

**The unity of the church:
a South African denominational experience and witness**

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Abstract

From the time of its inception in 1869, the Moravian Church in South Africa was divided into two provinces along ethnic lines. As the church is the “body of Jesus Christ,” which confesses the one Lord, who has one faith and practices one baptism for membership of the body of Christ, and is of one tradition, the division was questioned from within and without in the time of the apartheid society. How could the church, within the same context, be a witness in a politically divided society if it was also divided?

This is the story of the Moravian Church’s attempt to become one church in obedience to the Lord’s High-priestly prayer, “... that they be one (John 17: 11).”

The methodology is a descriptive-empirical, analytical approach, followed by a normative evaluation and concluded with an attempt at pragmatic application.

Introduction

The Moravian Church in South Africa confesses, as it does world-wide, in the words of the Nicene Confession:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian (Catholic)
Church
(The Church Universal), the Communion of the Saints.

But for many years the Moravians in South Africa were divided along racial lines, a division based on a pragmatic structure that was originally designed for effective mission outreach and pastoral care. Within the legally entrenched apartheid context, the church community was estranged and divided. This, given the ideological realities, was theologically untenable for a church of the Lord who prays, “... (T)hat they may be one, just as you, Father and I are one (John 18: 22) and who acknowledges and subscribes to

His own charge”, “... by this will all men see that you are my disciples if you have love one for another (John 13: 35).”

The process of church union as a witness to the political transformation in South Africa

Our aim toward becoming one Moravian Church in Southern Africa.¹

When the Unity Synod² of 1869 resolved that the South African Mission Province should be divided into Eastern (SAE) and Western (SAW) Districts because of unique cultural (language and lifestyle) and contextual factors (e.g. mission strategies applicable to the context), as well as geographical, administrative and financial factors, who could have predicted that this arrangement would – in later years – strengthen the apartheid racial system (predominant from 1948) and also lead to the relative estrangement of the members of the two independent churches?

However, the Church leadership – inspired by the church’s basic tenets – was never going to allow the branches of the one Moravian confessional family to become estranged from each other, despite the differences in culture and language, or whatever other differences there might have been. The leadership had a vision based on the Church Order of the *Unitas Fratrum*:

We believe in and confess the unity of the Church given in the one Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. He died that He might unite the scattered children of God. As the living Lord and Shepherd, He is leading His flock toward such unity.³

Based on this confessional disposition which in turn is based on the biblical injunction,⁴ the Provincial Boards of both provinces regarded it as their mandate to continue in constructing positive and visible signs of Christian unity in the apartheid-divided society.

The first Combined Synod was held in Salem in 1956. There, the South African Board, consisting of both Provincial Boards (see diagram 1),

¹ Taken from the report of the Regional Board (SAE) to Synod 1984 par7.

² The world-wide Synod of the Moravian Church (Latin: *Unitas Fratrum*) that convenes every seven years is called the Unity Synod.

³ Church Order of the *Unitas Fratrum* (COUF), 1995: 15, par 6.

⁴ The ‘High-priestly prayer’ of Jesus in John 17: 11: “that they may be one” became the biblical imperative for the Moravian Church. It serves as the reason for its existence in the divided society.

was introduced. In 1969, the South African Board mapped out a three-phased deliberate unity programme: (1) Consultation; (2) Federation; (3) Full unity. At the beginning of the seventies, a Draft Constitution was worked out and was accepted at both the SAE and SAW Synods in 1973 so as to ensure that the first “Federal Synod” of the Moravian Church could be held in 1975 at Gelvandale in Port Elizabeth.⁵ At the Federal Synod, new Draft Constitution was discussed. This led to the Moravian Church in *Southern Africa*⁶ being officially constituted in 1977 after its founding had been accepted by two further Synods in 1976. In 1978, the First Provincial Synod of the Moravian Church in Southern Africa was held at Mvenyane and was followed in 1982 by the Second Provincial Synod held at Salem. It was clearly stated that “we are determined to become one organic Moravian Church in Southern Africa”. The Second Provincial Synod spent two-thirds of its time discussing ways and means of implementing the existing mystical unity organically. In the proposals put forward, sensitive matters such as salaries and general finances were dealt with in an open and responsible way. The Synod also accepted that “the chairman of the Regional Boards shall be alternatively Chairman of the Provincial Synod”. Regarding the continuation of the work amongst those members who had been uprooted from the Tsitsikamma in Buwa and Keiskammahoek⁷, the Synod decided to regard this work as a joint venture and to bear the cost in equal shares.⁸ The Synod also issued a “Statement on Unity between the two Regions in Southern Africa.”⁹

Our belief:

- We believe in and confess the Unity of the Church given in the one Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour.

