

# MISSION COUNCILS – A SELF-PERPETUATING ANACHRONISM (1923-1971): A SOUTH AFRICAN CASE STUDY

**Graham A Duncan**

Department of Church History and Church Polity

University of Pretoria

graham.duncan@up.ac.za

## ABSTRACT

If ever mission councils in South Africa had a purpose, they had outlived it by the time of the formation of the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa (BPCSA) in 1923. However, autonomy in this case was relative and the South African Mission Council endured until 1981. It was an anachronism which served little purpose other than the care of missionaries and the control of property and finance. It was obstructive insofar as it hindered communication between the BPCSA and the Church of Scotland and did little to advance God's mission, especially through the agency of black Christians. During this period blacks were co-opted onto the Church of Scotland South African Joint Council (CoSSAJC) but they had to have proved their worth to the missionaries first by their compliance with missionary views. This article will examine the role of the CoSSAJC in pursuance of its prime aim, "the evangelisation of the Bantu People" (BPCSA 1937, 18), mainly from original sources.

**Keywords:** Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa (BPCSA); Church of Scotland South Africa Joint Council (CoSSAJC); Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (RPCSA)

## INTRODUCTION

I have dealt with the origin and early development of Mission Council of the Free Church and United Free Church of Scotland elsewhere (hereafter referred to as the Mission Council) (Duncan 2012, 217-234). Following the formation of the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa (BPCSA) in 1923, the existence of mission



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councils remained an obstacle in the relationship of the United Free Church of Scotland and the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa (BPCSA) (Duncan 2016) due to the large amount of business, control and power that the Council had accumulated prior to 1923. The only significant advance was the decision taken in 1932 to include ‘Native members’ of the Mission Council (BPCSA GA 1932, 35). A committee was appointed on Relations with the Mission Council at the time of the formation of the BPCSA (BPCSA 1923, 4). This implied an ongoing relationship when the immediate aim in an autonomous church should have been integration with or without missionary participation. Yet, even the policy of integration proceeded by fits and starts with no apparent reason for delay in implementation. Full integration would have assured the new church of the confidence the Free Church of Scotland (FCoS) had in its offspring to grow and develop within a vibrant and challenging South African society.

## THE HONEYMOON IS OVER

By 1937, the BPCSA was in crisis, according to the South African Mission Council, resulting from a shortage of missionaries, black ministers and theological students. Its response was to maintain, and if possible increase, the number of missionaries (BPCSA 1937, 18-19). Regardless, congregations continued to apply for Scottish missionaries (see BPCSA GA 1940, 12, 15). It was not so much that missionaries were desired but they came as free labour in a context where rural poverty precluded congregations from calling their own ministers. During this, and the succeeding period, rural congregations’ membership was largely confined to the elderly, women and children as wage earning men were forced by the depredations of the Land Act (1913) and the vagaries of increasing industrialisation to move to the urban areas to earn. The major problem ‘facing...industry was its labour supply’ (Beinart 1994, 64) often manifested in protests (Beinart 1994, 98-108; Duncan 1997, 69-72). The leadership of rural women was significant (Beinart 1994, 108) and church women would have been among those providing leadership. The situation did not change substantially in the following years of depression and war (1939-1945). The 1936 Land Act and Native Representation Act consolidated white power: ‘Rapid urbanisation...drew more African workers to the cities’ (Beinart 1994, 120) and this had severe economic implications for rurally based churches.

