

Church Unity in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Formation of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (1897–1999)

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Abstract

This article seeks to investigate the process that brought the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa into being in 1999; how did it happen without comprehensive discussions and agreement under the guise of mutual authentic reconciliation? The union was the end of a movement that took over 100 years to achieve. The discussions between two Presbyterian denominations were dominated by tensions and disagreements throughout the years in a context of increasing racialisation and apartheid. Yet, it was considered to be the appropriate resolution of differences, which had originated in racist South Africa, at the time of the inauguration of the first democratic government in 1994. The political change motivated black churches' confidence to reach out to their white sisters and brothers on an equal basis while churches of European origin, such as the Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, faced the future with a degree of fear and trepidation. The decisions that were implemented gave the impression of a union carried through in a rush devoid of clear definitive policies for the uniting denomination. Issues of power were at work, including resistance to change, the unacknowledged threat of change, and the continued domination of settler/colonial and missionary influences which enabled the avoidance of serious authentic discussion regarding reconciliation. The article indicates that greater awareness and care need to be taken regarding historical, cultural, economic, pastoral, and political concerns as prerequisites to union and safeguards built into the process of ongoing union. This study is based largely on primary sources. There are detailed records available. The Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa General Assembly (GA) papers were not published along with their proceedings of the GA. Greater detail is found in the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa sources, hence the greater number of quotations. However, the minutes of the Special Commission on Union and



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the closing General Assembly of the PCSA (1999) are not available. This article makes a contribution to ecumenical history of Christianity in South Africa and further afield as it discusses different emphases in similar traditions which became matters of controversy. It also elucidates some of the pitfalls in discussions which may endure beyond union if agreed-upon processes and policies are not put in place before union is consummated. It is interdisciplinary in nature.

Keywords: Basis of Union; Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (PCSA); Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (RPCSA); Special Commission on Union (SCU); Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA)

Introduction

Theoretical Framework and Resources

From a postmodern perspective,¹ archives can be considered to be “cultural heritage” (Van Bussel 2017, 20) which needs to be preserved. Such an approach promoted by Foucault (1975, 193) views the archive as a possible source rather than a memory aid, while Derrida (1995, 17) avers “that the archive does not only record events but produces it through its interpretation,” for as Van Bussel (2017, 24) claims, “archives are not passive receptacles: they shape and control the way the past is read.” In this way they display and exercise active power related to the future as much as to the past, for archives are not passive resources. They are “trans-disciplinary, multicultural, [and] pluralistic, [in an] increasingly interconnected and globalised world” (Van Bussel 2017, 24) where those who established the archives fade from direct scrutiny. Yet, it might be questioned how far institutionalised archives represent society or social justice in contexts where absolute objectivity and impartiality are unattainable. A further issue concerns selectivity regarding material that is known to exist yet is not deposited in archives; where is it and why was it not deposited?

There are two main archival sources for this article.² They are the General Assembly (GA) minutes of the Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (PCSA) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (RPCSA). As sources, the minutes of the PCSA are more fulsome. They include the papers and proceedings of the GA as well as discussion of matters under review and proposals. The administration of the PCSA until the union was in the hands of white persons, while those of the RPCSA were under the administration of black persons trained by Scottish missionaries. Their minutes are

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- 1 Postmodernism is used as a rather loose label to identify a number of theoretical approaches developed since the 1960s.
 - 2 Van Bussel (2017, 19) defines archives as an organisational (or personal) construct of (1) current (or active) records; (2) semi-active or semi-current records; (3) inactive or non-current records; and (4) permanent records, the whole body of records of continuing value of an organisation or person.

briefers and predominantly reflect decisions made by the GA. The papers for their GAs were distributed separately and were not well preserved. Therefore, it is unclear whether any distinct racial inferences can be made on this basis. The PCSA minutes are held in the William Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand while those of the RPCSA are held in the Cory Library for Historical Research at Rhodes University. The minutes of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) are held in the GA office in Kempton Park. The minutes of the Special Commission on Union (SCU) are missing from the archives.

However, behind the archives or immersed within them are issues of motivation, which are not always expressed openly or directly due to concerns that defy honesty and integrity, yet conceal the very motivation to move forwards and express hope for the future. In a sense, the RPCSA was in a more secure position in 1994 while the PCSA lived under potential threat. This produced a crisis response in the sense of the paradox expressed by Bosch (2011, 3) referring to Koyama (1980, 4):

The Japanese character for “crisis” is a combination of the characters for “danger” and “opportunity” or (“promise”); crisis is therefore not the end of opportunity but in reality only its beginning, the point where danger and opportunity meet, and where the future is in the balance and where events can go either way.

Perhaps the RPCSA represented the potential for opportunity while the PCSA was more inclined towards the disposition of danger within a unique, untried and untested political dispensation in South Africa.

Historical Background

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, there have been two church unions in our ecclesiastically diverse nation. In 1994 the black Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the so-called coloured Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) united to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). This was the result of a lengthy process. In 1881 representatives of five mission congregations assembled in Wellington near Cape Town for the first meeting of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. In the Cape a separate “Dutch Reformed Bantu Church” was formed in 1951. All the coloured congregations eventually joined the DRMC, and the black congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. In 1974 the synod of the DRCA decided in favour of church unity. In 1978 the DRMC decided likewise. It took 16 years for that ideal to come to fruition.

The second union occurred in 1999, when the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa united with the Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa to form the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA). The “uniting” part of the name referred to the vision that the union was not yet complete and that the UPCSA was open to further union. The RPCSA, an autonomous black church, emerged from the Scottish mission tradition while the PCSA was the result of the settler/colonial

tradition, a white church with black congregations which had arisen out of the white congregations' "internal" mission and which were dependent on them. This was also the result of a lengthy process which began near the close of the nineteenth century.

The common factor in these unions was that they both involved churches from the same family of denominations—the Reforming tradition—although one was distinctly Presbyterian.