⁵ Cf. Minutes of the Provincial Board, 1969. Cf. Addendum for diagram regarding federal structures of the MCSA.

⁶ The designation “Southern Africa” is due to the apartheid system which introduced the homelands structures. In the Moravian Church context it had divided the church into three regions, viz. South Africa, the Ciskei and the Transkei. These artificial apartheid structures were never politically acknowledged by the rest of the world, but to the Moravians and other churches in the Republic of South Africa they were a political reality that impacted negatively on the witness and life of the one Church.

⁷ Xhosa speaking members of the Moravian Church were forcefully removed in the late 60s early 70s from the Tsitsikamma in the Humansdorp area to Buwa and Keiskammahoek in the Ciskei Homelands because, under the Group Areas Act they did not belong in the motherland – although they had been born there and had lived in the area for four generations since the first half of the 19th century. As a matter of fact, they were offered this abode due to the fact that they (the Mfengu) fought on the side of the colonial powers during the border wars of the 19th century against the mighty AmaXhosa .

⁸ Cf. Minutes of 1982 Provincial Synod.

⁹ The designation was still “Southern” due to the constitutional divide of the RSA into three countries: RSA, Ciskei and Transkei.

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- We believe that the Church of Jesus Christ despite all distinctions is one in its Lord. We are called to testify that God in Jesus Christ brings His people out of every race, kindred and tongue into one body, pardons sinners beneath the cross and brings them together.
- We believe that it is the Lord's will that we should give witness of and seek unity in Him with zeal and love.
- We believe that it is laid upon us as a charge of our Lord to strive for a real and total unity between our two Regions of the Moravian Church in Southern Africa.

Our confession:

- We confess our share in the guilt, which is manifested in the severed and divided state of our Moravian Church in Southern Africa.
- We confess that despite the many hindrances, e.g. political, economic and social structures, we are determined to become one organic Moravian Church in Southern-Africa.

The road forward:

The Synod further expressed its longing for total unity but proposed that, until the day of total unity came, the following steps be taken on the road towards full union:

- That the Regional Board consists of five members elected at each Synod;
- That the work of SAW on the Rand and in Natal resort under SAE, and the work of SAE in the Western Cape resort under SAW;
- That the Provincial Board (PB) be authorised to second personnel from one region to the other under conditions worked out by the Provincial Board;
- That a Capital Salary Fund for the Moravian Church in SA be established and each region contribute annually to this fund;
- That Stewardship Programmes be seriously expedited at congregational level;
- That Congregations initiate programmes to make their members aware of the road forward towards full union and the implications thereof.

Plans were also made to call upon the Rev Werner Ullrich of the Württemberg Church in Germany, who was known in both regions, for the purpose of conducting seminars on unity to educate the congregations throughout the Province for a period of three years as from 1985.¹⁰

The Third Provincial Synod was held in Port Elizabeth from 1-2 July 1986. There it was decided to add two more areas of co-operation to the existing areas of Ecumenical affairs, Theological training and Mission, viz. Welfare/Diaconia and Church Music. A Unity Commission of six members (three from each region) was elected with the task "to make an in-depth study of all implications involved for the two regions in becoming one Moravian Church in Southern Africa in all respects ... A final report was to be tabled at the Provincial Board in March 1988 for further discussion and decision-making. Findings were to be sent to Regional Synod meetings in 1988 and to the Provincial Synod in 1990 for discussion and possible implementation."¹¹

The Adjourned Fourth Provincial Synod of 4 and 5 April 1992 in Port Elizabeth dealt with the final report of the Unity Commission and the Draft Constitution of the Moravian Church in Southern Africa. The Synod resolved that:

- The two regions ... decide positively in principle to unite to become the Moravian Church according to Model 1;¹²
- The two Regional Synods taking place in 1992 are served with this decision for ratification and to approve implementation on 1 March 1993;
- The two Regional Synods dissolve as Synods in 1992 to become regional Conferences;
- The elections according to Model 1 are conducted today, 5 April 1992.

