles of an interim constitution, that negotiations be furthered for obtaining a legal persona for the Coloured Church and that long-term negotiations with the whites be continued (White Executive Council, 18 November 1987, 888, Resolution 558).

The three Sections that had accepted the interim constitution in 1987 met on 12 May 1988 and constituted the proposed Presbytery in terms of the interim constitution, without sanction or co-operation of the White Section. This meeting also elected two office bearers, Edgar Gschwend (the Missions Director) as chair and MG Mahlobo as secretary. The following decisions were adopted at this meeting: "That the Black, Indian and Coloured Sections continue with the process of unity on the principles of the proposed draft Constitution. That negotiations continue for the securing of an own legal personality within the AFM for the organisation arising out of the three Sections. That negotiations with White Section in relation to unity continue" (Anderson 1992:78-82).

The whites were informed of these developments, and notice was given that any communication to the three Sections would be dealt with by the three Sections jointly. The three Sections investigated the possibility of creating two legal personalities (White and Composite Division) under the Act that constituted the AFM, but after consultations with legal experts it was decided that this was legally impossible.

A new constitution

To give form to structural unity, a joint meeting of the Black and White Executive Councils in 1988 decided that the Council for Doctrine, Ethics and Liturgy should have equal representation by the three Sections, and that joint Committees for Property and Finances as well as for the Interpretation of Church Laws should be established (Composite Executive Council, 16 November 1988, 1090-1, Resolution 88/19.5).

It should be remembered that Möller had retired in 1988 and the young Isak Burger had been elected as president of the White Section in his place. In a sense some groundwork had to be covered again with the new leader. At first, a relationship of trust had to be established with the leaders of the other Sections. After they had met and shared their hearts, Burger convinced his white brethren that unity was the only road for the AFM and that the black leaders' integrity should be trusted unconditionally (Burger 2007).

Part of the problem was that the other three Sections used centralised principles in defining their structures while the White Division had decentralised its structures as a part of white assemblies' strategy to protect themselves against the possibility of a "black take-over". This made it imperative for them to distinguish between a definition of doctrine, confession of faith and membership of the unified Church while leaving room for the two Divisions to define their own structures (Mahlobo 2007).

This led to the 1990 interim constitution with its joint constitution for all four Sections (Black Executive Council, 1990, 219), and a second part consisting of the Existing Constitution of the White Section which would become valid for the other Sections as well, with adaptations as necessary (White Executive Council, 28 March 1989, 17-8, Resolution 017/89). At the same time the White AFM confirmed that it rejected all systems of

discrimination as principles in the Kingdom of God and within the structure of the Church, and that the Church would not use race or culture as a criterion for the consideration of membership (White Workers' Council, 17 April 1990, 19, Resolution 33). However, it emphasised as well that no pastor of the AFM should be actively involved in party politics.

At this stage, in November 1990, the AFM issued a declaration on "Church and Society" as prepared by the Committee on Unity:

We admit that we have been uncritical and negligent in our approach to social structures and issues in the past. This has resulted in the Church accepting Apartheid without questioning its implications for the body of Christ and society. We therefore confess our guilt in so far as we have contributed to the formulation and perpetuation of racial segregation or in so far as we have failed to oppose it. We recognise that this has caused severe injury to people in the Kingdom of God and in wider society, and has deprived and disadvantaged many of our own people in terms of education, economic opportunity and human dignity (White Executive Council, 21 November 1990, 28-21, Resolution 401).

Unity between the Coloured, Indian and Black Sections

Since the White Section had been delaying the unity process, the Black, Coloured and Indian Sections in the meanwhile decided to unite, leading to the formation of two Divisions in the AFM as from January 1993. The former Black, Coloured and Indian Sections formed the Composite Division and the White Section became the Single Division. The White Executive Council congratulated the Composite Division on their unity (White Executive Council, 11 August 1992, 42, Resolution 240.047).

The Single Section requested by May 1993 that the unity talks be resumed (White Executive Council, 12 May 1993, 27, Resolution 202). The problem for the Single Section was mainly tensions in the White Church caused primarily by the press exposure received by the president of the Composite Division, Frank Chikane. Burger also defined problems he foresaw with Chikane's liberation theology. At a meeting of the two Division leaders in June 1993, Mahlobo asked the whites to try and understand their situation as victims of the political system. He emphasised that black believers did not want to be taken up by any political ideology or throw any stones without a theological underpinning. The blacks did not preach ideology as such, but theology. He said the AFM should look into the whole issue of the Exodus narrative as the backbone of liberation theology and the role of violence. Blacks did not want to be offensive, but if they did turn violent, it was in a defensive way that could be defended theologically. That was why black Christians prayed for the downfall of the government, while they tried to keep their prayers within a theological framework (Mahlobo 2007).