Historical Context of Presbyterianism in South Africa (1897–1994)

Presbyterianism had existed in two forms in South Africa from the early years of the nineteenth century. The colonial/settler tradition originated in Cape Town from 1806 (Quinn and Cuthbertson 1979, 3). The missionary tradition began in the eastern Cape in 1824 (Duncan 2022, 24).

Pre-apartheid Church Formations

When discussions began in the 1880s regarding the formation of a Presbyterian denomination in South Africa, it was hoped that this would include the independent white congregations and presbyteries, and the missions of Scottish churches. This did not happen, largely as the result of concerns related to racial differences. The Presbyterian Church of South Africa was established in 1897. It consisted of a number of independent (i.e., not subject to Presbyterian polity) congregations and one presbytery. The majority of the Scottish missions remained outside this union. Discussions with the missions continued until the black Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa (BPCSA) (renamed the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa in 1979) was formed in 1923 as the result of negotiations among the missions.

It was in 1990 that the General Assemblies of the PCSA and the RPCSA accepted a "Basis of Agreement" in which failures of the past were acknowledged along with a commitment to "restore relationships and encourage contacts and cooperation at congregational and Presbytery levels" (PCSA 1997, 139).

In 1992 (PCSA 1992, 154; cf. 1993, 73,75), the General Assembly had urged the denomination "to seek ways of promoting contact and cooperation with their nearest counterparts in the Reformed Presbyterian Church in SA." This was the result of a report of the Ecumenical Relations Committee which questioned: "Is it not the time when the Church is called, even more urgently than before, to demonstrate the real meaning of reconciliation?" (PCSA 1992, 127). Early responses were not particularly encouraging, although some presbyteries, for example Durban and Ciskei/King William's Town made conciliatory moves. In the midst of this the RPCSA suffered a serious blow when their General Secretary, Rev. Samuel B. Ngcobo, died following a brief illness on 31 May 1994 (PCSA 1994, 73).

Impact of Racial Segregation

South Africa had an unfortunate history of racial segregation which was one consequence of colonialism and its settler counterpart from the eighteenth century. This did not only impact black Xhosa-speaking peoples but also the San and Khoikhoi peoples of the Western Cape and also the Afrikaner (Boer) population, though in different ways (Simpson 2021, 1–2). Following two South African wars (1880–1881, 1899–1902), the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910. This left the black population largely disenfranchised politically and was exacerbated by their alienation from their land by the Land Acts of 1913 and 1936 (Beinart 1994, 10, 118–119). Hunter (1983, 234) describes the PCSA’s approach to mission as “integration” with the following caveat:

But belief in integration had to be translated into the means of achieving this at a time when urbanisation was forcing the church to rethink its mission policy as a whole. (Hunter 1983, 234)

The imposition of apartheid in 1948 alienated both black and white people in South Africa. The Nationalist government had clearly designed a segregated society and had introduced repressive legislation to deal with those who challenged its implementation. In general, the white population accepted and even supported this in the churches whose mission still tended towards inaugurating black racially segregated congregations, and this remained the case until the 1960s.

Failed Union Attempts

However, from that time, there were a number of attempts to proceed towards union, sometimes including the Evangelical (Tsonga) Presbyterian Church of South Africa (EPCSA) and the United Congregational Church of South Africa (UCCSA), and even the Anglican Church of the Province of South Africa (CPSA). However, all of these failed (Duncan 2017, 2018, 2019).

Democratic Transition Influence

South Africa became a democracy following the general election held on 27 April 1994 with the focus on “national reconciliation” (Simpson 2021, 354). It was in this spirit that:

In June 1994, the General Assembly of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa took a landmark decision in giving a mandate to its Ecumenical Relations Committee to reopen negotiations for union with the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (PCSA 1995:66; cf. RPCSA1994:43; RPCSA 1995:41; PCSA 1998:9; 1; 1999:85). ... [T]he PCSA received this news joyfully. (PCSA 1999, 85)

The RPCSA had become aware of the negative impact of remaining separate in a new democracy and it would have been churlish to have revelled in a post-apartheid society outside of union. It was reported to the PCSA GA:

Previously the racial divisions in society—to some extent reflected in the multi-racial Churches—and the entrenched advantages for Whites in education and economic opportunities had made many in the RPC feel that a real union was impossible. White leadership would tend to dominate, and even though the number of highly trained and educated leaders in the RPC was increasing and a united Church would not really be one.

Now however there was a feeling of liberation among their members, leading to an increased confidence that they had a real contribution to make to a united Church, in spite of a continuing disparity in wealth. The Assembly was also challenged by the example of politicians and by the thought that the Church might be overtaken by elements of secular society, in terms of their ability to forgive past wrongs, to resolve differences and to work together to build a united nation. ...

The Committee firmly believes that this initiative presents a great challenge to the PCSA—and an opportunity we dare not pass up. ... We are proposing that the PCSA respond positively and that we set about the task with a real sense of urgency, as proposed by a leading RPC minister at our meeting. (PCSA 1994, 74)

Concern was also expressed regarding gaining grassroots support through consultation. This was indeed a “leap of faith” for the PCSA and one which, to an extent, rendered them vulnerable in the light of their previously held concerns about union. Yet, it also provided a way forwards for a denomination that had a racialised history and a strong impetus in favour of union.

By 1996, there were instructions for a plan of union to be drawn up between the RPCSA and PCSA following the “approval [of] the principle of union” (RPCSA 1996, 59). A year later, it enacted the Basis of Union and recommended the appointment of 15 members to the Special Commission on Union (SCU).

Power Dynamics between Denominations

The power dynamics in the SCU were significant and were closely related to race. The RPCSA was a black church whereas the PCSA was a white-dominated denomination arising out of its mission policy. All members of the PCSA delegation, except one, were white. The only black member was Rev. Prof. M.J. Masango who had been a minister in a white congregation and became co-chair of the SCU. There were no members from Zambia or Zimbabwe. The RPCSA was a black denomination formed in 1923. All members from the RPCSA were black, except for one, Rev. G.A. Duncan, a Scottish missionary. Inevitably, a united church would have a very substantial majority of black members, and to some this would have presented a threatening prospect.