The Synod then proceeded to elect a President and a Vice-President as well as a Presidium for the forthcoming Synod. At the following Regional Synods in 1992, the Draft Constitution was accepted with the following amendment:

Whereas the Provincial Synod accepted the one constitution of the one Moravian Church in SA on 4 April 1992; and whereas

¹⁰ Minutes of the Second Provincial Synod, 1982: 26.

¹¹ Minutes of the Third Provincial Synod, 1986: 22.

¹² This Model (see diagram no 1, Addendum) implies that there is one Provincial Synod, one PB and one head office consisting of the Western Region comprising of the Western Cape and the Eastern Cape and the Eastern Region comprising of Johannesburg, Natal, Ciskei and Transkei areas (see Addendum).

this Synod has to ratify and approve implementation as from 1 March 1993; Be it resolved that this Synod should dissolve and the name “Synod” be replaced by “conference”.

During the inter-synodal period, the designation of the Regions was changed. SAE was named Region A, and SAW became Region B (see diagram 3). In pursuing the goal of unification, a further change was made. The forthcoming Synod was not to be the “fifth” but the “First Provincial Synod.”

The First Provincial Synod of the one Moravian Church in South Africa

The First Provincial Synod convened from 3–7 October 1994 in Port Elizabeth. It dealt with ways and means of implementing and introducing the new structures of the Moravian Church in South Africa (see diagram 4). Thus it was resolved that: “... (A)ll congregations be represented at the Provincial Synod. Regional Conferences as they are presently constituted fall away after 1996. Existing districts (1–11), with all the District Councils, will now operate and take on greater responsibilities. Annual District Conferences shall be held. Representation at the 1998 Provincial Synod will consist of all serving clergy and one representative from each congregation. Departments and Unions will be represented by one delegate per unit.”¹³

According to the new Constitution, the Provincial Synod shall consist of:

- The Presidium;
- All Provincial Board members;
- All Bishops;
- All ministers and evangelists;
- All duly constituted congregations;
- One representative from each Department; and
- One from each Union; as well as
- Ecumenical non-voting members from our partner-churches

The Synod shall meet once every third year. The PB shall consist of the President, the Vice-President, one representative from each District as elected by the District Conference; the serving Bishops without voting rights. It shall meet at least four times per year.

The District Conference shall consist of the Presidium, District Council, the ministers, parish workers, acolytes and

¹³ Minutes of the First Provincial Synod of the *one* MCSA 1994 Port Elizabeth.

evangelists in charge of main congregations, the congregation representatives (minimum of 6) and such church related bodies or staff members as might be decided by the District Conference, the serving Bishops and the Executive of the PB. The District Conference shall meet annually. The District Council consisting of representatives from the congregations and co-workers shall meet at least once per quarter.¹⁴

The inter-synodal period saw the implementation of the 11 District Councils on an experimental basis in 1997. The purpose was to prepare the congregations for the restructuring of the Church when its regional structuring would be abolished and the new constitution introduced.

The Second Provincial Synod

The Second Provincial Synod, held from 5-9 July 1998 in Port Elizabeth, accepted the Draft Constitution as the Church Order for the Moravian Church in South Africa.¹⁵ The Moravian Church was again one Church. Apart from dealing with its full protocol, Synod elected its new leadership: DA Meyer was elected as President and AR Swart and E Ndabambi as Vice Presidents of the executive of the PB. AT Appel, SB Jwili and KTh August¹⁶ were elected to the Presidium of Synod.

The Synod was graced by an official visit by the State President, Nelson Mandela. He said that Genadendal, one of the Missions which had focussed on education, development of skills as well as spiritual and material development, had been a light of hope during the past years of colonial and apartheid darkness. "I know that what was achieved at Genadendal was inspired by the vision and devotion of the Moravian Church. That is why, to me as resident of that other Genadendal¹⁷ it is such a privilege to be here at your Provincial Synod."¹⁸ He also congratulated the Church for adopting a new Constitution, which would protect its unity. By taking cognisance of this ecclesiastical unity the President declared it a public event, which expresses a theological truth in the political reality of the South African public sphere.¹⁹

¹⁴ Minutes of the First Provincial Synod, 1994.

¹⁵ As the homelands were reintegrated from 1994 into the now democratic Republic of South Africa to form part of one country, the Church was positively and patriotically designated the Moravian Church in South Africa.

¹⁶ Minutes of the Second Provincial Synod, 5-9 July 1998, Port Elizabeth.

¹⁷ President Mandela named his official residence after Genadendal to pay tribute to the pioneering work amongst the indigenous people of South Africa.