## THE ROT SETS IN

Subsequently, a report of the Foreign Mission Committee (FMC) was tabled in the 1948 General Assembly of the BPCSA on the South African mission field. *Inter alia* it was conscious of the impact of ‘the effects of the economic and political

background on missionary work' (BPCSA GA 1948, 35); and it commented negatively on relations between black and white:

The disabilities of Non-Europeans and the suspicions and fears of Europeans form an undertone to every conversation, discussion and negotiation. It is literally impossible for missionary and African to talk together, for Mission Council or Presbytery to meet for business, without attitudes and actions being affected by the racial situation in South Africa. (BPCSA GA 1948, 35)

Here was the heart of the matter - ingrained and inherent racism. If it was indeed the case that black and white could no longer work together, why perpetuate the myth? It was noted that blacks were beginning to 'cross the line into semi-skilled and even skilled occupations. But the rate of progress is too slow to keep pace with the growing sense of racial consciousness and social grievances' (BPCSA GA 1948, 35), despite the fact that missionary institutions had been providing such education for just over one hundred years (Shepherd 1971, 21-23). The same was true of theological education, which had not had great success in the recruitment, selection and training of ministers. Then it was suggested that the BPCSA Business Committee be expanded to include three missionaries. This is inexplicable in a context where missionary numbers were dwindling and the local church should have been asserting its own authority and empowering its own members. The only conclusion that was reached in this regard was expressed by the BPCSA as follows: 'Unless it regains the spirit of a Missionary Church it will not be able to maintain itself even as a settled church' (BPCSA GA 1948, 38). But integration was a future prospect; yet, while there was no need to make the case for integration, the report stated with concern:

While the Church is at different stages of development and in some cases is not ready to take great responsibility we are sure the time has come to encourage the process. The division between Mission and Church is already causing confusion in the African mind. There are inevitable difficulties when matters involving the Church are decided in a Mission Council without reference to the Church. The Church will not grow in responsibility until real responsibility is put upon it. Far better to begin the process now by gradual stages as the Church is trained for it than to wait until we are compelled by financial stringency or lack of personnel to put burdens suddenly upon it for which it has not been made ready. (BPCSA GA 1948, 43)

It did not seem to occur that the problem was the differential functions, stipends, conditions and status of missionaries. Then, where was the evidence that the 'African mind' was confused? Further, according to the FMC, it was already suffering from the effects of financial stringency and personnel shortages. It did not occur that the dissolution of the South African Mission Council could obviate all of these differences. This was concluded 25 years after the formation of the BPCSA – enough time to resolve outstanding issues. The FMC favoured the gradualistic approach but did not reflect on what was to be gradually processed. Then, how did the FMC intend

to ‘encourage the process’ in a concrete sense? Words alone would not achieve the purpose. Strong and decisive action was necessary to develop black leadership as opposed to missionary leadership, as was the result in the integration of Scottish ministers into the ministry of the BPCSA. But this had to wait for another 10 years to pass.

## TO WHOM DO THE MISSIONARIES BELONG?

A change of status in the position of Scottish missionaries was intimated in 1957 when Dr JWC Dougall, General Secretary of the FMC, visited the General Assembly of the BPCSA. The FMC had come to prefer that missionaries be ordained in the churches in which they were to serve as one means of clarifying issues of loyalty, care and discipline. The Church of Scotland had ruled that ministers could not be ministers of two churches and that from that time missionaries would be recruited who would be ‘entirely under the jurisdiction of the BPC’ (BPCSA GA 1957, 50). Further, Dr Dougall commented ‘that the Mission Council lasted longer in SA than in other fields, and that he hoped it would gradually disappear, and its place be taken by a joint body which would function until the Church assumed full control’ (BPCSA GA 1957, 50-51). Still no date was fixed for this but it was agreed to increase the BPCSA representation on the South African Mission Council. The reason for the endurance of the South African Mission Council was not interrogated; the BPCSA resigned itself to the maintenance of the *status quo*.

In the 1960 BPCSA General Assembly (1960, 29) the Revs Ben Jones, Dougald W Matheson, John A Anderson and Archibald Chisholm were accepted into the ministry of the BPCSA to join the Revs Ronnie Samuel and David Anderson, who had already been ordained by the BPCSA, along with Elder George McArthur. Some issues were clarified a year later when the new Secretary for Africa of the Church of Scotland, Rev Neil Barnard visited the General Assembly. One of the significant happenings was the beginning of a move to dissolve the South African Presbytery now that missionaries were part of the BPCSA (BPCSA GA 1961, 18).