Special Commission Challenges

Established in 1998, the Special Commission on Union (UPCSA 1999, 21) faced the challenge of having only one year to accomplish its task. While on and off negotiations had been in process for many years this seemed to be an inordinately short time to complete the process. The SCU held three meetings (UPCSA 1999, 21).

Policy Development Issues

Key to securing the union within this time frame was the delay in formulating clear policies for the uniting church. This was evident in the selection of the General Assembly office and in theological education.

By 1996, progress was reported on the location of the Central Office, with a proposal that it be located in Johannesburg (the historical location of the PCSA office), and a recommendation concerning the number of presbyteries. The office matter became a matter of dissension in the SCU as the PCSA refused to contemplate any move away from Johannesburg. The early debate “proved to be a very controversial and sensitive one” (UPCSA 1999, 33). There was tension between the view that the office be located in a central venue that was accessible and close to other churches’ offices (UPCSA 1999, 34) and being closer to the majority of the membership of the denomination, i.e., in the Cape. The office venue matter led to a “long and heated debate” and the expression of “strong views and feelings” (UPCSA 1999, 34). A sub-committee was formed to resolve the matter, and a decision was reached to retain the existing rented property in Johannesburg for a period of two years (UPCSA 1999, 34) while a decision was made that an ad hoc committee “bring proposals to the next General Assembly concerning the permanent venue of the Central Office of the UPCSA” (UPCSA 1999, 34).

Critical Analysis and Theoretical Implications

Theological Differences

Both the PCSA and the BPCSA were successors of the sixteenth-century Reformations. Both subscribed to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* ([1647] 1969) (BPCSA 1958, 115), the BPCSA in its original form while the PCSA adopted it in the revised form of the *Confession* in its *Twenty Four Articles of the Faith* (PCSA 1971, 79–84). Both of these sanctioned “liberty of opinion in points which do not enter into the substance of the Faith” (BPCSA 1958, 116). This allowed for differing interpretations of faith which were consistent with the Protestant Reformation (BPCSA 1958, 115). Within the PCSA this led to the emergence of “liberal” and “conservative” groups (which have persisted into the present) while the BPCSA tended towards a more conservative approach to theology. However, from the 1960s, this began to change as the mainly black students who trained at the Federal Theological Seminary were exposed to African theology and the Black Theology of Liberation (FedSem 1987, 36) with its insights directly related to ministry in the black context (Denis and Duncan 2011, 150–153). After the union,

ordinands were given the choice of affirming the *Westminster Confession of Faith* or the *Twenty Four Articles of the Faith* as either Subordinate Standard of faith was recognised (UPCSA 1999, 27).

Organisational Integration Challenges

Neither denomination had its source directly in the ministry of the Church of Scotland.³ The formation of the PCSA in 1897 was that of a new denomination. A plausible explanation is that the members of St Andrew's congregation, Cape Town, were originally members of Scottish churches, including the Church of Scotland. This was later corrected. External matters were alluded to as reasons for separation, yet it was also affirmed in numerous biblical references that "OBEDIENCE TO THE GOSPEL DEMANDS IT" (PCSA 1995, 68; emphasis in original), which appeared to contradict submission to state law. Further to the point, in the statement that "THE TWO CHURCHES HAVE COME OF AGE" there is a facile acceptance of what is described as an "agreement" that the PCSA should minister in the cities while the then BPCSA would focus on the rural areas (PCSA 1997, 137; emphasis in original). This took no account of issues that would become detrimental to the BPCSA, particularly in terms of demography and finance, as population shifts took place. "When the BPC formed congregations in the cities [following its members] ... a conflict ensued, straining relations between the two churches" (PCSA 1997, 137). This was contested at the time and remained a point of serious difference (Duncan 2017, 3–16). One question is the lack of definition regarding the circumstances that caused them to "come of age." The only circumstance that is referred to is the change in the political complexion of South Africa, so it is not correct to claim that it ignores "external factors" and then continues by saying "a negative socio-political situation has been overcome" (PCSA 1997, 137). There appeared to be some confusion here and this was challenged by presbyteries. Further, an attempt to complete the union at an earlier date was deferred at the suggestion of the PCSA since they wished to celebrate their centenary in 1997 prior to union.

3 For example, St Andrew's, Cape Town, denied any relationship. The Kirk Session at St Andrew's affirmed its independence of the Church of Scotland in no uncertain terms on 8 November 1843, the year of the Disruption in Scotland:

1. That whereas the Scottish Church in Cape Town has never been so connected with the Church of Scotland ... (St Andrew's Kirk Session Minute Book, meeting of 8 November 1843, quoted in Quinn and Cuthbertson 1979, 26).

The arrival of congregationalist minister Rev. John Philip in 1820 altered the polity of St Andrew's to congregationalist (Quinn and Cuthbertson 1979, 26) for a time. In contrast, the original Scottish missions were of the Free Church of Scotland and the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland emboldened by the energy and vision of the Glasgow Missionary Society (cf. PCSA 1998, 91).

Resource Disparities

There was considerable confusion regarding the resources of each denomination. The PCSA was considered to be a wealthy church while the RPCSA was considered to be poor. Comparatively, the PCSA was a cash-rich church, while the RPCSA's wealth had been in property, which had been realised to provide a number of funds to finance and advance the mission of the denomination. At the time of union, the RPCSA had considerable wealth tied up in Lovedale Press and the various properties in its investment portfolio. The issue of property was and remains divisive. In the RPCSA, all property was held in the name of the General Trustees. In many PCSA congregations, property was vested in the name of the congregation (PCSA 1998, 92–93). Despite numerous attempts to resolve this matter, many congregations from the PCSA tradition have failed to comply with GA instructions. This led to allegations that the RPCSA wanted to access the PCSA's wealth, especially its pension fund, and that the PCSA wanted to use its wealth to control the denomination. It further led to strong feelings that the PCSA congregations, which held their own title deeds, might leave the denomination with their properties, and verbal threats have been made to this effect. This would be the outcome of developments that were not in accord with their wishes. Yet, the 1999 GA agreed that "once the UPCSAs have been constituted all immovable properties currently registered in the name of the PCSA ... are to be transferred to the UPCSAs" (PCSA 1999, 320).

