

# Church Unity or Ecumenism: The Perspective of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa 1967–2022

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## Abstract

Right-wing politics is re-emerging all over the world, challenging the church to defy this trend and be true to her nature of oneness and Catholicism. This brings to the fore the question of unity and the ecumenical spirit. It is from this understanding that this article, which is an exercise in contemporary church history, seeks to contribute to the Reformed Church scholarship in the face of the current context of mission. The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA), as part of Reformed Churches, has a rich history of union. This discussion stems from the hermeneutical considerations of the reformed understanding of church unity, and particular focus is given to the UCCSA's understanding of unity and ecumenism. After articulating what ought to be happening, the article delves into the historical considerations of the UCCSA and Church unity.

**Keywords:** Hermeneutics; Church; nature; ecclesiology; ecumenism; reformed

## Methodology

The article will employ a practical ecclesiological method that focuses on the descriptive empirical, historical, hermeneutical, and strategic considerations for the UCCSA in the context of Church unity and proffer lessons for its unity. The descriptive empirical considerations build from the analysis of primary documents from the UCCSA that describe the context of unity in the church. The hermeneutical considerations will relate to the understanding of the UCCSA on church unity with scripture. The conclusion follows the strategic considerations of where the UCCSA must go, and what it must do, or become in living out the unity imperative. This methodology—practical ecclesiology—seeks to illuminate not only the doctrinal aspect of unity but also the ecclesiological praxis as regards “church unity.”



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## Introduction

The UCCSA emerged from a union of the London Missionary Society (LMS), the Congregational Union of South Africa (CUSA), and the American Board of Foreign Missions (ABM) in 1967. Its history has always been ecumenical. In 1975, three years before Van der Kemp was sent to the shores of Southern Africa, one of the LMS leaders made this arguably prophetic statement: “This is a new thing in the Christian Church...here are Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians and independents all united in one Society... Behold us here assembled with one accord to witness the funeral of bigotry” (Briggs and Wing 1970, 307). Such a foundation is an expression of an ecumenical mission pursuit. This has found fulfilment in various participations of the UCCSA in ecumenical fora and her pursuit of Christian unity, an issue under review in this article. This ecumenical rich foundation is also a challenge for the UCCSA to always re-look at its ecclesiology and praxis if it is to be true to these ecumenical aspirations of the forefathers.

## Scriptural Basis to UCCSA’s Understanding of Church Unity

The hermeneutical consideration speaks of what should be happening in the church as per the biblical understanding. The UCCSA’s understanding of unity is the same as that of the wider family of the Reformed churches. Scriptures such as John 17:11 are foundational. Commenting on this, Briggs (1996, 210), who wrote about the UCCSA polity, argues as follows:

In his priestly prayer after the last supper Jesus prayed for his disciples gathered around the table with him, that they might be one as he and his Father are one. And not those eleven men alone. He prayed, too, for all who would come after them, that they might be one in the unity he enjoyed with his Father. Moreover, the unity for which he prayed had to move beyond the theoretical into the practical, until it became visible unity, so that the world could see and believe that the father had sent him.

From the above sentiment by Briggs, it can be argued that the priestly prayer is central to the imperative of unity. This unity is true of the UCCSA’s understanding when it becomes visible. Mission finds its expression in the practical life of the church born of fellowship (*koinonia*) in the love of the Trinity and between humanity as well. From this perspective, love is both a divine gift and a calling to the church. It is a gift because Christ prayed for it, and it is a calling because he commanded his disciples saying, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, have love one to another.” John 13:34 (NIV).

The above understanding of unity can be seen in the writings of John Owen, one of the leading Congregationalists of his time. According to Briggs (1996, 211), he argued for “a communion of churches; particular churches are obliged unto mutual communion in terms of their ministry and order.” Herein, church unity is understood as a duty incumbent upon all denominations. It is from this understanding that the congregationalist finds it easy to unite with others, especially those of the same

(reformed) understanding. This is confirmed very well in the UCCSA Constitution whose Preamble (2013,1) says, “Scripture declares and faith accepts that from the beginning God’s purpose was to gather all people in loving and permanent communion with Himself and with one another.” One can then argue that “unity” is at the heart of the congregational understanding of the church.