## NEW FOR OLD

In 1962, constitutions were presented to the General Assembly for the Church of Scotland South Africa Joint Council and the Missionaries’ Committee (BPCSA GA 1962, 33-37). The Constitution of the Joint Council made it clear that:

3. **The Joint Council** is the Executive of the Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland in South Africa and will take the place of the Church of Scotland Mission Council.

4. **The Joint Council** will report to the Bantu Presbyterian Church for information and advice and may carry out such work as the Bantu Presbyterian Church asks it to do with the approval of the Foreign Mission Committee. (BPCSA GA 1962, 33)

It is evident that, despite the work of the Integration Committee (now dissolved, BPCSA GA 1062, 32), the FMC was not yet prepared to give up ultimate control of its South African assets and the wording of paragraph four above indicate what ‘may’ happen as the result of a BPCSA initiative. Membership consisted of the moderator and senior clerk of the BPCSA General Assembly, eight BPC nominees; the balance of 12 members were to be missionaries or their appointees. There was still a clear tendency to maintain ‘white’ domination of the Council (BPCSA GA 1962, 33).

With regard to financial matters, domination remained the order of the day:

12. ... the Joint Council shall have general supervision of the financial operation of the work entrusted to it, and shall be left as free as possible in the management of details. All applications for grants must come through the Joint Council and be subject to its approval. (BPCSA GA 1962, 35)

Again, the Joint Council acted as a block to direct access between one autonomous denomination and another. It is further to be noted that the Church of Scotland’s point of communication was a General Assembly committee (the FMC) while the Bantu Presbyterian Church was approached through a Joint Council with a majority of Church of Scotland representatives. Inequity was built into the new constitution. The Constitution of the Missionaries’ Committee revealed that it was composed of:

- 1.(a) All missionaries (men and women) who hold their appointment directly from the Foreign Mission Committee.
- (b) Two members appointed by the Bantu Presbyterian Church. (BPCSA GA 1962, 37)

Its sole functions were:

- (a) With the election of members to the Joint Council.
- (b) With the terms of service of missionaries in so far as they affect the missionaries’ contract with the Foreign Mission Committee. Any correspondence with the Foreign Mission Committee must go through the Secretary of the Joint Council.

It is to be wondered what the point was of retaining a missionaries’ committee when it had so little to do. Yet, it had a function relative to the Joint Council. This was to become an anomaly as the number of missionaries declined and joint (marital) appointments were made from 1977. It also resulted in the Secretary of the Joint Council having a supervisory and powerful relationship over other missionaries, which was a contradiction in Presbyterian polity. In addition, the BPCSA had little place to contribute to a discussion of missionary interests and by the mid-nineteen seventies even this influence had disappeared in practice.

Further, no one interrogated the point of formulating new constitutions for bodies which were soon to be dissolved. In 1965, The Overseas Council (which had replaced the Foreign Mission Committee) invited mission churches for a consultation (BPCSA GA 1964, 28) which was to include in the agenda:

- Interdependence and Mission
- The Place of the Missionary
- The Future of Institutions
- Finance and Property
- Informing each Other
- The Christian Abroad
- Joint Action for Mission. (BPCSA GA 1964, 48)

The BPCSA prepared a position paper on problems and opportunities facing the denomination.

## THE THRUST TOWARDS INTEGRATION

The General Assembly instructed that steps be taken ‘to secure the full integration of the Church and Joint Council as soon as possible’ (BPCSA GA 1965, 22) ‘amicably’ (BPCSA GA 1966, 38) and report to General Assembly. Much as it wanted to maintain the relationship with the Church of Scotland, it also wanted greater autonomy. The Joint Council responded by appointing a committee (a typical Presbyterian delaying response) to investigate the possibility of involving the BPCSA in its affairs to a greater extent (BPCSA GA 1966, 38) and agreed to greater involvement of BPCSA members in its workings (BPCSA GA 1967, 28). However, this fell short of integration, which would necessarily involve the dissolution of the Joint Council. It was not possible to remain with two controlling bodies post-integration. There was to be no change in the balance of power. Either the missionaries remained in control or the BPCSA took complete control of its own affairs with all the consequences of self-government. This would allow them to reflect on the role of missionaries in the future. Were they needed? Were they wanted? Do they make an actual contribution to the growth and development of a young church’s mission? This was not to be an issue that would be settled quickly or easily.