Church Unity Models

The only model that was considered at this time was organic unity, compared with the attempts in the period 1881–1923. This followed the same process as had been adopted by the Church Unity Commission (CUC) established in 1968: "The aim of the Commission is to promote organic union between the Churches" (Wing 1990, 1). By 1990, much had changed in the South African ecumenical scene, particularly with regard to achieving church unity through organic union. Despite this, the CUC (Wing 1990, 17) affirmed:

In the past, the Church in South Africa has bemoaned the fact that it has been conditioned by the kind of disunity which comes from living in an apartheid society But despite the weight of apartheid legislation and structures, there has been nothing to prevent Christians from "living unity" in the context of the Church. The Churches have not "lived unity" in such an authentic manner that they have become models of unity in a sick and separated society.

Now that South African society has taken the first steps towards unity and away from separation, the Churches cannot afford to lag behind. Instead, they should be taking the lead in resisting disunity, racism, sexism, injustice and oppression by affirming in word and deed that unity which is God's will for all his people.

This suggested that the time was ripe in South Africa and the church for renewed attempts at union with a new approach which originates in the changed political situation.

Post-colonial Church Dynamics

The church did not have to adopt and promote a lifestyle sanctioned by the Nationalist government. It had the choice to promote an alternative society (Romans 12:1–2). Postcolonial theory is a theory founded on the concepts of otherness and resistance as a refutation of colonial influences which determined the nature of the lives of oppressed peoples. It is mostly regarded as a literary theory which goes beyond colonial thinking and promotes positive alternative identity formation in contexts where this has been suppressed or destroyed, in opposition to the perpetuation of negative or inferior images. It represents attempts to reclaim the past in the face of “that past’s inevitable otherness” (University of Washington n.d., 3). This aligned with the concept of resistance in the struggle for human freedom, liberty, identity, and individuality. It is more than a philosophical issue; it has political, economic, cultural, and spiritual aspects which embrace a hybrid form that is dynamic rather than static. Hybridity refers to

the integration (or, mingling) of cultural signs and practices from the colonizing and the colonized cultures (“integration” may be too orderly a word to represent the variety of stratagems, desperate or cunning or good-willed, by which people adapt themselves to the necessities and the opportunities of more or less oppressive or invasive cultural impositions, live into alien cultural patterns through their own structures of understanding, thus producing something familiar but new. (University of Washington n.d., 5)

This was already a sensitive issue between the two denominations and had been an obstacle in union discussions. The imposition of apartheid “had polarised black and white in South Africa ... [with] its designs for a segregated [society] further than ever. The Nationalist government had clearly outlined its designs for a segregated society and had introduced repressive legislation to deal with those who threatened its implementation” (Hunter 1983, 234). However, the aspect that was not addressed related to the integration of cultures, which will be dealt with in the section on African ecclesial identity below.

Integration was the process adopted by the UPCSA (1999, 61) in an attempt to form a truly uniting denomination, but, despite all the time and energy invested in it, there was little positive result in terms of transformation and the process disappeared from the UPCSA agenda. This originated in an attempt at authentic transformation, but for many throughout the united denomination there was no appetite for fundamental change, especially at the presbytery and congregational levels. It was assumed that while the polity of the UPCSA remained Presbyterian, there was no need for further innovation. Organisational change management could have provided a helpful motivator.

Organisational Change Theory

Significantly, when it came to adopting change within a uniting church, there was a concern that the white-dominated PCSA intended to continue as before with the black RPCSA conforming to its standards. This is reflected in a comment made by Skinner (Skinner and Cleese 1993, 33) regarding the psychology of colonially imposed slavery:

[W]e have somehow persuaded you to share our way about thinking about things that in order to be equal to us you have to enslave yourselves to our *values*. So you are doubly enslaved: enslaved first in the old sense of being in our power financially and materially; and enslaved even more deeply by accepting our rationalisation of the extortion, even to the degree of believing and allowing us to screw you gives you membership of a superior club, puts you closer to the superior plane you imagine us to inhabit. You have now joined the double-think whereby we are able to exploit you without admitting we are doing so, even to ourselves. So we can feel quite justified in robbing you, believing that we are helping you to referring to slavery the economic facts of life [sic].

This is disturbing because it suggests a mutual lack of awareness of and commitment to the processes at work in changing social circumstances:

[T]here is usually a strong conflict of interest ... between those who advocate and perhaps benefit from taking the most intelligent action to cope with the current challenges, and those who are mainly concerned with hanging on to the advantages and privileges they possess under the status quo. The compromise required between adjusting to, and resisting, changes is much more difficult to handle where those who don't like change can leave, or be sacked. (Skinner and Cleese 1993, 388)

Rian Eisler's cultural transformation theory offers a conclusion that fundamental to "the enormous cultural diversity of human societies are two fundamental models of structuring human relationships—the dominator and partnership models" (Duncan 2007, 31) where the autocratic hierarchical dominator (androcratic) model is based on tension, anxiety, threat of force leading to a new form of institutionalism (Eisler 2002, 161–162), and the partnership (gylanic) model is established on "mutual benefit, mutual accountability, mutual empathy and caring" (Eisler 2005, 15). Although Eisler's research focuses on differing historical periods, she affirms that "these models transcend such important differences as time, place, religion, ethnicity and technological development" (Eisler 1994, 33). In terms of this study, it is suggested "that 'younger' churches [e.g. RPCSA] were more committed to the partnership ideal than the 'older' churches [e.g. PCSA, in following a Eurocentric approach] which had more to lose especially in terms of power and control" (Duncan 2007, 46). Yet, these remained differentiated rather than integrated approaches.