Briggs (1996,123) talks of intercommunion as an element of the reformed churches that expresses their willingness to unite and be in communion with other churches. In many reformed churches, the communion table is open to all who are baptised, including those from other denominations. The Congregationalists take this pattern further by opening the table to all who love Jesus despite the state of their denominational affiliation and baptism. This is informed by the understanding that the invitation of Christ is to all. That is, “Come to me *all* you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” This theology informs church unity and ecumenism as understood by the UCCSA.

Another key element in the hermeneutical considerations of the idea of unity in the UCCSA is the understanding of the “covenant.” According to Van der Water (2001, 155), the UCCSA subscribes to covenantal ecclesiology. He notes that from the origins of Congregationalism, its founders emphasised the aspect of the covenant. This is evident in the UCCSA’s confession of the Covenant in all closing services of the Assembly. This is repeated in all special services. The confession states that: “We covenant with the Lord and with one another; and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed word of truth.” It is believed that in terms of UCCSA Polity the concept of covenant also includes covenant commitment, covenant promises where God pledges salvation to those who are faithful to the covenant, and covenant responsibility which is to care for one another and walk together (John15:12). It is, therefore, this covenant responsibility that is the basis of ecumenical involvement and church unity.

Furthermore, the unity of the church is essential for the mission. The UCCSA has espoused the missional vision. This reflects that it is being reformed and fulfils Jesus’s command that his disciples must be united if the world is to know him and identify them as his disciples (John 13:35). In other words, a united church has an impact and is thus relevant to society. Its relevance and impact on the society will bring transformation to the society, and this is a mission. This relates very well with Acts 2 at Pentecost, where there was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on a united church that was in one accord. This argument may be relevant in explaining the success of the mission in the early church.

### **Heritage of Unity in the UCCSA**

Briggs and Wing (1970, 307) are of the view that “congregationalism in Southern Africa was founded on an ecumenical principle, not a denominational one.” This is from the interdenominational routes of the UCCSA in the LMS. Pass (2016, 389) narrates it this way: “In 1795 the London Missionary Society (LMS) started as an Interdenominational

organisation (Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterian, and Congregationalists) formed the LMS.” The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was founded in 1810 in the USA. The ABM would later arrive in Southern Africa and set up Congregationalist churches, which would later be united with churches of the LMS. Arguably, this presents a rich foundation of church unity and Ecumenism.

On 3 October 1967, in Durban, representatives of the Bantu Congregational Church, the Congregational Union of South Africa, and the LMS in Southern Africa dissolved themselves in terms of their constitutions and united under the banner of the UCCSA. According to Wing (1977, 9), they came out of the Inaugural Service “as one people.” This union is arguably built on John 17:21 in which Jesus prays for his followers to be one, as he is one with the Father. This is no small feat, especially when one considers the costs of Church unity in issues of leadership, constitution, tradition, identity, and personal benefit. One can argue that it was a miracle.

In November 1967, a Joint Committee with the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa was revived “to initiate and foster cooperation leading to unity” (Wing 2017, 10). This statement presupposes that even before the formation of the UCCSA, there were attempts at unity with PCSA. The watershed moment of 1967 did not satisfy Congregationalists. If anything, they were inspired by the experience of 1967 to continue striving for church unity. This engagement between the UCSA and PCSA led to the drafting of the Constitution for mutual eligibility of ministers and members. The discussion for union with Presbyterians has continued over the years, put on hold, and revived. Currently, there are united churches, such as St Mungo’s and St Barnabas, where Presbyterians and UCCSA worship in the same congregation under one minister. The continuation of the unity talks can be understood in the historical sense as well as the theological one that church unity is at the core of “being Church.”

