

The Church of Central Africa Presbyterian 1924–2024: A Centenary Assessment

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Abstract

By the early twentieth century African churches were emerging from the work of the three missions with a Reformed identity which were working in Malawi. In a two-stage process of union, the three young churches came together in 1924/26 to form the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). In anticipation of the centenary celebration in 2024, Zomba Theological University hosted a research conference in April 2023, aiming to take account of the 100-year history. The conference recognised the remarkable growth of the church, which now has millions of members in Malawi and neighbouring countries. It has built up its own distinctive tradition of worship, spirituality, and witness. It offers a wide range of social services and is influential at national level in Malawi. The conference also identified points of stress and tension, especially the recurrent question of how to balance unity and diversity in the life of the church. While it has never completely broken apart, there has been a constant struggle to attain meaningful unity. The centenary may be an opportunity for assessment and action. Creating an instrument to give theological attention to issues facing the CCAP may be one way to discover and deepen its identity and unity.

Keywords: ecclesiology; Malawi; mission; Presbyterian Reformed; unity

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Introducing the CCAP

In 2024 the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (commonly known as the CCAP) marks the one hundredth anniversary of its formation, which took place at Livingstonia, in northern Malawi, in 1924. The two presbyteries of Blantyre and Livingstonia, which came together to form the synod of the new church, were the products of almost 50 years of Scottish Presbyterian missionary work in Central Africa (McCracken 1977; Ross 1996). As their names suggest, this enterprise was inspired by the life and work of David Livingstone, Blantyre being the name of the town in Scotland where he was born (Ross 2002). In 1926, in a long-hoped-for development, a third presbytery became part of the CCAP. This was the Nkhoma Presbytery that arose from the work of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM) in central Malawi, which had begun in 1889 (Pauw 2016). The DRCM was largely staffed by “Scots Afrikaners,” a remarkable number of them directly descended from Andrew Murray, a Scottish minister who came to South Africa’s Cape Colony to serve in the Dutch Reformed Church in 1822 (Müller 2022; Parsons 1998). With their Scottish background and Reformed theology, the South African missionaries had much in common with their counterparts at Blantyre and Livingstonia but by now they were deeply grounded in Afrikaner language and culture, which in some respects gave them a different outlook.

The 1924/26 church union was something that had lived long in the missionary imagination. As early as 1882, when they were both relatively new to Malawi and when an African church barely existed, the head of Blantyre Mission, David Clement Scott, wrote to Robert Laws, his counterpart at Livingstonia: “I do think successful work in Africa depends a great deal on the union of the various missions. It would simply be disgraceful if we could not unite for God’s work.”¹ Ten years later, when Laws addressed the World Presbyterian Alliance in Toronto, he stated, “We should work towards a Central African Presbyterian Church, which would include Blantyre and the Dutch” (McIntosh 1993, 113). Such work began with the formation of presbyteries at Livingstonia in 1899 and Blantyre in 1903.² Alexander Hetherwick, Scott’s successor at Blantyre, saw the establishment of the presbyteries as a first step in a process that would allow the African church to transcend the Mission through which it had been born. As he explained in 1903:

It means the organisation and development of the native church life as apart from the Mission that was the means of giving it birth. It means that the Church life here can take on a stamp that is its own and not a mere wooden reproduction of the life and character of the home church and home Christianity. The Church must be native and not exotic –

1 David Clement Scott to Robert Laws, 3 May 1882, MS 7903, National Library of Scotland, cited in Englund (2022, 92).

2 Minute of the Presbytery of North Livingstonia, 15 November 1899, cited in McCracken (1977, 289); Minutes of the meeting of Blantyre Presbytery, 13 January 1903, 50/BMC/1/2/1. Malawi National Archives (henceforth MNA).

and the freest scope must be given to native character in the development of its work and organisation. (Church of Scotland East Africa Mission 1903)

His thinking about the indigenous character of the church was closely interlinked with the drive for church unity. It stood to reason that an authentically African church would not be defined by ecclesiastical divisions that had occurred in Europe.