In September 1993 the White AFM issued a statement in which it declared: "We wish for unity in the AFM. The Bible does not contain any prescribed structure of unity and for this reason we are of the opinion that we must find a structure of unity that will serve the kingdom of God the best" (White Executive Council, 16 November 1993, 25).

Early in 1994 the White Executive Council approved the recommendations that an interim period of two years after the acceptance of the constitution in 1995 be taken during which spontaneous association of regions (local synods) should take place. A Presbytery, consisting of the Chairs of newly formed regions, was also established. The Presbytery was responsible for clarifying the AFM's theological attitude towards liberation theology, the interfaith movement, pastors' involvement in politics, the SA Council of Churches and Marxism, all matters that white fears had raised (White Executive Council, 24 February 1994, 30-1).

Unity between the Composite and White Sections

At the beginning of 1995 the Composite Division requested that the process of unity be accelerated and a joint meeting of both Executive Councils was held on 22 February 1995. At this stage the Composite Division was on the verge of giving up on any further negotiations with the Single Division (Burger & Nel 2008:429). Chikane saved the day by convincing the Composite Division to keep on trying, with the argument that history would one day honour the Composite Division for its determination (Chikane 2007).

At this stage the Dutch Reformed Church asked for pardon for their participation in establishing and maintaining apartheid (cf. Botha 2010:37-48 for a historical overview), and some of the members of the Executive Council of the Composite Division argued that the White AFM should do the same. Again Chikane argued that the AFM never officially supported apartheid, but that the church was a victim of the theology that underpinned apartheid and that was formulated mainly by theologians of the Dutch Reformed Church (De Klerk, 1975:220-2, 252-5, 259-60; Mahlobo 2007).

A joint meeting of all Executive Councils was held again in November 1995 and the agenda consisted of the following: The objections of whites to political involvement of some black leaders and specifically

Chikane's, fears of whites that assemblies from the previous Composite Division would not be paying prescribed statutory funds, the challenge of unification of Regional Councils and the question of who would chair the meeting of the joint Workers' Council (it was decided that it would be Möller and Fred Joseph jointly) (White Executive Council, 13 November 1995, 2-3, Resolution 216).

At the next joint meeting of the Executive Councils held on 30 and 31 January 1996, it was finally agreed that the AFM would unite and that President Mandela and prominent church leaders would be invited to the unification service on Good Friday, with evangelist Reinhard Bonnke as the preacher. General consensus was also reached on a policy on finance, budgets and properties, administration of justice, ministries within the Church, theological training, Rules of Order and the call system of pastors. It was also approved that Chikane be allowed to accept an appointment to the Presidency in an advisory capacity (Joint meeting of Executive Councils, 30-31 January 1995, 2-4).

The White Section experienced a lot of tension and fears about the future of the unified Church. At one stage the possibility of a schism was a looming reality, because many conservative whites believed that unification with the Composite Division would inevitably lead to domination by the majority. The Executive Council requested Burger to visit all White Regional Councils before the crucial Workers' Council of 1996 to inform pastors and other leaders about the process of unification (White Executive Council, 7 March 1996, 12, Resolution 58.11). He successfully convinced the White Division to complete the road to unification.

The Workers' Councils of the Composite and White Divisions held separate council meetings on 1 and 2 April 1996, and then had a joint meeting on 3 April (Joint Workers' Council, 3 April 1996, Minute C). At the joint meeting, 70% of representatives were from the former Composite Division. The united Workers' Council approved the motion of structural unity (Erasmus 1996:89-92). The Workers' Council also decided that "knowing the path we have travelled, realising God's grace upon the AFM of SA for the past 80 years and noting the miracle of church unity that only God could effect, this house resolves that the proposed new AFM of SA Constitution as amended be accepted" (Workers' Council, 2 April 1996, 466, Resolution 11).

First on the agenda was the election of new national office bearers for the united Church. Burger was elected as president at the first vote, against the expectations of the whites present, with Chikane elected as vice-president, George Mahlobo as general secretary and Peter de Witt as general treasurer.

On Good Friday, 5 April 1996, the AFM held a celebration of unity at the Centurion Cricket Stadium where the then Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki, congratulated the Church on its newfound unity. At this meeting Burger asked forgiveness from Chikane for wrongs done by the whites in the AFM. Burger did not have the consent of any Council, but felt led by the Spirit to take this step. Tears flowed and members of the AFM were deeply touched by this event which was broadcast on national television. Burger was condemned by some white AFM members for his public confession.