Organisational change management could have provided a useful tool to find the best strategies for leading successful transformations within an organisation. It concerns adapting to a changing environment, promoting effective communication and

collaboration. Drivers of change were absent from the movement to transform and adapt (Gould 2023). Change occurs when the institution adapts its mission and vision to respond to a new situation. Then,

cultural change revolves around transforming the values, beliefs, norms and behaviour that shape the institutional culture. The goal is to create a new culture that aligns with the desired vision, encouraging collaboration, innovation, adaptability or customer focus. (Gould 2023)

This would be problematic if there was no personnel change since there would be an absence of “appreciative inquiry” which focuses on strengths and opportunities. This involves staff participants in creating a shared vision of the future and an accompanying mission. It involves participation, collaboration, communication, and corporate decision-making together, so that everyone has a say and feels invested in the change. Resistance to change, as we know, is human nature, particularly in the Church in a world where change is constant. People resist change for many reasons, but generally because they fear losing some sense of control and consider their way of doing things as the best and only way.

In the process leading to and after union there was a leadership vacuum due to the lack of a recognition that a uniting denomination could not simply be a replica of either of the former denominations. The leadership of both denominations was in the hands of the General Secretaries, while the functions of the Moderators of the General Assembly were to moderate at meetings and act on behalf of the denominations when required to do so. They held office for a year. As the union approached the appointment of the General Secretary of the PCSA as General Secretary of the UPCS and that agreement that “the two Central Office administrations would be merged in December 1999” (UPCS 1999, 22) meant that things would most likely continue as before in the UPCS. However, only one of the RPCS staff was appointed after a struggle, but did not take up the appointment (UPCS 1999, 35). This virtually meant that the PCSA ethos would continue to dominate the UPCS. It was also decided that there would be no change, in addition to the staffing situation, in the PCSA General Assembly office venue (UPCS 1999, 33–34), timing of General Assembly and venue(s) for the training of ministers (UPCS 1999, 32–33). The RPCS had already agreed to retain the *Manual of Law, Practice and Procedure* (1992) of the PCSA and its successors since it was more up to date. The matter of the transfer of properties was agreed but not implemented (UPCS 1999, 23, 24).

The entire matter of change was exacerbated by the lack of a strategy for change and poor communication with the lower councils of the denominations. It was made worse by the inability to deal with African ecclesiastical identity effectively, if at all, and the reconciliation of diverse cultures.

African Ecclesiastical Identity

African ecclesiastical identity signifies perhaps the greatest challenge to the union in terms of lived experience within the two parts of the PCSA. There are two aspects to this issue. First, the issue of Africanisation was raised under theological education. A conference was to be held following the union to consider this issue (UPCSA 1999, 33). One aim was the exposure of theological students to cross-cultural opportunities. But, beyond that, there was a clear expression of the need for the UPCSA to be a church in and of Africa. This had implications for the teaching of both African and Black Theology of Liberation.

Then, the issue of ancestor veneration became almost an anecdotal obsession among white members, including some ministers, who mistakenly kept on referring to ancestor “worship”: “The debate on this question has been a Western one, a non-African one, more than an African problem” (Moodley 2008, 7). Karenga (1997, 21) summarises the issue well:

Africans’ profound respect for ancestors, which admittedly has a spiritual dimension, is best called veneration. The ancestors are venerated because they are a source and symbol of lineage; models of ethical life, service and social achievement; and they are spiritual intercessors between humans and the Creator.

This has to be seen in the light of African cultural thinking where:

Existence is viewed in terms of an integrated and invisible whole. All human beings and nature are animated by a basic “vital force”. Human beings and nature are bound together in a symbiotic relationship. This relationship extends to the spiritual world. ... In traditional religious values, the ancestors are part of the whole. They exist in symbiotic relationship with the living as custodians of society. ... They mediate social identity for the living, and together with the various spirits, and the Supreme Being, they influence the well-being of the individual or social group. (Seed 2020, 49)

This raises the question regarding the parallels between ancestors and the communion of saints (Otanga 2023, 45–108). Theron (1996, 49) affirms that “an attempt must ... be made to see the deceased Christians as part of the bigger communion of the faithful” as a resolution of the dichotomy between “continuity and adaptation” and “discontinuity and confrontation” (Theron 1996, vii). Those who have issues here have failed to see the value of ideas such as these and tended to separate members racially or at least ethnically—hence, the need for African theology to be taught to all intending for ordination.

But this pointed to the need to acknowledge different worldviews which existed in the church between the communitarian worldview distinguished in the African context by *ubuntu/shalom* and the individualistic perspective of Western societies. *Ubuntu* presupposes cooperation, integration, and harmony, and it “enables each individual to

become a unique centre of a shared life” (Schutte 2001, 9) to express freedom in community, while individualism thrives on competition, hostility, self-centredness, and lack of trust (Skinner and Cleese 1993, 223). Here are two value systems in operation that are not easily amenable to reconciliation. This encapsulated an essential difference between the two churches involved in union negotiations despite the PCSA having a substantial African component. This is evident in the spirit of independency at congregational level, which resisted subservience to presbytery and General Assembly decisions if they went against the perceived interests of the congregation.

The main issues regarding integration revolve around language, culture, racism, and tradition even although Pentecostal worship, for example, is the form adopted by many UPCS African, and some white, congregations. Perhaps the issue at the heart of worship disparities is the lack of faith as trust (Groome 1980, 61–63) in one another and in God. Learning another language and entering another culture may be a pathway to an inculturated Christianity where “[i]nculturation suggests a double movement: there is at once inculturation of Christianity and a Christianisation of culture” (Bosch 2011, 454). This matter would present an ongoing educational, theological, and spiritual challenge.