No sooner had the presbytery been formed at Blantyre than Hetherwick was thinking that this was just a first step on the further journey that would lead to a wider church union:

This is another step in the foundation of the Church of Central Africa. The final step is, we hope, not far distant when we will join with the other Presbyteries in a General Synod of all the churches who acknowledge the Presbyterian form of church government. (Church of Scotland East Africa Mission 1902)

Hetherwick saw the way ahead very clearly and he was a man in a hurry:

A union of two Presbyteries would give us a court of final appeal in all matters affecting the comity of the native churches and strengthen the hands of each in dealing with the many problems that arise in the organisation of native Christianity. We cannot come together too soon, so that the lines of policy and method may be laid down while the churches are yet young. (Church of Scotland East Africa Mission 1902)

Despite this sense of urgency, it took 20 years to fulfil the dream. The vehicle that carried the movement forward was a series of conferences held by the Protestant missions working in Malawi and surrounding areas. These included smaller missions such as the Zambesi Industrial Mission and the Nyasa Industrial Mission as well as larger missions working in neighbouring countries, such as the London Missionary Society in Zambia or the Moravian Mission in Tanzania. Their conferences inspired the idea of a larger “Church of Central Africa” that would include the churches emerging out of all the Protestant missions in the region. At the 1904 conference, held at Blantyre, the presbyteries of Livingstonia and Blantyre had committed to work towards union but with an open mind about whether the united church might include a wider constituency. The question remained open until the 1910 missionary conference, held at Mvera. When the Blantyre and Livingstonia presbyteries met there, the question of the name of the proposed united church was put to the vote. There were three votes for “The Church of Central Africa” and 10 votes for “The Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian.”³ A constitution was approved on this basis.⁴ After this had been ratified by the mother

3 Livingstonia Mission Council Minutes, September 1910, Appendix 1 - “Meeting at Mvera of representatives of Blantyre and North Livingstonia Presbyteries,” 3 August 1910, cited in Thompson 1995, 212–213).

4 Presbytery of Blantyre, “History of the Movement for Union between the Presbyteries of Blantyre and Livingstonia,” 5 February 1912, 50/BMC/ 3/2/1. MNA.

churches in Scotland, all was set for the union to take place in 1914.⁵ Instead, the First World War broke out and caused such disruption that it was not until 1924 that the Presbyteries could meet at Livingstonia to effect the union. While the missionaries had been the driving force behind the union, it was embraced wholeheartedly by the African ministers and elders who by this time formed a majority in both presbyteries (see Munyenembe 2019, 78–82).

A Research Conference and Book Project

This is the event that calls for a centenary celebration in 2024. As one contribution to the recognition of the 100-year mark, Zomba Theological University convened a research conference from 19–21 April 2023, with the idea that it might generate some academic analysis to inform the centenary. Some 30 scholars presented papers on different aspects of the CCAP's life and history. Out of this material a book is being produced, with the aim of publishing in time for the centenary event in August 2024.

Cause for Celebration

There are good reasons for the CCAP to celebrate. From small beginnings in 1924 when two presbyteries came together to form a synod, the growth and expansion of the church has been nothing short of astonishing. At the centenary in 2024 there are 103 presbyteries under five synods, with 3 100 000 church members. Almost everywhere you go in Malawi, and in many parts of Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, you will find a vibrant CCAP congregation.⁶ The main church of each congregation forms the centre of an extensive web of prayer houses that take the presence of the CCAP to the heart of thousands of local communities. In many ways, the strength of the CCAP is on the ground where church elders, women's guilds, choirs, and youth groups offer committed and inspirational leadership. The growth of the church has been well beyond what its creators in 1924 could have expected or imagined. It continues to be an effective agent of evangelism, with tens of thousands of baptisms and confirmations each year adding to its membership.

During its 100 years it has also developed a distinctive form of church life, creating a unique blend of Presbyterian tradition and Malawian culture. This was something recognised as early as 1894 by David Clement Scott, the head of Blantyre Mission, who was involved in an early attempt to introduce church government in Malawi. As he remarked at the time, "One could wish for no weightier justice than that of native *mlandu*-power Christianized into a Church Court" (Church of Scotland East Africa

5 Church of Scotland Foreign Mission Committee, 3 March 1914, DEP.298/16/3-6. National Library of Scotland.

6 For studies of the CCAP presence in Zambia and Zimbabwe see Victor Chilenje (2024, 147–171) and Alexander Malemelo (2024, 133–146).