One land issue that was problematic related to the disposition of land that was designated to be incorporated into areas zoned for white occupation under the provision of the Group Areas Act (1950). Government policy dictated that if and when such lands were under black ownership, there was the strong possibility that black residents would be removed forcibly (eg. Emgwali Girls’ Institution had been zoned for white occupation in the 1950s [BPCSA GA 1967, 36]). Hence, it was

agreed that ‘transfer of the Church of Scotland property in “black” areas to the BPC be referred to the Board of Trustees for consideration’ (BPCSA GA 1967, 28).

Then, in 1970, following the receipt of reports from the reinstated Integration Committee, an attempt was made to introduce the business of the Joint Council to the church at large. The BPCSA began by challenging the definition regarding Joint Council being the ‘Agent’ of the Church of Scotland in South Africa ‘to clearly define the powers, responsibility and authority of the “Agent” will be extremely difficult, and we felt we must seek a different approach’ (BPCSA GA 1970, 95).

It was decided that medical missionaries should report on their work to Presbyteries and to the General Assembly (BPCSA GA 1967, 28). However, in light of the political situation in South Africa, and to secure the interests of the BPCSA, the General Assembly concluded that the Church of Scotland be asked to continue to control and finance the remaining institutions in South Africa; three hospitals, three educational institutions and two mission farms (BPCSA GA 1967, 28). This request was the result of dire need in an uncertain situation where the BPCSA felt responsible for the maintenance of services it had provided with missionary assistance hitherto. Such aid required to be supervised by an executive body, i.e., the Joint Council. With regard to the institutions, Emgwali was to remain the property of the Church of Scotland ‘due entirely to the Group Areas position’ (BPCSA GA 1970, 223); the oversight of Pholela school was to be transferred to the BPCSA (but this might jeopardise the position of the Scottish missionaries with regard to permission to reside at the institution), while Lovedale’s future became the centre of a long-term discussion with the Ciskeian government, which began in 1970 (BPCSA GA, 22-23) when the Ciskeian Department of Education and Culture requested the Joint Council to sell the institution to them. They recommended that the BPCSA accept the proposal in principle with the proviso that they be allowed to appoint a chaplain to Lovedale. This was agreed (BPCSA GA 1970, 30).

It was then only a matter of time before the management of finances became an issue. The rarely articulated direct question was: ‘Could black people be entrusted with the stewardship of money?’ This became the sub discourse for all future discussions for control of money-conferred power. In 1970 the General Assembly of the BPCSA passed a resolution:

...to recommend to the Overseas Council that the BPC be given responsibility to administer the finances of the institutions and the Joint Council with the assurance to the Church of Scotland that funds of institutions will remain at those institutions for their smooth running and development and will not be injected into the funds of the church. (BPCSA GA 1970, 52)

It was further agreed to investigate the possibility of the BPCSA administering the funds of trusts held by the Joint Council and institutions.

The issue of integration was settled in part by default as the result of a decline of missionaries (by 1967 there were only seven missionaries, excluding nurses).

Numbers had decreased following the Bantu Education Act (1953) with the forced takeover of mission institutions by the government. As the decision to take control of mission hospitals occurred, the number of medical missionaries would also drop (Dr John McCutcheon remained at Donald Fraser Hospital, Gooldville Mission, following the government takeover on 1 April 1970 [BPCSA GA 1970, 21]). While education and medical missionaries could (and some did) transfer to government service, they would no longer remain as missionaries.