The unity of regions was the next important point for discussion at the united Workers' Council of 1996. To give form to unity, it was necessary for regions to unite in an orderly fashion, and to reach this goal the Council decided that the elections of regional office bearers, scheduled every three years, would be postponed until the regions had united. The time frame for this process allowed regions to unite before the Workers' Council of 1997 (Executive Council, 22 August 1996, 29, Resolution 62/08/96). Today there are 43 national regions with approximately 50% black leadership.

Next, the united Executive Council decided that the AFM should make a submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and that this submission should state that the Church had operated within the parameters of the past, either by being supportive of or by being reactive towards an aggressive system (Executive Council, 28-31 July 1997, 31, Resolution 12.4).

Not everybody accepted the resolution to unite the Church with the same enthusiasm. The Executive Council took note in 1997 of several negative letters from members and local assembly boards and it was decided that the national office bearers should collectively sign a circular to all assemblies in order to state the AFM's commitment to unity (Executive Council, 28-30 October 1997, Resolution 15/10/97).

Lessons learnt from the unification process

The unification process formed a learning curve for all participants, especially where people from different races and cultures first had to learn to trust one another. The spectre of majority rule had to be adjoined in whites' minds before they could consider unification. The most important lesson to be learnt was the necessity of believers from different cultural backgrounds to listen to one another in order to learn to understand and trust their brothers and sisters.

National unity was not the end of the road; a lot of hard work still remained to be done. Oneness still had to devolve down to the local level. Departments and regional structures were re-established on a non-racial basis, but most local assemblies still had not seen much of the desired oneness. Given the conviction that the Church was at last on the right path, there was, however, plenty of goodwill to bring this about.

The amalgamation of regional structures was a challenge, with some whites trying to maintain control and it was sometimes stated informally that the church order should not allow suffrage to assemblies that did not comply with statutory requirements. The former Composite Sections became deeply dissatisfied with this situation, starting with the coloureds. When one remembers that they were regarded as underlings, and that even their fixed property was under the control of the White Section, it is surprising that it took so long for all sides to realise that such a state of affairs could not continue without leading to arrogance in some and bitterness in others. These were sinful attitudes that prevailed among many for a long time.

In its strategic planning, the National Leadership Forum (the executive body of the AFM)² repeatedly assessed the state of unity within the AFM. At such opportunities in 2002 and 2006 the perceptions about unity were discussed, with some members of the National Leadership Forum perceiving that no unity had been established because it was not visible at the grassroots level of local assemblies. Others experienced goodwill between members and assemblies of different races within the AFM and they were of the opinion that at pastoral level there were important indicators that unity was slowly taking shape. Expectations differed between people, with some expecting that unity should be demonstrated by annual conferences which would reflect the composition of the Church and by resource distribution, and others feeling that unity was demonstrated by fellowship at pastoral and leadership level.

The issue of language and culture was also discussed. These issues were for some important for the formation of identity, while for others they were regarded as more functional, as a prerequisite for communication. Some regarded unity as total integration, while others argued that integration would lead to loss of identity defined in terms of language and culture, and that worship should be defined in terms of language and culture.

The National Leadership Forum emphasised that the Church should exert itself at all levels to educate its members in prejudice reduction, cultural interaction, cultural sensitivity and appreciation of cultural diversity. Caring for one another should be encouraged through involvement in sharing resources with one another, financial assistance to struggling assemblies, adoption of assemblies in poor areas by economically strong assemblies and involvement in community development projects (Strategy for Master Plan, Seventh NLF Workshop Groups, National Leadership Forum, 26-29 August 2002).

In 2002 the AFM also revisited the state of reconciliation and healing in the South African context and discussed its role. The Church realised that hurts and prejudices of the past had not yet been adequately attended to in South Africa and in the AFM, due to denial and the fear that it would open up wounds. Repentance and forgiveness had been expressed and experienced on various occasions, but while the vertical dimension of reconciliation between God and humanity was high on the agenda of the Church, the horizontal dimension of reconciliation between persons and especially races was still at a superficial level. It was decided to declare the first decade of the twenty-first century a Decade of Reconciliation within the AFM, and it was proposed that quality time for leadership to interact and discuss issues openly and cross-culturally be created, that pastors and members become sensitive and appreciative of cultural sensitivity, that healing sessions be organised where people were given an opportunity to express their pain and be guided to deal with it and that opportunities for relationship building between pastors and members of different cultures be encouraged (National Leadership Forum, 28-29 August 2002, Appendix 8.1).

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² The Executive Council was replaced by the Presbytery when the AFM unified, and it was renamed the National Leadership Forum.

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