Ten years after the formation of the UCCSA in 1967, another denomination was received into the UCCSA. In 1969, negotiations for unity between UCCSA and Disciples of Christ began. These negotiations gave birth to a union in 1972 when the Association of the Disciples of Christ joined the UCCSA. Wing (2017, 10) has this from the preacher during the Covenant Service in Pretoria: “You have done it again.” History would later reveal that this “act of unity with other denominations” would be repeated in the future. One can pray that this experience will always enrich the UCCSA and indeed the wider reformed family.

The spirit of church unity and ecumenism has once again been seen in the unity talks between the UCCSA and the Evangelical Congregational Church in Angola (ECCA). ECCA is part of the Disciples of Christ that became part of the UCCSA in 1972. The UCCSA is a very close mission partner of the Global Ministries. This must speak of the commonality the UCCSA has with the ECCA. Being on the other side of the Zambezi with Namibia Synod, they started bilateral as far back as 2015. Since then, the two synods have always enjoyed a cordial relationship. The Synod of Namibia kept the

UCCSA briefed on this relationship and the possibility of a union. In March 2021, the Executive Committee resolved to pursue closer cooperation and facilitate exchange visits between the two churches. The inspiration and impetus were born from the UCCSA's current understanding of mission as expressed in her current theme: "Reaching New Frontiers. Hope and Healing." Thus, the integration of ECCA into the UCCSA Family will result in a wider missional impact. Theologically, it is in some way a fulfilment of John 17:21, which presents a clarion call for church unity.

The bilateral began in the past. The current impetus followed the then UCCSA President, Rev S Cele, attending their Executive Committee Meeting in March 2022. He reported a successful visit that exposed him to the work that God was doing in Angola through the Congregational Church (ECCA). What was heartwarming is how this church, very similar to the UCCSA, has successful mission programmes. He also reported their willingness to join the UCCSA family.

Rev Andre Kangoyi Eurico, the General Secretary of ECCA, attended the Executive Meeting of the UCCSA held in Randfontein in South Africa Synod on 23–25 March 2022. In his presentation, on behalf of the ECCA, he expressed his appreciation to the Synod of Namibia for its role in introducing the ECCA to the UCCSA. He made it clear that the ECCA, through its executive, resolved to pursue a union of the two denominations that share the same background, theology, and practice. The ECCA was started in 1880 by missionaries from a Congregationalist in America. In 1886, they were joined by Canadian missionaries.

In the presentation, he also gave a summary of what the church was doing. The church has hospitals and seven mission stations. In 1914, the Evangelical Council was established at the Centre of Angola. In 1975, the Angola Nation became independent, and a council of churches was formed. Thus, the church called itself "Congregationalists." Currently, it has over 2000 congregations. Its motto is: "The ECCA stands for Christ and Christ stands for all."

On 24–29 May a ministers' retreat was hosted in Lubango in the Huila Province. It brought together 213 ministers from 18 provinces. The retreat ran under the theme: "Ministry and Mission based on Matthew 6:33." Rev. Dr Xolani Maseko represented the UCCSA General Secretary. A delegation from the UCCSA in Namibia also attended. It was represented by Rev Dr A September, Mr F Adonis, and Mr J Heymann, with Mr V Immanuel translating. This visit was informed by the talks between the UCCSA and ECCA towards a union. During this visit, they appreciated the ECCA's approach to the mission where, instead of having committees, they have departments running the missional programmes and projects.

This visit was significant because it created a platform for engagement with ECCA representatives on issues of polity, programming, finance, and "governance and structure." This revealed commonality with minor differences in emphasis in areas of

theological training, mission council activities, and investment. During this meeting, there was an explicit request that ECCA be admitted to the UCCSA and be a part of it. The ECCA stated that it is ready to embark on this journey if the UCCSA opens its doors. Joining the UCCSA would give it the status of being a transnational church rather than a national church. Furthermore, it would enrich their polity and spirituality as they share in the ministry of the UCCSA, their sister church.

Informed by her theological understanding that says, “We are blessed in order to be a blessing to others,” the biblical mandate for church unity—and inspired by her nature and history of union—the 41st UCCSA Assembly resolved to welcome the ECCA into the UCCSA on a Transitional Status during which the integration process will take place. It is envisaged that in the 2024 Assembly, the ECCA will be fully integrated into the UCCSA. The UCCSA General Secretary and the UCCSA Executive were mandated to carry out the orientation and integration process.