Organisational and Missionary Integration Challenges, Leadership Tensions, and Implementation Gaps

Transition towards a United Future

In 1994, decisions led to the formal agreements to the establishment of a Central Committee on Union (CCU) with a number of task forces to facilitate the union process (PCSA 1996, 118). The CCU used the 1970 Basis of Union between the RPCSA, the PCSA, and the EPCSA (Evangelical Presbyterian Church of South Africa) as a basis for its work (PCSA 1995, 31; PCSA 1966, 118).

Central Committee on Union (CCU)

The work of the Central Committee on Union (CCU) was to oversee the final preparations for union (RPCSA 1998, 57–58). It was composed of a number of Task Groups: Ministry, Finance and Property, Signs, Symbols and Uniforms, Liturgy and Worship, Manual of Law, Practice and Procedure, and Christian Education. The following matters were reserved to the CCU: oversight of the Task Groups, location of the GA Office, definition of presbytery boundaries, and revival of the 1970 Plan of Union for approval for union (PCSA 1995, 31).

By 1996, progress was reported on the location of the GA office, with a proposal that it be located in Johannesburg, and a recommendation concerning the number of presbyteries. The office matter became a matter of dissension in the CCU as the PCSA refused to contemplate any move away from Johannesburg. This matter was not resolved until well into the period following the union. Progress was also reported on the Basis of Union and legal matters. Slow progress was reported on the work of the

task forces (PCSA 1996, 118). Yet, the Manual issue was apparently resolved early by a recommendation to accept the PSCA *Manual* as *Interim Manual* of the UPCSAs with an understanding that changes would be made after the union took place (PCSA 1996, 19). On Finance and Property, the pension fund issue was crucial. It was anticipated that the task forces would report in 1997 (PCSA 1996, 119). In the meantime, it was noted that there was a variety of styles of worship and resources for worship and that further work was necessary especially with regard to the formal services of the church, particularly those relating to the legal aspects of ministry (PCSA 1996, 264–267).

When progress was reported to the 1997 General Assemblies, in the areas of “uniting structures, organisations and the mission of the Church” (PCSA 1997, 136) it was also noted that there were areas of the denominations’ lives in which there was not yet agreement. These were considered to be “some secondary issues that could be settled later ... even after the union” (PCSA 1997, 136). These included “Christian Education, ... youth work, uniforms in the associations and other issues affecting the organisations of the Churches, ecclesiastical symbols and dress and styles of worship.” It was recognised that there were areas of difference and “a great need for sensitivity” (PCSA 1997, 136). Issues related to the associations were to become an ongoing source of continuing disunity, particularly among the black constituency of the uniting denomination. Other significant issues related to the General Assembly office, finalisation of the recommendation on the *Manual of Law, Practice and Procedure*, personnel, property, employment of personnel, ministerial training, stipends, and pension funds.

Vision for the UPCSAs

However, there was a recognition of a need to “conduct a thorough review and formulate a vision for a United Church” (PCSA 1995, 61). This was prefaced by a list of reasons in favour of union:

BECAUSE A UNITED CHURCH IS A VALID WITNESS TO THE POWER OF RECONCILIATION IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY ...

BECAUSE THE FULNESS OF CHRISTIAN TRUTH AND WORSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO CHURCHES CAN ONLY BE TRULY EXPRESSED IN UNITY ...

BECAUSE THE CHURCH IS TRULY THE CHURCH WHEN IT IGNORES EXTERNAL FACTORS AND DENOMINATIONAL LABELS ...

BECAUSE THE TWO CHURCHES WERE FORMED NOT AS SEPARATIST CHURCHES BUT AS TWO BRANCHES OF THE SAME CHURCH ...

BECAUSE THE TWO CHURCHES HAVE COME OF AGE ...

BECAUSE A NEGATIVE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION HAS BEEN OVERCOME ...

BECAUSE OBEDIENCE TO THE GOSPEL DEMANDS IT ... (PCSA 1995, 67–68; emphasis in original)

The reasons in explanation of these points indicate a lack of critical interpretation (see PCSA 1998, 91–92).

The Basis of Union

The Basis of Union was presented to the GAs in 1997. It contained the following sections:

1. THE NAME OF THE CHURCH
2. THE FAITH OF THE CHURCH
3. THE WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH
4. THE POLITY OF THE CHURCH
5. STATUS OF CONGREGATIONS, MINISTERS, ELDERS AND MEMBERS
6. THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CHURCH
7. RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER CHURCHES
8. EMPLOYMENT OF PERSONNEL
10. PROPERTY AND INVESTMENTS
11. PENSION FUNDS
12. CUSTODY OF RECORDS
13. CHURCH BODIES, GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS (UPCSA 2017, app. 100–111)

Progress towards Union

Further attempts were made to encourage support for contact between the denominations and their associations. Unanimous agreement was given to the proposal that the GA adopt “the Basis of Union between the Presbyterian Church of South Africa and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa” (PCSA 1997, 406).

However, in 1998, presbyteries responded and a number of crucial issues arose. Cape Town Presbytery raised several issues. The acceptance of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* ([1647] 1969, chapters III, X and XX.v) was challenged on the basis of concerns regarding the infallibility of scripture, alleged offensive remarks about the papacy, and conflicting views regarding the doctrine of double predestination (PCSA 1998, 93).

All RPCSA presbyteries except Transkei voted in favour of union (PCSA 1998, 136; RPCSA 1998, 160–161). Durban Presbytery raised issues regarding assessments and stipends and suggested that “[u]nresolved financial issues could be a ticking timebomb that could threaten the entire union” (PCSA 1998, 95). “The matter of unresolved stipends could be the issue that could wreck the union” (PCSA 1998, 96). In accepting

the Basis of Union, the North East Presbytery issued a forewarning: “subject to all negotiations being completed by the time of union” (PCSA 1998, 96). This was totally disregarded. The Transvaal East Presbytery voted against the union despite being “in favour” of the principle of union (PCSA 1998, 136). St Michael’s, Springs affirmed the union, “but because of too many grey areas to be sorted out after the union would take place, we would have to say ‘no’” (PCSA 1998, 101–102). This was a recurrent theme expressed by congregations. Only one presbytery actually voted against union. But the seeds of dissension were already being sown in the PCSA.