¹⁸ Minutes of the Second Provincial Synod 5-9 July 1998, Port Elizabeth.

¹⁹ Minutes of the Second Provincial Synod, 5-9 July 1998, Port Elizabeth.

The cost of Church Unity²⁰

Despite many misgivings, suspicion, uncertainty and criticism, the Moravian Church became one church:

- In obedience to its theological principle and on the basis of the biblical injunction;
- On the basis of its historical background as one confessional family in South Africa;
- As a witness in the South African context.²¹

However, no one can deny that the political transformation in the country contributed to the eventual holistic outcome. Indifference, racism, property, and above all finances and the calling and remuneration of ministers, were the major concerns – if not obstacles – in the way to unity and which had to be discussed, consulted and negotiated in a Christian spirit of openness, frankness and fellowship. Even such a spirit was tried and tested in a period full of difficulty, full of tension and taxing on tolerance levels.

The Unity Commission in 1988 confronted the Synod with the costs of change to become one church, viz. the theological and biblical injunctions, the historical baggage, structural changes, the legal issues concerning constitutional rights and property title deeds, the financial burden and language differences.²² In a sense, all these issues have been partially addressed in unification, but it had still to be lived. The spiritual dimension is a given and needs to be grown into. As far as the historical baggage and cultural differences are concerned, the Church will always have to live with and manage these in a spirit of tolerance and sensitivity. In order to prepare the members for integration the Church had, as early as 1986, embarked on an active partnership programme between congregations in the West and in the East through correspondence and visits. In this way, (1) an acceptance of one another as sisters and brothers, (2) the rejection of certain racial and cultural stereotypes, (3) the acceptance of the reality of being one church, confessionally and (4) the desire to effect that unity in an organic structure, were nurtured. Ironically, active partnerships (north-south) between the Moravian Church of South Africa (both SAE and SAW) and German Churches had already existed for more than 20 years. (Through these supportive partner-

²⁰ As early as after the first year of unity the Church had run up an overdraft of R300 000 (Cf. Annual Financial Statement) in order to effect organic unity.

²¹ Report of the Unity Commission, Part I, 1991.

²² Report of the Unity Commission, Part I, 1991:1 – 36.

ships, the oppressed church of the poor was strengthened during the long years of degradation and exploitation).²³

In order to strengthen this programme each congregation and district had to establish a partnership committee. (These individual committees have, since 2001, been co-ordinated in the National Partnership Committee.) In this endeavour the Moravian Church's witness has public implications in that this model will also gradually influence South African society at large. It is not just an issue of organic and structural unity, but also of existential unity.²⁴

The financial aspect is still very problematic for the Church administration because, with Unity, the salaries of all co-workers (especially ministers) were put on par and integrated into a single salary system according to years of service. It was a fact that the economically poor SAE was in no position – given its existing income which was, economically, due to the apartheid system – to afford the claims of one church budget. The SAW was aware of this and of the extra burden it would be to the West where 70% of the members are ordinary workers. This determination and dedication to Church Unity was amicably displayed in a ministers-conference declaration made after serious debate on the financial implications:

“On becoming one Church” is long overdue. In joining with the Churches at the Rustenburg Conference we have committed ourselves irrevocably when we subscribed to the Declaration, to work for unity on all levels. We are guilty of seeing too many problems, especially in the field of finance, and using it as a deterrent factor for not becoming one Church ... We admit that we have been favoured economically and also in other fields and therefore are the stronger partner. It therefore stands to reason that we should be prepared when becoming one Church, to carry the heavier part.²⁵

The forthcoming unity budget however required of the East to contribute relatively more than it was used to. The Synod therefore called upon the

²³ Through the Evangelische Missionwerke in Süd-westliche Deutschland (EMS), partnership programmes were established with congregations of the Brüdergemeine, Badischen and Württembergischen Landeskirche. These links were strengthened by mutual visits and support, even throughout the apartheid era. These congregations and their church leadership were regularly kept informed about the situation in SA and they also actively advocated for the cause of the oppressed in SA. Partners sometimes demonstrated against the SA propaganda and supported boycott campaigns.

²⁴ This model that is being developed can serve as a useful tool for new communities where a community spirit has to be developed.

²⁵ Cf.. The declaration of the ministers fraternal of SAW in early, 1991, *The Rustenburg Declaration and Our Unity*.