Mission 1894).⁷ Reflecting on Scott’s approach, Andrew Ross observed, “The traditions of the Kirk Session and that of the chief always acting in conjunction with his headmen and elders, readily blended” (Ross 1996, 202). The CCAP has also generated its own particular spirituality, grounded in vernacular translations of the Bible, a distinctive preaching tradition, and indigenous hymnody (Chifungo 2024, 322–336; Kumwenda 2024, 337–354). It is also widely recognised that the CCAP has played an influential role at national level during different phases of Malawi’s history. For example, the CCAP played a critical role in the founding of Malawi as a nation and state, in resisting the imposition of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland during the 1950s, in the transition from a one-party system to multiparty democracy in 1992–94, and in defending the constitutional provision for presidents to serve for a maximum of two terms in 2002–03 (see Ross and Fiedler 2020, 226–240, 347–361, 417–418; Ross 1993; 2004, 91–107).

The CCAP has also been a major player in the provision of social services throughout Malawi’s history. For example, its role in education has been a highly significant aspect of its 100 years of history. In many parts of Malawi, the first school was opened by the CCAP, and it continues to be responsible for a huge network of primary schools as well as some of the most respected secondary schools in the country. The early twenty-first century has seen the establishment of four CCAP universities: the University of Livingstonia, Nkhoma University, the University of Blantyre Synod, and Zomba Theological University. The church believes that education is a tool for empowerment; therefore, it has invested in education to uplift and transform the people’s lives. Almost half of the health care in Malawi is provided by the Christian churches, with the CCAP playing a leading role. Hospitals and clinics established during the missionary era continue to offer greatly needed services today, with many of them being modernised and expanded. The CCAP was a major player in the efforts to combat the spread of HIV and AIDS during the past 30 years. It has also been involved in community development by initiating projects aimed at providing social and economic empowerment to the people. At grassroots level CCAP women’s guilds play a crucial role in ministering to the needs of the most vulnerable members of the community. An equivalent men’s guild is a growing force, bringing men together in a fellowship of solidarity and service.

The research conference paid special attention to the contribution of women to the life of the CCAP, partly as an attempt to correct long-running neglect of this dimension in the literature. A paper by Gilbert Phiri focussed on the lives of women who were educated at Blantyre Mission around the time that the CCAP was formed and demonstrated the remarkable impact they have had both on church and society (Phiri 2024). Gertrude Kapuma traced the little recognised but central contribution that women have made to the making of the CCAP across its 100 years of history (Kapuma 2024). Mwawi Chilongozi focussed on the ordination of women, introduced as a relatively late

7 *Mlandu* can be translated as “law case” and refers to the resolution of any dispute that has arisen in the community.

development in the history (Chilongozi 2024). Eunice M’biya and Gift Kayira explored the broader question of women’s leadership in the CCAP and its relation to the search for gender equality (M’biya and Kayira 2024). This has been contested territory but it is clear that recent times have seen significant gains in terms of gender justice within the life of the CCAP.

As the CCAP surveys its 100-year history, it can identify many achievements that call for celebration. At the same time, the history has been marked by certain tensions and weaknesses, which naturally attracted the attention of the scholars who took part in the research conference in April 2023.

Unity and Diversity

A great variety of aspects of church life attracted analysis at the conference. Worship and spirituality, church-state relations, migration, gender, evangelism and church growth, ministerial formation, and theological issues were among the topics that were explored. It was not possible to give every aspect of the life of the church the attention it deserves. The conference featured only those topics on which participants offered papers, therefore its range was limited by the choices they made. This does not mean, however, that it did not offer a wide-ranging analysis of the history and present reality of the CCAP. The episodes and issues that featured are salient ones for any sound understanding of the CCAP. One striking feature of the conference, however, was that, whatever the starting point, the discussion very often led to the question of CCAP unity.

Whether reality is ultimately one or many is a philosophical question that goes back to Plato (Gunton 1993). When it comes to church life there is invariably an element of tension between unity and diversity. Every church has to accommodate differences among its constituent parts while maintaining sufficient common ground to sustain meaningful unity. In the case of the CCAP, its 100-year history has been marked by acute tension as it has sought to meet both of these requirements.

A recurrent question at the research conference was whether or not the CCAP has succeeded in becoming a united church. Or have its constituent parts never truly come together? In a provocative recent study, Rhodian Munyenyembe (2019, 153) has suggested that, in reality, the CCAP is more like a federation of separate churches than a single united church. Its behaviour often seems to indicate that this is the case, with individual synods taking their own decisions with scant regard for the authority of the higher court of the General Assembly. Resources are concentrated at synod level, with minimal provision for the General Assembly. At times it can look as if it would be simpler just to give up on any idea of an overall unity under a supreme court and reconstitute as separate churches. Yet, though internal relations have occasionally been very strained, during the 100 years no synod has ever left the CCAP.

