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# TO UNITE OR NOT TO UNITE? A CASE STUDY OF PRESBYTERIANISM IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1897-1923

## ABSTRACT

As from 1891, attempts to bring all Presbyterians of Scottish and Scottish mission descent in South Africa together into one church faced insuperable barriers. Their histories and traditions, as well as their demographic and ethnic composition were all issues, despite their similarities. The Presbyterian Church of South Africa was formed in 1897, and the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa in 1923. Discussions on various forms of relationship started in 1891 and continued in the years following the formation of the Bantu Presbyterian Church in South Africa. This article investigates the issues at stake in the attempts to establish one Presbyterian denomination from the disparate Scottish ecclesiastical bodies, using primary and secondary sources and focusing mainly on the issue of racism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the formation of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa (PCSA, 1897) and the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa (BPCSA, 1923), various attempts were made to form one united church (Duncan 1997:113-132). The reasons for their failure were derived from the different ethos of each branch of Presbyterianism. The PCSA was a colonial body that wanted to improve matters for Black South Africans. The Scottish mission, the precursor of the BPCSA, wanted to empower Black South Africans to form their own autonomous church. The PCSA and the Scottish mission both held a variety

of contemporary views concerning racism, which constantly hampered discussions and negotiations.

The decision to form the PCSA out of a number of independent colonial/settler congregations, which had been formed into four presbyteries and the congregation of Port Elizabeth (Bax 1997:10), was taken five years after a Federal Council was formed to explore the possibility arising out of a perceived need for cohesion formed in 1891 within the Presbyterian fold. The decision to form the BPCSA was a lengthier and more complex process involving the United Free Church of Scotland (UFCoS) as the sponsor of the Scottish mission (Duncan 1997:142-158). This arose out of the need of the UFCoS to divest itself of financial responsibility for the mission and a strong desire among Black Presbyterians for autonomy. However, concerns regarding racism were a major obstacle in the ongoing discussion.

## 2. RACISM

Racism is a pervasive and perennial problem in South Africa. It militates against wholeness of life and building up the household of God which is the aim of life in a context where the total environment and human life are under threat, and aims at building healthy, wholesome communities through the formation of leaders. This article demonstrates how opportunities to build a better, more inclusive South Africa at the close of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century were squandered through racism.

Racism has its roots in the economic, political and social relations between people. Biological and other theories were developed later to provide ideological justifications for the domination of one racial group by another. Studies and research carried out in recent years have demonstrated clearly the links between colonial and economic domination and institutional domination. The racist regime of South Africa is the most extreme example of this (Sjollema 1982:100).

Racism is a culturally constructed evolutionary attitude of mind based on power, with tragic consequences when enacted. This situation developed in South Africa from the time of the settlement of Europeans, particularly the 1820s, and manifested in the century-long wars of dispossession from late in the eighteenth century against the "Other", the indigenous peoples. The exercise of crude, and often violent power was symptomatic of the hegemony of empire.

In his recent work, *The equality of believers: Protestant missionaries and the racial politics of South Africa*, Elphick (2012:7-8) makes the central claim that:

the struggle over racial equalisation ... was pivotal to South African history; that this concept was rooted in the missionaries' proclamation of God's love to all people, as manifested in the birth, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus; that the ideal of equality was nurtured in large part by missionary institutions, even though missionaries themselves repeatedly sought to limit, deflect or retard its achievements.

While this was true, missionary responses also changed over time as is evidenced in the contrasting approaches of the first two missionary principals of Lovedale Institution, William Govan and James Stewart. Govan's approach was non-racial, favouring academic excellence (Duncan 2013a:102), while Stewart took a paternalistic approach, favouring the general education of the mass of learners (Duncan 2013a:152-156). This was related to two main assumptions, namely

that networks linking members of South Africa's disparate racial and cultural groups are not of recent origin, but go far back in South African history; and that, in seeking to understand the religious origins of apartheid historians should ... see the Dutch Reformed Church as a predominantly evangelical church, closely akin to British and American Protestant churches, which was determined to shape its policies in constant dialogue with the English-speaking world (Elphick 2012:9).