“church councils to encourage the congregations to pay their contributions”²⁶
 In a Pastoral Letter of March 1994, when the Provincial Board announced the first Unity budget for the Province, the Board encouraged all members to honour their contributions in order to realise the United Church.

This should help us to become members of the Moravian Church in South Africa and not to remain members of an Eastern or Western Region. This should help us to accept each other as sisters and brothers. We sincerely hope that no member in any congregation will regard the little more that he/she shall have to contribute financially as a burden. May this rather be an inspiration to strive for real unity so that we as one church can witness unto our Lord more effectively.²⁷

The third Provincial Synod took place in June 2001. It was an impressive experience to see the full strength of the Church at work with a view of the best gifts (cf. Eph. 4:11–13). The representation was a much younger group from all over South Africa, very articulate and learned. All the church associations had representation at the Synod, which means that all had gone national and inclusive during the inter-synodal period and had integrated the Women’s, the Men’s, the Youth, the Choir Union, The Brass Band Union and the Sunday School work of the Moravian Church throughout South Africa.

Throughout these efforts at making the unity work in practice, its partner churches in Germany supported the Church, especially financially. Already in the first year of unity the Church ran into financial difficulties regarding the budget – economical unity was going to be a costly affair. This seems to make the road forward a very difficult one, at least financially. Despite all that, the spirit of owning the *one* Church was overwhelmingly positive at Synod 2001. Synod was very sensitive and responsible in exercising its decisions with the result that there was always a good spread of representation across the whole church in the elections. A democratic system had been put into place as church polity to enable the church to be a church of the people by the people. Transparency and accountability are built into all structures of the Church so that the people of God can now be equipped for works of service in the micro and macro environment of the Church, witnessing to that one-ness in cross-form and being part of and building the ecumenical church of Jesus Christ. By proclaiming Him as the Lord of his church, the Moravian Church professes,

²⁶ Minutes of the SAW 11th Synod 1992: 72.

²⁷ Pastoral Letter, March 1994: 6.

Christ has brought us peace by making us one people,
one new people in union with himself. Through Christ
we can come in the one Spirit into the presence of the Father
(Eph. 2: 14-18).

Conclusion

The Moravians have experienced that today, unity is about freedom – sacrificial freedom – whereby it is a question of sharing and building communion with those who are in need or are less fortunate. Subsequently, it is a question of the *social dimension of freedom*. The social dimension, together with the ecumenical dimension, is a hospitable and caring freedom of openness to the other and the stranger, even within the same confessional group but of different ethnic and cultural descent (not a fear of the stranger but openness to the stranger; not *xenophobia* but *xenophilia*²⁸). This openness provides the opportunity for obedience, which is the test to the spirit of service to the other in Jesus Christ.

The church is still confronted with enormous issues and challenges with regard to its being, its calling and witness locally. As far as its institutional structures are concerned, it is constantly confronted with challenges such as representation on the Church Board and the Synod. The question of whether numbers should play a role for democratic representation is an issue of just representation and equity. The church consists of twelve districts of which at least two have fewer members than some congregations in the other districts. And yet each district has equal representation on the Church Board. The same principle applies for representation at provincial Synod. Small congregations have equal representation at Synod. Due to the dissatisfaction in certain circles in the church, it has become apparent that a different ratio has to be applied with respect to representation.

The issue of salaries of ministers: In the Moravian Church in South Africa two types of ministers serve the congregations, viz. full-time and part-time ministers. In some cases, the part-time ministers serve larger congregations than their full-time counterparts. In some areas use is still made of full-time evangelists who have less formal training than the ministers and this also causes friction because of the differences between the salaries of the part-time ministers and full-time evangelists. Due to the centralised system of the church, congregations are assessed annually to contribute a specific amount based on numbers and a cost-principle for the effective running of the church at large. Ministers are remunerated according to years of service and not according to the size of their congregations or according to their qualifications.

²⁸ Not hatred or fear, but love for the stranger.

Within the area of property the church experiences friction. The old homelands and black township systems did not allow the church to have property rights; the same applies to the chieftainships in the rural areas. This has resulted in endless legal costs to have the properties registered in the name of the church. The Group Areas Act during apartheid also impoverished the church because of the uprooting of congregations and the estrangement of property due to declaration of certain areas as white suburbs. Today, the church – in order to erect new church-buildings in the new areas – has to compete with businesses to obtain property. This is a grossly unfair move on the part of the democratic government considering the legacy of apartheid.

