

Some Historic Roots and Contemporary Routes of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA).

STEVE DE GRUCHY

Rev. dr. Steve de Gruchy is a lecturer at the School of Theology, University of Natal and discusses the role of the Congregational Church of Southern Africa.



The UCCSA is part of the Reformed family of churches in Southern Africa. It is a relatively small denomination of approximately 350,000 members in five countries, but its contribution to the history of Christianity in the sub-continent, as well as to the ecumenical movement in this country, has been significant. In order to grasp some of the current challenges facing the Church, we need to reflect a bit on this history.

THREE CONGREGATIONAL TRADITIONS

33

The UCCSA was born in 1967 when three important Congregational church bodies united. The oldest of these was the London Missionary Society (LMS), which was formed in 1795, and which arrived in Cape Town in March 1799. The LMS worked on the Eastern Cape frontier in places such as Bethelsdorp, King Williams Town and Kat River (Fort Beaufort), as well as on the Northern Cape frontier, with the famous mission station at Kuruman being the centre of the work there. From here, and under the guidance of missionaries like Robert Moffat and David Livingstone, mission stations were established in modern day Botswana and Zimbabwe. By 1967 the LMS was well established in these regions.

The second body that united into the UCCSA was the American Board Mission (ABM), the overseas mission work of Congregationalists in the USA. The ABM worked mainly in Natal and Mozambique, and made a large contribution to educa-

tion and health amongst the Zulu. They also oversaw the translation of the Bible into Zulu, and the ordination of the first Zulu minister. By 1967 the ABM had affected the change from overseas mission to local church, and had become the Bantu Congregational Church.

The third part of the UCCSA, was the Congregational Union of South Africa, which was represented in South Africa and Namibia. This body was made up of both English settlers who were Congregationalists, and those mission stations that the LMS had established and then handed over to the coverts to run as local Congregational Churches.

As can be noted, these three branches of the Congregational Church in Southern Africa represented a great diversity. First of all, there were the three distinct church traditions, each with its own form of organization, liturgy and traditions. Second, there were the obvious differences in terms of race and colour given that there were

1

black, 'coloured' and white churches. Thirdly, even amongst the black members of the three branches, there were differences of language and culture, given the diverse work amongst the Batswana, Zulu,

Xhosa, Sotho, Ndebele, and Chitswa people. And finally, these three church bodies were working in five different countries, namely, South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

2

DIVERSITY AND UNITY

To bring all of this great diversity together in 1967 was no easy task, given the racial polarization of southern Africa, the affects of the apartheid laws and the growing political and military resistance in countries like Namibia (SWA), Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) and Mozambique. Yet it is our confession that in the midst of these tensions, Jesus Christ called us to find our unity in Him, rather than take refuge in our human pride and prejudices.

From its first days in 1967 up to the present, the UCCSA has lived with these kinds of the tensions. Indeed the past 35 years has seen three of them emerge, and occupy the time and energy of the Church. Whilst some may see this as detracting from the work of the Gospel, this would be missing the point. In the highly charged atmosphere of division in southern Africa, the witness of real Christian unity amidst diversity is a central aspect of the Gospel (Ephesians 2).

At first it was the struggle to unite the three different traditions. There were times when one faction felt marginalized, and sought redress. The fact that the three traditions represented different languages and cultures added to the mix - and there was also work to be done uniting the Batswana, Zulu and Xhosa members. Tremendous strides were made particularly in the work of the women's movement, known today as the *Isililo-Manyano-Bome*, (the very name of which signals the work of unity), and the men's movement, *The Soldiers of Christ*.

No sooner was this unity beginning to

be felt, that the next tension - between white, 'coloured' and black should raise its ugly head. Congregationalism, with its extremely high view of the local church gathering, has always been non-racial in principle - but the sin of racism, fostered by the anti-Christian ideology of apartheid, also found willing hearts amongst many English-speaking Christians and even 'coloured' members of the UCCSA.

It should be remembered that the vast majority of members of the UCCSA were victims of apartheid laws and policies. (Today the church is roughly 50% 'coloured', 48% black, and 2% white). Almost every single church building owned by black churches was lost to the group areas act, and an unbelievable amount of money was wasted on having to replace these churches - money that could better have been spent in spreading the Gospel.

Famous mission schools were forced to close, and many mission stations were shut down as people were forcibly removed into 'homelands'. On top of this, the laws concerning education, property, work and recreation personally affected all the members of these churches.

In the face of the 1976 Soweto uprising, and the struggles of the Mass Democratic Movement in the 1980's the UCCSA was forced to take sides, and together with almost all the Churches in the country, chose the side of the poor and oppressed, most notably with its full support of the Kairos Document. This was in keeping with its long tradition of prophetic witness, found in people like the LMS missionary,

YET IT IS
OUR CONFESSION
THAT IN THE MIDST OF
THESE TENSIONS, JESUS
CHRIST CALLED US TO
FIND OUR UNITY
IN HIM...