This theme embodies the UCCSA vision of a missional church that is not so much concerned with denominationalism but with the Kingdom of God on Earth. As a Missional Church, the UCCSA is convinced that to be missional is to exist for others. As a transitional, multi-racial and multi-ethnic church, the UCCSA seeks to preach an inclusive gospel of Jesus Christ. This theme informs the UCCSA that mission landscapes and mission challenges do change. There are always new mission imperatives. In every age, the Church must be relevant to the context and always faithful to the gospel of Christ. This is the conviction that informs the reception of the ECCA into the UCCSA Family.<sup>1</sup>

### **UCCSA Praxis on Unity**

The UCCSA has been a “united” Church for over 50 years in its constitution, organisational governance and structure, and confession. The church has since then been known as “one church in five countries,” meaning that from the 41st Assembly, she will be referred to as “one church in seven countries.” Despite this rich history, there have been glaring divisions according to race, ethnic, and political boundaries, hence some poignant and critical discussions on the meaning, nature, and implications of this unity. This is clear from the administrative report of the General Secretary to the 41st Assembly who said:

President and members of the Assembly, the 40th Assembly in Bulawayo agreed to approve an internal consultative process on Identity and Unity amongst the members of the UCCSA. This decision was taken as a measure to cushion the JUC between UCCSA and UPCSAs as well as a first step we needed to undertake as a denomination to raise awareness of who we are and the impeccable unity that Jesus Christ prays for in John 17. The Identity and Unity Consultation workshop that we held in Johannesburg at Emseni Christian Centre, South Africa on 19th–21st November 2019... As part of the

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1 Information on the reception of ECCA into the UCCSA is taken from the “Framework for UCCSA’s Integration into the ECCA” by Rev Kudzani Ndebele, 2022.

outcomes of the workshop we managed to discuss the biblical mandate for Church Unity and include the overture from the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA); the overture from the Evangelical Congregational Church in Angola (and we may want to include the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, which is active in Mozambique, but is not part of the UPCSA). History has taught us, that genuine unity begins with the local church.<sup>2</sup>

The above quotation reflects the ongoing engagement and discourse on church unity. It is a journey. The church needs constant evaluation and assessment if she is still true to the ideal and confession.

The ECCA held its General Assembly on 9–12 March 2023. During this major gathering of the church, deliberations on the ECCA coming into the UCCSA were made. This was to check whether the General Synod was still going together in this regard. It was not surprising that some people felt uncomfortable with the speed at which the process was moving. Although most people were still excited by the unfolding unity, a few people wanted further consultations. This is not unusual for people where change is taking place. Some people fear the unknown while others fear losing their identity. Conversely, some are optimistic about what this change or union would bring. In the end, it was resolved that there must be a commission that will iron out existing differences and lead the process of joint programming in the mission. It was agreed that in the end, the unity must not just be a cosmetic meaning of the structure only, but one that reflects shared beliefs, mission programmes, and ministry traditions.<sup>3</sup>

### **Way Forward for UCCSA on Church Unity and Ecumenism**

The unity that was achieved in 1967 and 1972 needs to be maintained and managed. Unity is not an event but a process. Matthew 13:24–25 is part of the parable of the weeds. It says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seeds in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.” This speaks about complacency. If the church is not careful, it can make decisions that negate the unity within. Truth, integrity, and forgiveness must be the hallmarks of the church’s message. This is captured in the concern of Joseph Wing in de Gruchy and van der Water (2005, 129) when they say, “maintaining outward interdependency and unity at the expense of truth and integrity could be counterproductive in the long term.” This is important, especially as one notes that the church is multi-ethnic and multi-racial, extending to seven countries in Africa. The central message of nurturing this unity must be the covenant that binds the church together, its relationships, and its responsibility. This must be maximised especially in the declared UCCSA month, which is October each year.

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2 Rev K Ndebele, 2022, Administrative Report.