It was in 1970, that the transfer of funds held by the Joint Council began in earnest (BPCSA GA 1970, 20). These were mainly trust funds for educational and missionaries' purposes ('Information as to the source, purpose and amount of funds held by Joint Council and the institutions within its control,' BPCSA GA 1970, 72-84; supplemented by 'Notes on monies held by Joint Council and their uses... excluding specific bequest funds, details of which have been prepared separately,' BPCSA GA 1970, 84-94, prepared by George Reid, missionary and Treasurer of the Joint Council).

Following a meeting with Rev. Neil Bernard, Africa Secretary of the Overseas Council in 1969, it was anticipated that integration would take place 'towards the end of this year [1970] or the beginning of 1971' (BPCSA GA 1970, 87) meaning that 'a large part of the work of Joint Council will in future be administered by the BPC' (BPCSA GA 1970, 87). It is not clear which work would be carried out by the BPCSA and who would be entrusted with the remainder of the work. Moreover, soon the matter arose of who would pay for the process of integration and its aftermath? By the time of the General Assembly, a month later, it had become clear to the Integration Committee that by 'March 1971 total integration will not be an accomplished fact, but, from that date onwards, all decisions, as far as it is legally possible, will be taken by the BPC who will also assume financial responsibility' (BPCSA 1970, 100).

One particular issue of no special note at that time related to the payment of Overseas Council legacy income and grants to the BPCSA: 'The sums are paid over to the Bantu Presbyterian Church Joint Treasurers in the quarter they are received' (BPCSA GA 1970, 93). Within a few years this would become a major source of tension between the two bodies through the withholding of grants. In addition, a matter was raised concerning the holding of funds accrued from the compensation of expropriated properties, pending decisions regarding their long-term use (BPCSA GA 1970, 93). No decision was forthcoming at this juncture.

The issue of property was delicate in view of the imposition of the Group Areas Act. Legal advice stated that property could only be used for 'Church, School or Mission purposes'. Otherwise, 'it shall revert to the state'. The clear implication was that resulting from 'the transfer of land to the Bantu Presbyterian Church and perhaps the transfer of land to the State, those conditions will of course be of prime importance' (BPCSA GA 1970, 96). This meant that the use for which a plot of land



was originally allocated, had to be investigated. In addition: ‘We are also seeking to clarify what the position would be of a Scottish Missionary living on land in a “Black Area” [so-called] owned by the BPC’ (BPCSA GA 1970, 97). The Integration Committee was convinced of the need of a financially trained person to manage this process. It is not clear what steps were taken to appoint a local person, but in 1972 it was agreed to recruit a South African to be Treasurer of Joint Council and Accountant in the BPCSA (BPCSA 1972, 17). This did not happen.

More sensitive was the issue regarding the payment of missionaries and their additional allowances. The Overseas Council was hesitant in this matter:

What we doubt, however, is the value of salaries being paid through the BPC. There would be no harm at all in the BPC receiving a statement from time to time of salaries paid to individual missionaries, but we believe you are increasing unnecessarily the amount of work done by your Treasurer and it would be wrong for the impression to be given, in the present state of the law in South Africa, that the BPC was paying the salaries of expatriates. In a number of countries, we now pay salaries directly into the banks, but we realise that with PAYE in South Africa this would be difficult. (BPCSA GA 1970, 97)

This vague statement led to a decision that the wisest course to adopt was that the salaries of missionaries be paid through the Treasurer of the Continuing Body [Joint Council]. Apart from this explanation, taking into account the great discrepancies in the stipends paid to missionaries and ministers in the BPCSA, this was a source of considerable embarrassment. It became a source of resentment and conflict and a challenge to the role of the church as an agent of justice and equity in an apartheid society. This was a long-standing problem which had occasioned secessions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Duncan 2013, 52-79). In the context of integration this was a matter of trust and integrity between the parties concerned (Overseas Council, Joint Council, BPCSA and Missionaries’ Committee).