In 1998, both General Assemblies formed the Special Commission on Union to finalise the arrangements for union in 1999, and instructed “all Committees and Associations ... to wind up their business and bring reports to next year’s Assembly” (PCSA 1998, 143). This implied transfer and transition to the “equivalent committees of the new Assembly on their recent work and the issues they believe to be important to the future” (PCSA 1998, 143). *Inter alia* the issues of part-time ministry and organising workshops on the *Interim Manual* were highlighted.

Within the RPCSA there was general acceptance of the union. While there were concerns about domination, these were muted. The only discussion concerned the use of the PCSA *Manual of Law, Practice and Procedure*, in the interim period following the union, at the 1998 General Assembly, which was accepted. It was considered to be “a way of preparing the RPCSA for absorption into the PCSA” (PCSA 1998, 138). This became an RPCSA-wide concern as more and more policy decisions were deferred until after the union. However, the continuance of the SCU for a period of up to three years post union was offered in order “to determine any matter in dispute as to the terms of union” (PCSA 1998, 143). This feeling was replicated in a comment made by the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to the author, on the occasion of the union (26 September 1999), referring to earlier unions which had taken place in Scotland since 1900, that it was incredible that a union could take place between two churches with so few policies in place.

The Ministry Committee provides one example. At the closing GA of the PCSA in 1999 it was noted that the Ministry Committee advocated “a radical revision” of their theological formation to include an Africanised curriculum, and this was consistent with the aims of the theological institutions already used by the PCSA (PCSA 1999, 217, 219). There was a task force on ministerial training in the SCU. It worked consistently to resolve a number of anomalies. This related to training institutions where there was a significant difference:

The RPCSA emphasis on one venue is important for the development of a common Reformed and Presbyterian ethos under the direct supervision of church tutors, this within an ecumenical academic climate which has borne fruit in the frequent cooperation between FedSem [in which the PCSA was also involved for the training of black candidates] and trained ministers of different denominations and parishes. The PCSA

adopted an approach which depends on Post Academic Training to develop this ethos.
(UPCSA 1999, 32)

The RPCSA (1999, 37) had agreed that Africanisation of theological education was vital along with the following: use of Fort Hare and Natal Universities, the place of the selection conference, placement of students regardless of race, and adoption of post-academic training and ordination at the end of the first year of a two-year probationary period. This was the essence of the Task Force on Theological Training's report and recommendations which were, in substance, an adoption of PCSA practice.

The task force report to the uniting GA was approved by the SCU; however, there was no report to the closing Assembly of the PCSA (PCSA 1999, contents page). Yet a partial report was minuted (PCSA 1999, 320–321). Therefore, the task force report was not made available to the GA except in summary in the report of the Ministry Committee, which stated: "The means of providing a theological education and practical training for our ministers must needs be under radical revision at this stage" (PCSA 1999, 217). They were working on a plan that would not be sent to GA until 2002 to be implemented in 2003. Reference was made to the *Interim Manual*. The report stated that "[t]herefore, at least initially, most of the Theological Education and Training programme as we know it in the PCSA is bound to be followed" (PCSA 1999, 218).

The report contained an appeal against the Special Commission Theological Education Task Force

assuming otherwise or attempting to shortcut the process. Rather, and as agreed at the first meeting of that sub-committee, it should itself form the core of a planning group for a conference which must necessarily involve a wider and balanced spectrum of people from both of the "old" denominations. (PCSA 1999, 218)

This was confirmed by the GA (PCSA 1999, 352). None of this was ever revealed to the task force, even though the PCSA Convener, Rev. E.A. Perkins, was a member of the Task Force on Theological Education; nor was there any agreement to adopt this projected plan.

At the uniting General Assembly, the joint convener of the SCU, Prof. M. Masango, brought a proposal from the closing GA of the PCSA that the report be rejected. This is strange when the Ministry Committee Convener, Rev. E.A. Perkins, was present (PCSA 1998, 473; 1999, 11) to present the report himself. Further, Prof. Masango was co-convener of the SCU, which had approved and brought the report to the uniting GA. The proposal appears in the minutes of General Assembly in a redacted form:

The Rev. Dr M.J. Masango moved as an amendment that the Assembly:

- (a) in the light of the report given to it by the PCSA Ministry Committee in respect of Section VII of the SCU's report to the Uniting Assembly, recommends that this

section should be referred to the new Ministry Committee for discussion at the projected conference. (UPCSA 1999, 23–24 [Clerk of Assembly's minutes] cf. UPCSA 1999, 66; [Official minutes 27 September 1999])

This caused considerable consternation among the ministers from the RPCSA tradition, which led to early distrust and acrimony regarding the integrity of the ministers from the PCSA tradition who knew all about the proposal but withheld this information from the convener of the SCU Theological Education Task Force until it was proposed on the floor of the GA. This proposal, which was approved, allowed the PCSA programme for ministerial formation to be retained without change. In the meantime, the Federal Theological Seminary and the Rhodes University Faculty of Divinity had closed in 1993 and 1999, respectively (Denis and Duncan 2011, 265). The PCSA were using the Faculty of Theology at the University of Natal, while the RPCSA, PCSA (some black students), EPCSA, and UCCSA were using the University of Fort Hare (Denis and Duncan 2011, 268).