3 Joint Report of the UCCSA General Secretary and ECCA General Secretary to the UCCSA March 2023 Executive Meeting.

The UCCSA Assembly in its 41st Assembly in Botswana welcomed the ECCA and received the “UCCSA in Malawi.” According to them, it has a constituency status of a local church. So, what next? This question demands a clear road map for the implementation of the unity dream. I suggest the following strategies not only for the UCCSA but also as a model to churches that may pursue such or similar unions:

- First, roadshows should be hosted especially in Angola (ECCA) and in countries where the UCCSA operates. This should follow an orientation but also an information dissemination format. The significance of such a strategy is that it prevents a scenario where “unity” becomes an elitist pact that lives in the top echelons of leadership without meaningful expression and assent amongst the “ordinary” membership of the church.
- Second, depending on the considerations of priority, a huge service should be held in both Angola (EECA) and Malawi, where the “churches” may be formally received or recognised in a solemn worship service. Such a service will not only serve a theological purpose of making a covenant but also a sociological one, to communicate and introduce the new church to the ecumenical partners and the society at large.
- Third, the process should not be rushed. Rushing it poses the danger of passing some blind corners unchecked and unattended to. In the long run, it leads to a superficial unity. People still belong to the same church, yet with deep-seated divisions along identity and values. The unity that is inherent in the church’s makeup must be given time to manifest in the process of integration. As Bonhoeffer in Clements (2015, 98) is quoted as saying:

The church as a genuine form is *unity*, basically the unity of God! The form reveals itself under the presupposition of unity. Differentiation: the church over against a religious community (arisen from individual converging wills) [is necessary]. The church is the *primary unity*. Those who do not start with unity confuse the church with a religious community.

This must educate the church on the need and significance of seeking to invoke this unity element of the church in the process of any denominational integration. With prayer and engagement, this will most probably begin to manifest itself over time.

- Fourth, the recognition services in both countries must pave the way for working committees or groups to harmonise the denominational framework of operation in matters of mission, ministry and doctrine, governance and legislation, and infrastructure and finance. Some important deliverables will be the “confessions that bind both churches,” a single constitution, logo and procedures and guidelines of representation that will inform the meeting as the assembly.



- Fifth, a critical consideration is fidelity to the biblical mandate of church unity as in John 17:21 and the imperatives of the covenant that define congregationalism. The dangers related to this consideration can be the creation of a huge transnational denomination that confesses one identity but is riddled with pain from territorialism, racism, and classification according to the economic status of the countries that inform the context of operation. Related to this consideration is the fact that unity does not necessarily inspire godliness. This becomes clear when one considers the story of Genesis 11. The unity at Babel must provide the church with a mirror to critique her unity if it is pursued for the mission and the glory of God or the human achievement and interests of the elite few. Unity does not always equate to purity but can at times serve the selfish interest of humanity.

## Conclusion

It was Jadocus van Lodestein who said that once the church is reformed, it always reforms itself,<sup>4</sup> though this was popularised by Karl Barth. The unity between the UCCSA and IECA as well as the “UCCSA” in Malawi not only grows the boundaries of the UCCSA from five to seven countries, but it also presents her with an opportunity to introspect and renew herself to accommodate the “new churches.” It also offers her a chance to reconfigure herself for best service in the contemporary mission landscape. This is a time to correct some of the historical problems that were inherited from the uniting traditions that formed the UCCSA in 1967. This move presents a model for all reformed churches in their pursuit of church communion and for all other ecumenical bodies to find inspiration as they continue the ministry of reconciliation of churches across world divides. Even though church unity is desirable, it must never sacrifice the right of common church membership, and it must be founded on sound theological reasoning and less on the social aspirations of elite leaders. To confess unity and write of it is the easier part but what is laborious is the integration so that full membership and true unity are attained. This must inform the UCCSA for the next two years but also the church of Jesus Christ as she lives and breathes unity into posterity. Having considered all arguments, especially considering the developments within UCCSA, unity is a significant aspect of ecclesiology, one can thus make a strong case for its inclusion in the nature of the church.

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