John Philip. One should also remember that Chief Albert Luthuli, past President of the ANC, and the first South African to win the Nobel Peace Prize, was a deacon in the local church at Groutville. However, this kind of witness, did not please everyone, and there were some splinter groups who left the Church to found small sects.

Nevertheless, the Church stood united through these tensions and emerged stronger - feeling vindicated when the 'national convention of representative leaders' for which it had been calling for many years, was indeed the vehicle of peace and democracy that all South Africans prayed for.

NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE CHURCH

3

With the end to apartheid, the liberation of Namibia and peace in Mozambique, there was a very different political situation in southern Africa from that which prevailed in the 1980's, and this has brought out the third tension within the diversity- that between the five countries in which the UCCSA is represented. The emergence of nationalism and different political systems has raised questions of national identity to the fore over the past 10 years.

For a number of years, members in countries other than South Africa played second fiddle to the part of the church in this country. It was by far the largest part of the church, and had access to the greatest resources. Its issues and concerns seemed to dominate the debates when the whole church gathered in the Assembly. This raised concerns amongst representatives from the other four countries.

Over the past decade, then, there has been ongoing work to try to organize the relationship between the five countries. An obvious option that was considered was to

split into five separate churches. However, Congregationalism has always stood against the principle that political boundaries should determine the structure of the church. Besides, in these days, there continues to be an important Christian witness in the fact that five different countries are united in one church, for it reminds us that we are first and foremost citizens of the Kingdom of God, rather than of the many different kingdoms of this earth.

With this in mind, the UCCSA has opted for a federal structure - with five separate national synods - united in one Church. These national synods are now responsible for a range of tasks, and the gathering of the whole family will be characterized by worship, bible study and fellowship, rather than by business and debate. Clearly there have been tensions about representation and the balance of power in this new structure - but with its history of having overcome serious divisions in the past, the UCCSA will certainly emerge richer and more united through this journey.

...THERE CONTINUES TO BE AN IMPORTANT CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN THE FACT THAT FIVE DIFFERENT COUNTRIES ARE UNITED IN ONE CHURCH...

35

FROM MAINTENANCE TO MISSION

4

Whilst the Church has been spending much energy on working through these tensions and relationships it has not been idle. Emerging out of its own mission legacy, and the challenges of the 1980's to the Church of Jesus Christ in the world, the Church began to think more and more

about moving 'from maintenance to mission'.

Like many churches, we have become complacent in the vineyard. We spend so much of our time and money on issues of maintenance. We have forgotten that "the church exists by mission, as a fire exists by

burning" (Brunner), and that the God who sent his only Son to offer us abundant life, also sends us out in the power of the spirit to witness to this abundant life in midst of the work of death in this world.

The Pastoral Plan for Transformation, which occupied centre stage from 1987 to 1999, helped to raise a mission consciousness at all levels in the church, not the least through its programme, *Hamba! Tsamaya!*

Beweeg! This was a timely reminder to the church, so that at the start of the new millennium it could begin to focus on the concerns of so many people such as Aids, unemployment, poverty, domestic violence, environmental degradation and sexual morality. Discerning God's will in the midst of these pressing issues remains high on the agenda of the church at local, regional and now synodical level.

5

TOWARDS THE FUTURE

36

Theological education has always been of high concern for Congregationalists, for without bishops and formal adherence to historic creeds, the church depends hugely upon an educated clergy. Sadly, the demise of the Federal Theological Seminary (FedSem) in the mid 1990's has seen the church without an official training centre. Students receive their training at a variety of centres, including the universities of Fort Hare, Western Cape and Natal (Pietermaritzburg). There are hopes of establishing an official Congregational House of Formation at one of these centres in the near future.

With its own history of unity amidst diversity, and its theological emphasis on the integrity of the local church rather than denominational structure, the UCCSA has always seen itself as a keen participant in the ecumenical movement - and has contributed to this in a number of vital ways, not the least being the role played in a range of ecumenical forums by its first General Secretary Rev. Joseph Wing. The UCCSA is an active member of the Church Unity Commission, the South African Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World

Council of Churches. While formal unity talks with the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa stalled in the 1980s, there are a growing number of local 'United Churches' scattered throughout South Africa.

The UCCSA stands then, between this legacy in the past, and the hope that we have in Christ for the future. We share our historic and doctrinal links to the apostolic church, and through the Puritans of England, to our theological home in Calvin's Geneva.

We are heirs to a great mission legacy on this sub-continent, and can be rightly proud of the 'great cloud of witnesses' that are our ancestors in the faith. But we are not called backwards; rather we are called forwards in faith to witness to Jesus, the life of the world in each and every new context.

To this task the UCCSA has always set itself, and its members desire nothing more than to undertake the challenge in the power of the Spirit, and hand in hand with Christians of all races and culture, languages and denominations, and from all the countries of Africa and the World in this new millennium.

THE UCCSA
STANDS THEN,
BETWEEN THIS LEGACY
IN THE PAST, AND THE
HOPE THAT WE HAVE
IN CHRIST FOR
THE FUTURE.