As a result, pressing issues had to be delayed, including the place(s) of training. This led to controversy arising out of the number of places of training resulting in a decision to enter a five-year trial period “to use the universities of Stellenbosch and Pretoria as training institutions in for the UPCSA in RSA” (UPCSA 2001, 307). This matter was not resolved until late in 2001. It had been an issue since the uniting assembly in 1999. This was a serious policy issue which could have been resolved prior to union. This entire matter along with the delay in formulating other important policies seemed to confirm among RPCSA ministers and elders that this was duplicitous and integral to the process of absorption. To deny this would be implausible in the post-union period when policy decisions would be taken in committees where both the RPCSA and PCSA were represented. This carried unnecessary tensions and suspicions into the union on various issues including the timing of General Assembly, the location of the General Assembly office, the appointment of General Assembly staff, and the union of the church associations, which became a particularly intractable matter.

Union

At Port Elizabeth and within the Centenary Hall in New Brighton, on Sunday, 26th September, 1999, at 10h00, the ministers and elders, as Commissioners of the General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa met together for public worship, which was attended by a large congregation composed of members of both churches. (UPCSA 1999, 54)

They were supported by a number of foreign fraternal delegates. The preacher was Rev. Dr. H.R. Botman, former Moderator of the Southern Africa Alliance of Reformed churches. The Moderator, Rev. C.W. Leeuw, minister from the RPCSA tradition, was inducted as Moderator of the General Assembly of the UPCSA.

Later that same day, the GA Moderator, Rt Rev. C.W. Leeuw ended his Moderatorial Address with some prescient words:

There are still a number of differences that we must address.

I will just mention a few:

- (a) There's the question of a permanent venue for the new office
- (b) There is the question of different cultures and the way things are done
- (c) There is the fear of ancestor worship and traditions
- (d) There is a fear of being absorbed and the fear of whites by blacks and vice versa
- (e) There is the fear of what is going to happen to our pension?
- (f) There is the question of reconciliation
- (g) There is the question of trust—apartheid has destroyed the trust that there was amongst the people of our land. Trust is not something we can buy, it must be built up—we cannot co-exist without trust
- (h) There is the question of white ministers and white congregations and black ministers and black congregations. (UPCSA 1999, 92)

But the Moderator added a further threat to union on the very day of its consummation:

Some of you might feel to leave the new church for various reasons, but I want to encourage you to stay. Don't run away, but let us help one another to build our church together—we all need one another. (UPCSA 1999, 92)

This threat has persisted from time to time though normally in covert language and is never spoken outrightly. Consequently, this challenge is never addressed, although it is symbolic of a lack of commitment to the UPCS. These threats continued as the matter of the union of the church associations was about to burst on the scene. This exacerbated the already tenuous union.

Evaluation

The stimulus in favour of union within the RPCSA was largely an emotional response to politically charged euphoria with the transfer of power in a democracy in 1994, while for the PCSA the same political context provided an opportunity to avoid an ignominious future as a racially divided church within a novel political dispensation. For them 1994 was a threatening year and they sought a degree of security in a union where they could hopefully still control the agenda. From the onset of union negotiations there was no planned process of reconciliation and union was not, as assumed, a logical step into the future. There was insufficient interrogation of the role of the PCSA during and in support of apartheid. There was a lack of unity within the PCSA with regard to what it meant to be Presbyterian, rather than independent or congregationalist. Then there was the difference in history and tradition in the uniting denominations, and further there was suspicion and even fear of the emergence and domination of an African ecclesiastical identity. Almost no account was taken of the implications of being a transnational church. Here was a missed opportunity to engage in a discussion of constructive ecumenical engagement.

During the final negotiation process, there was a serious lack of trust, and this led to feelings of betrayal and long-term feelings of suspicion, offence, and resentment, which were carried forwards into the union. Often negotiations were marked by prevarication and even intransigence as in the debates regarding the location of the church office, the trusteeship of property, and theological education. All of these matters were worthy of longer and deeper investigation than they received, especially the issue of lack of trust. Union occurred too speedily and this caused suspicion and, later, resentment.

As far as congregational life was concerned, many congregations continued their lives as if there had been no union. There has been little material difference in black congregations, and where there has been a change in the racial membership of white congregations this has been on the basis of acceptance of the status quo. This might be described as psychological capture as described by Skinner and Cleese (1993, 333; *italics in original*) with regard to the colonised: “we have somehow persuaded you to share our way of thinking, about things and to believe that in order to be equal to us you have to enslave yourselves to our *values*.”

On the national scene the Church Unity Commission had virtually given up expectations of organic union and preferred to move in the direction of “the search for ways in which we may more fully manifest that unity in a divided Southern Africa” (Wing 1990, 9). What happened in the Presbyterian context rendered any hopes of further union almost merely wishful thinking. Yet, the UPCSA entered into long-term negotiations with the UCCSA, which have yet to yield a positive outcome. A major difference in this case is that the UCCSA is a largely “coloured” denomination. The measured pace of the discussions is more likely to produce a positive result. Another factor is the approach adopted by the PCSA to union, compared with the RPCSA. It appeared that it was based on the view of giving up as little as possible rather than both denominations offering the best their traditions had to offer.

And there was the question of the missing archive of the SCU signifying that care and maintenance are inadequate.

Conclusion

The “uniting” part of the name referred to the vision that the union was not yet complete and that the UPCSA was open to further union. However, it is true that, even at this time, twenty-five years post union, the UPCSA is still “uniting” within itself as well as being open to union with others, e.g. the Uniting Congregational Church in Southern Africa where discussions and negotiations soon began. Many of the UPCSA’s issues have been “resolved,” but there still lingers a view, in the light of subsequent events, that the RPCSA was absorbed by the PCSA on 26 September 1999 and that the UPCSA is the PCSA writ large.

The path towards union had been a lengthy and arduous process. It is difficult to assess whether the similarities between the two denominations had been a help or a hindrance along the journey. Perhaps an issue was that both denominations knew one another a little too well in terms of their history and sought to capitalise on their own perceptions of the other. Tensions were inevitable, but with adequate preparation and commitment some, at least, of these could have been mitigated by responsible attempts to reach consensus and a degree of solidarity. There is much to be learned in the wider ecumenical context from this experiment and for a stimulus to future research on, for instance, reconciliation, organisational change, and the place of African ecclesial identity.

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