However, matters were advancing apace. Due to legal problems it was agreed that Lovedale Press be managed by a committee with a majority of white persons ‘as an interim measure and to comply with the law’ (BPCSA 1971, 20). With regard to the name of the continuing committee it was agreed to recommend the name of ‘Joint Committee’. The BPCSA: ‘For historical and emotional? (sic), reasons we strongly favour the adoption of the name “Joint Committee”’ (BPCSA 1971, 20). No explanation was offered but perhaps the BPCSA had had enough of mission councils. The 1972 General Assembly noted that the Overseas Council had accepted the name change. However, in the meantime the Business Committee had agreed to retain the name Joint Council (BPCSA 1972, 20) as a result of the potential cost involved. New constitutions were presented (BPCSA 1972, 40-42) for the CoSSAJC and the Missionaries’ Committee (BPCSA 1972, 43-44). The Joint Council Constitution had several points worthy of note.

First, the name of the body was the Church of Scotland South Africa Joint Council. It is clear that this is a Scottish body. Nowhere does the name of the Bantu

Presbyterian Church of South Africa appear; only South Africa. This perpetuated a historical mindset which was not challenged by the BPCSA, for whatever reason. It indicated the enduring power of the Church of Scotland over matters South African, despite the steps that had either been taken or agreed to. Again, within a few years, the reality of power sharing would be clarified. Then, membership of the Executive Committee was not defined, so it could easily become dominated by white members, i.e. missionaries. Finally, the scope of work indicated the ongoing control of church affairs. It included: medical mission (including the appointment of members to hospital boards); Church of Scotland property in South Africa (for which the Joint Council shall be directly responsible to the Overseas Council); and ‘the administration of all other matters which, at this time, because of the existing laws of the country, cannot become the responsibility of the Bantu Presbyterian Church’ (BPCSA 1972, 41). Capitulation to the ‘existing laws of the country’ was an opportunity missed to reflect creatively on the use and disposition of assets for the evangelisation of the black people of South Africa and their growth in autonomy.

## CONCLUSION

What becomes clear is that integration was not to be easily conceded to the BPCSA. At the end of almost 50 years of existence, the mission council was still alive and functioning. The continued existence of a mission council was obstructive insofar as it hindered communication between the BPCSA and the Church of Scotland by interposing a white dominated body *in loco parentis* to ‘guide’ and implement decisions. It did little to advance God’s mission, especially through the agency of black Christians, despite some senior black ministers being co-opted on to the CoSSAJC, which continued to exercise power and control through the means of personnel, finance (including missionary salaries) and property. Their role had nothing to do with evangelisation. This was and remains a perennial problem in mission globally: ‘...most missionaries, on the one hand, did not trust the ability of...Christian leaders, and on the other, did not want to give up their control of the churches for their financial support’ (Ge 2012, 61); and ‘only financially independent churches could be really free to develop themselves indigenously without foreign intervention’ (Ge 2012, 62). This was an expression of the connection between Western religion and power’ (Breistein 2012, 106). Ngomedje (2012, 125) expresses this quite simply: ‘People do not like feeling vulnerable because regardless of the reasons for it humans would rather prefer to be in control.’ This was especially true of missionaries. This is an historic issue well expressed by Ross (2010, 12):

A deep challenge for European churches is that they have been accustomed to being “in control” of the Christian message and its expression in church life. The opportunity to go into earning mode and discover the experience of other new ways of understanding, experiencing and communicating the gospel is not easily grasped or appropriated.

Missionaries seemed to be incapable of becoming vulnerable despite the fact that this would empower black South Africans and give them an authentic sense of dignity. Yet, from the inauguration of the BPCSA in 1923, a cadre of exceptional black ministers was developing and growing, e.g. Revs TB Soga, JH Soga, Y Mbali, DV Sikutshwa, WPT Ndibongo, JY Hliso and GT Vika.

As far as achieving its prime aim, ‘the evangelisation of the Bantu People’ (BPCSA 1937, 18), the South African Mission Council did little directly to promote this. Historically, this had always been assigned to local black Christians. Delay in integration is inexplicable, apart from the intransigence of the missionaries who saw no problem in accommodating themselves to their own agenda and benefit from prevailing political restrictions. But the work was not yet over and the Joint Council eventually survived until 1981.

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