Despite all the struggles, a sense of common belonging has prevailed and the research conference frequently heard voices calling for the unity of the church to be strengthened, not loosened. It seems that the CCAP has all along been caught between centrifugal and centripetal forces, being pulled apart and pulled together at the same time. This is not a comfortable position, so the CCAP has never been quite at ease with itself. This matter kept cropping up at the conference and was considered from a great variety of angles. Since it is an issue that perplexes both leaders and members, as well as fellow citizens and overseas friends, it could hardly be avoided in any realistic appraisal of the CCAP at 100. Might the centenary provide an opportunity to grasp this nettle?

It is no small thing to bring together different streams of Christian witness to create a united church. This was achieved by the CCAP in 1924 and its significance can never be underestimated. The strength of the union is demonstrated by the fact that, 100 years later, it is still in place. None of the presbyteries, later synods, of the CCAP has ever broken away from the mother church. Nevertheless, the research conference continually gravitated towards the divisions and tensions that have marked the life of the CCAP. These go back to the beginnings in 1924/26. The union of the three presbyteries was undermined by the fact that the three missions, which controlled most of the resources, continued to operate separately. The arrangement for the expatriate missionaries to continue to be answerable to their home churches and not to the CCAP proved to be another divisive force. The everyday life of the local churches continued much as before, with minimal influence from the synod that was intended to unite them (Ross and Chilongozi 2024).

When the General Synod was established by the new constitution of 1956, the time was approaching for the missions to hand over their responsibilities and assets to the CCAP. However, as Nancy Collins observed at the conference, everything was handed over to the local synods and nothing to the General Synod (Collins 2024). This concentration of resources in the hands of the local synods at the expense of the General Synod was to have far-reaching effects. It meant that the programmatic activity of the CCAP was almost entirely based within the local synods and the General Synod was left ill-equipped to fulfil its unifying function and struggling to find a meaningful role. A serious attempt to address this imbalance was made with the new constitution of 2002, which renamed the General Synod as the General Assembly and clarified its authority as the supreme court of the church. However, as Felix Chingota argued at the conference, constitutional authority has not been enough to resist the tendency for the church to fragment along the lines of its constituent parts (Chingota 2024).

Meanwhile, particularly since the advent of multiparty politics in the early 1990s, the CCAP has been prone to being divided by political forces seeking to exploit ethnic and regional identities. With the three Malawian synods each being closely identified with the three regions of the country, it has been difficult for their leaders to avoid being manipulated in a political environment where much revolves around regional identity. Since each of the synods has a specific geography and a particular ethnic composition,

further divisive forces have been introduced to a church that already had a tendency to fragment (Mapala 2017). This is illustrated by Cogitator Mapala's analysis of ministerial formation (Mapala 2024). Here is an area where from the 1960s the CCAP attempted to give expression to its unity but was recurrently thwarted by the intrusion of ethnically-based politics. Above all, it has been demonstrated by the long-running border wrangle which resulted in a no-border decision being taken by the synods of Livingstonia and Nkhoma in 2006, without any approval from the General Assembly. As Winston Kawale and Isaac Chibowa demonstrated at the conference, the border dispute raises a whole raft of troubling theological, ecclesiological, and spiritual questions, which are yet to be answered (Chibowa2024; Kawale 2024). For example, it has a serious implication for church discipline, which for a Presbyterian Church is the pillar of its integrity. It has become commonplace, particularly between the Livingstonia and Nkhoma synods, for a member suspended by one CCAP synod to be welcomed by another without following due procedures.

Additionally, the church is confronted with the task of prioritising the needs of its congregants in areas of economic development, health, and education, while also addressing the spiritual needs of its community. Very often there are severe constraints on the availability of resources for the smooth implementation of these projects. Each synod is running its own development projects which are similar to those of the other synods in scope and nature, often with financial support from the same international partners. If all these projects were harmonised under a consolidated administration, the church could maximise its resources with a better output. An example that was raised at a panel discussion during the conference was that each of the three Malawian synods has a university, each lacking adequate resources (human, financial, and material). If all resources were put together by merging the universities, including Zomba Theological University, the church would stand to benefit much more than by operating in the manner it is currently doing.