Language

In the Moravian Church in South Africa the official language is English, while isiXhosa and Afrikaans are also spoken. In the deep rural areas the church has to make use of interpreters for sermons and worship services during official visitations, as well as official meetings. Apart from the fact that this is time consuming, much tolerance and patience are exercised. Most of the younger members are, however, fluent in English. Although ministers are expected to study isiXhosa and Afrikaans in order to facilitate the calling of ministers cross-culturally, not much success has been achieved in this area.

Integrated worship services

Members are starting to worship in the areas where they live when a Moravian place of worship is in the vicinity. Provision is also being made for special worship services in the vernacular, but this is mostly the case where Xhosa-speaking members have moved into neighbouring suburbs and there is an existing Afrikaans/English-speaking church. Such services would then take place in the afternoons as the need arises. Otherwise all services are open and members are especially accommodated by the use of English.

Ecumenical affiliation

Due to the value of the Rand, international affiliation is a very costly affair for the Moravian Church in South Africa. Yet the church needs that association for its awareness and vision; without it the church would be very poor in its being, its calling and witness

This discipline in unity opens the church up for experiments of and enrichment through freedom with regard to the ecumenical dimensions of the Church of Jesus Christ in the world. The Moravian Church in South Africa, through its affiliation to the Lutheran Communion in SA, the Communion of

the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches and the Unitas Fratrum, has learnt that unity in the Lord knows no boundaries. This proved to be an enriching and empowering experience throughout the colonial and apartheid years of oppression and impoverishment of its members. Unity is strength, for it is only in this ecumenical unity that the church is in a position today to address the “demo-crisis” of its local context and the global society effectively.

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ADDENDA

Structures and organogram

Diagram 1

Structure of the Moravian Church in Southern Africa (1956-1975)