A further consideration is the role of the CCAP in relation to national life. It is well known that the CCAP has done outstanding work offering a common witness at times of crisis, as it did for Malawi to attain independence from British colonial rule in the 1960s, and during the political transition from a one-party state to multiparty politics in the 1990s. However, during the twenty-first century it is an undeniable fact that each of the CCAP synods has been involved in partisan politics by siding with a political party of its choice to the extent of betraying not only its primary ecclesial loyalty but also its calling to show solidarity with people at the margin of society, which reflects its commitment to a preferential option for the poor. This defeats the purpose of common witness and undermines the prophetic role of the church. In times of crisis, people look for leadership from the church. If the church is silent because it is divided, then it loses its integrity and its service to the nation is gravely compromised.

Such division also undermines the CCAP's own system of government. Presbyterian church government normally operates through a hierarchy of courts where the lower

courts are subordinate to the higher courts. On paper, the highest court in the CCAP is the General Assembly but the conference heard that it has often been deprived of the authority and resources needed to exercise its proper role. This weakness can be traced back to the very foundation of the church and it might be that the centenary offers an opportunity to address this matter. At the conference Takuze Chitsulo canvassed the radical proposal that the synods might be abolished with most of their responsibilities being handed to the General Assembly (Chitsulo 2024). A church with authority and resources concentrated in its supreme governing body, with a network of presbyteries covering the country, might be better placed to function as a unifying force, as opposed to the current arrangement where synods largely identified with Malawi's regions are vulnerable to manipulation by divisive political forces (Munyenyenbe 2019).

A Church in Need of Theology?

A related and significant question raised at the conference is how far the CCAP is able to forge a theological identity. Malawi has a dynamic cultural, political, and religious environment where many forces jostle for influence. Is the direction of the CCAP determined by external influences or is it able to chart its own course based on its core theological identity? A concern that surfaced time and again at the conference is that the CCAP often seems to be at the mercy of winds blowing from external sources rather than being able to draw on its own theology to take a distinctive position. This means that its authenticity is at stake. Of course, it can be valid at times for the CCAP to change and develop its belief and practice. To be a Reformed church is to be ready to be always reforming. However, the question is whether change is driven by the CCAP's deeper discovery of its own identity as it meets changing times, or whether it adheres so loosely to its core commitments that it can too easily be manipulated by external forces.

A suggestion that arose at the conference was that the General Assembly might set up a theological thinktank to engage with relevant issues on behalf of the CCAP as a whole. An important paper by Timothy Nyasulu sets out a range of issues related to the pastoral practice of the CCAP that call for theological attention (Nyasulu 2024). A strong theological unit reporting to the General Assembly could be a significant force for unity. It could provide the institutional equipment to work towards a common position for the CCAP as a whole on the issues of the day. This need not be at the expense of open debate and healthy diversity but the further the CCAP can go in establishing a shared theological self-understanding, the greater its chances of sustaining viable unity.

The fruits of the research conference have taken a permanent form in a book that was published in April 2024, just in time for the CCAP centenary in August 2024. While the book raises many issues that deserve attention in the counsels of the CCAP, if there were just one concrete outcome to be desired from the research conference, it would be the establishment of a unit within the church that is tasked to discern, develop, and articulate theological positions around which the church could in future consolidate its identity and forge its unity.

Conclusion: Achievements and Challenges

Surveying a 100-year time span in the life of a church, especially across the tumultuous history of southern Africa between 1924 and today, reveals both strengths and weaknesses. The CCAP, which began with high hopes on all sides in 1924, has been stress-tested by the history through which it has passed. The result is that there is much of which it can be proud when it marks its centenary in 2024 while, at the same time, a realistic self-examination reveals some persistent weaknesses and recurrent concerns. A critical assessment, such as that attempted by the April 2023 research conference, tends to focus its energies on these sensitive points. Its analysis is offered in the hope that the centenary can be an opportunity not only to celebrate and give thanks, but also to review and reform.

The CCAP enters its second century with great responsibilities. It has millions of members who look to it for spiritual nurture, it plays a significant role at national level in Malawi, and through its growing diaspora it has increasing international influence. This situation is a measure of its achievements but also presents it with formidable challenges. Not the least of these is how to provide for both unity and diversity in the life of the church. This question has run as an unresolved tension throughout 100 years of history and now presents itself to the current generation of theologians and leaders as an issue that is not going away. Can the centenary be the moment when decisive steps are taken to meet this definitive challenge? Academic analysis here reaches its limits and defers to the spiritual dimension. The centenary can be expected to be an occasion of profound thanksgiving to God and of prayer for God's guidance and blessing on the CCAP's next century.

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