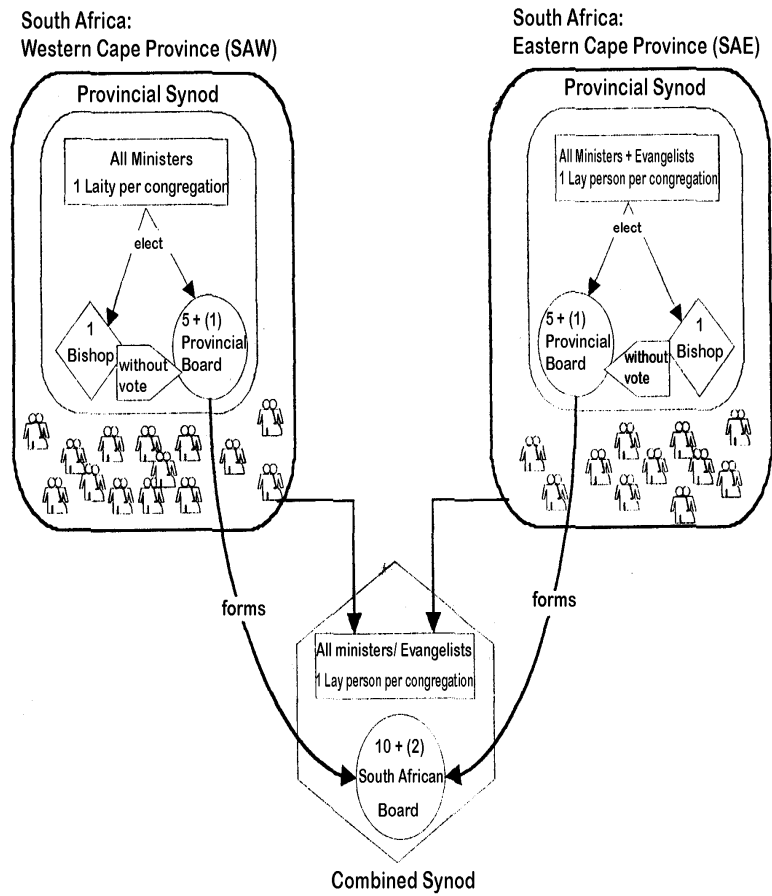


Diagram 2

Church jurisdiction of the Moravian Church in Southern Africa 1975-1992

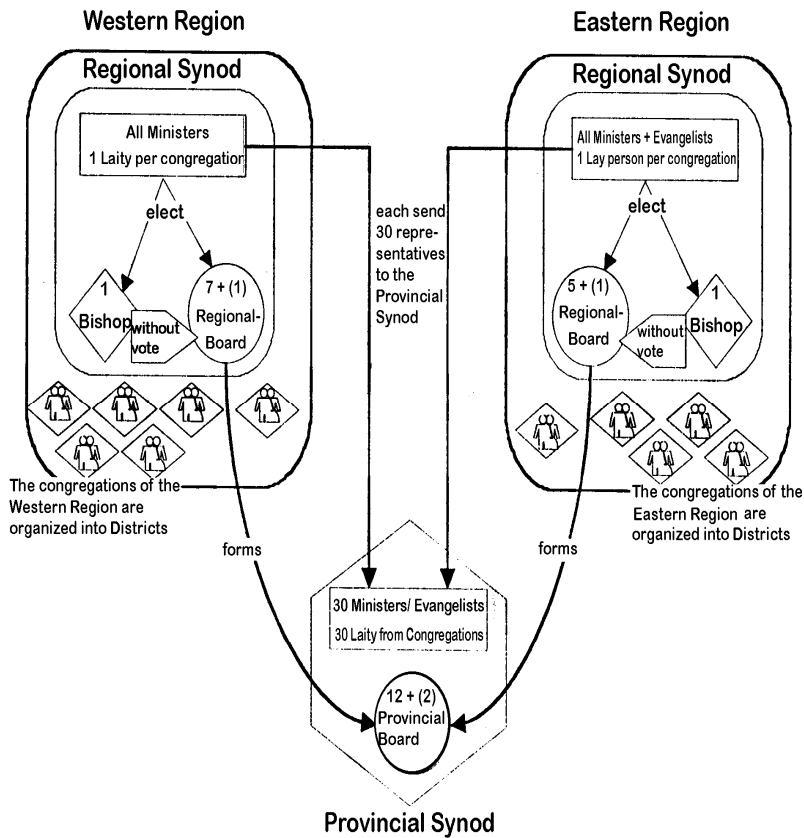


Diagram 3

Church governing structures of the Uniting MCSA (1992-1998)

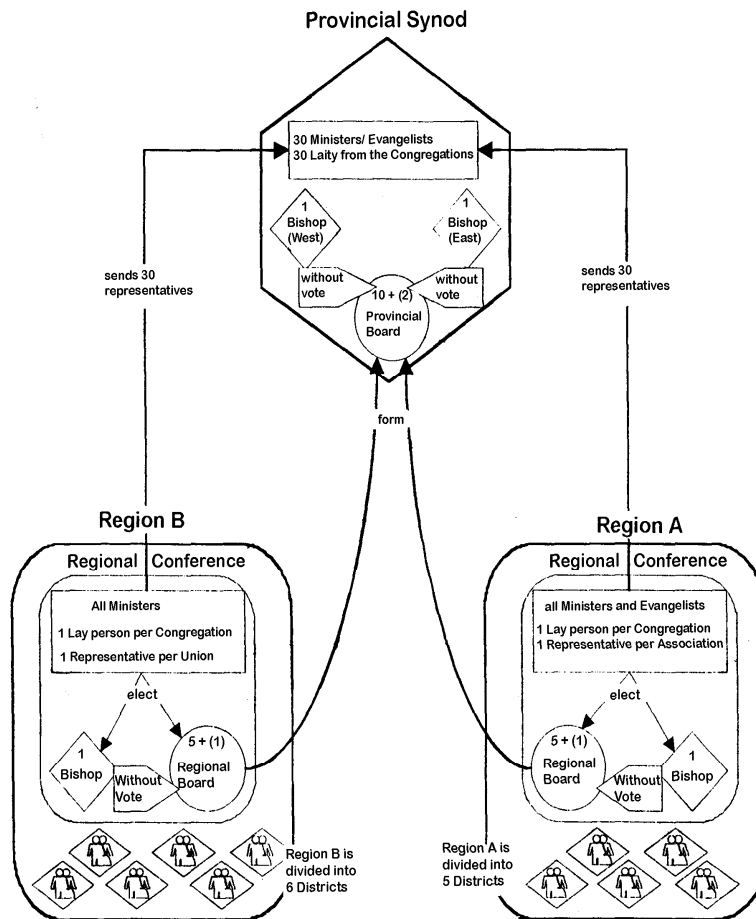


Diagram 4

ORGANOGRAM OF THE MCSA (since 1998)

The congregations, 12 districts, district councils, district conferences, the provincial board, and the synod