### 3. BACKGROUND

When Presbyterianism arrived in South Africa, it came in several forms. It began with Scottish arrivals worshipping in Cape Town with the Dutch Reformed Church or the Church of England, the only officially recognised churches (Quinn & Cuthbertson 1979:3). From 1806, Scottish soldiers were posted in Cape Town and, in 1808, they formed a Calvinist Society which, in time, developed into St Andrew's Church, Cape Town, the "mother church" of settler Presbyterianism. Settlers greatly increased in number with the arrival of the 1820 settlers in Algoa Bay (Port Elizabeth), leading to a movement into the interior spearheaded from Cape Town and the eastern Cape (Duncan 2015:5-6). These were predominantly independent congregations, some of which formed themselves into presbyteries.

Concurrently, developments took place in various parts of South Africa. In 1823, the Glasgow Missionary Society (GMS) sent its first missionaries to the Eastern Cape. The Presbytery of Kaffraria of the Free Church of Scotland (it later became a Presbyterian Church of the FCoS) was established on 1 January 1824 (Cory MS 7514; Lennox 1911:22). When the FCoS and UPCoS united in 1900, there were 28 congregations of the Scottish mission in South Africa with 14,402 members (Hewat 1960:184). These were to be found in the Eastern Cape and in Natal. Mission work in the Transvaal was established in 1896 with a meeting between Rev. William Mpamba and

a leadership corps of those sons of the area who had exposure in working in the diamond fields of Kimberley exposed to the gospel through [the] Native Congregational Church of Rev Gwayi Tyamazshe, a Lovedale trained minister” (Manaka 1996:1; cf. Duncan 2013a:213).

#### 4. THE MOVE TOWARDS UNION

Unity was at the heart of the Reformed tradition from the sixteenth century. None of the Reformers wished to establish separate churches, believing that all belonged to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381CE). For instance, Calvin stated:

The Lord, indeed, as he has done from the beginning of the world, can wonderfully, in ways unknown to us, preserve the unity of the true faith, and prevent its destruction from the dissensions of men. ... I should with pleasure cross ten seas, if necessary, to accomplish that object (Letter XVII, Calvin to Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1552).

However, different contextual circumstances led to a divided church and this was perpetuated particularly in Presbyterianism in Scotland (Muirhead 2015:213) and, subsequently, in South Africa, beginning with the Mzimba Secession (1898) (Duncan 1997:84-103), followed by the Tsewu Secession in 1906 (Duncan 2012:50-61).

The concept of the parity of elders in Presbyterianism allowed for the development of the leadership of ruling elders, complementary to teaching elders (ministers), and gave them and their colleague Black ministers opportunities to exert themselves in a situation of equality. This was the root cause of the Mzimba and Tsewu secessions where ministers and their congregations rejected the discriminatory financial, administrative and disciplinary methods of their White colleagues. This was one of the prime

causes of the African Initiated churches in South Africa of the Ethiopian-type and throughout the continent during this period.

The possibility of union was, at least in part, determined by the social and political context of racism towards the close of the nineteenth century. According to Vale (2014:3-4), this was a time of

the development of a mining economy, the rise of grinding poverty, the accumulation of fabulous wealth and the gradual legislation of institutionalized racism ...

During the early years of the twentieth century, the outcome of the South African War (1899-1902) was the alienation of Black people in the settlement, leading to the formation of the Union of South Africa (1910) and the notorious Land Act (1913). Part of the ideological support for this was derived from the various views of liberalism espoused by White ministers, politicians and academics who were more in tune with the needs and aspirations of Black people than the majority of the White opinion. Their reaction to White racial superiority was central to the race issue and was

largely an expression of assumed cultural superiority. ... Given the tenacity of South African racial assumptions, it is reasonable to assume these forms of liberalism are peculiarly local expressions of prejudice" (Friedman 2014:41).

Translated into the ecclesiastical context in muted form:

... there was a general tendency to depreciate liberal principles in the political life of the country between 1880 and 1930. Similarly, there was growth of colour consciousness in both Church and State. Stewart's belief that [W]hites would separate from [B]lacks in a predominantly native church was as true then, as it is in the present day (Van der Spuy 1971:29).

Drawing on the contemporary thinking of Benjamin Kidd (1894) on social evolution, James Stewart, missionary statesman and principal of Lovedale Missionary Institution, was not immune from racist thinking:

Under the influence of some of the forms of natural religion – it may be that of fetichism, or that of any other name or kind, the African is a very slightly evolved man, especially as compared with men of many other races. This [B]lack believer in his own natural religion of fear and grotesque faith, of dread of witchcraft, and strange practices to protect himself from its influence, is in consequence and at times rather an incomprehensible creature. ... the spiritual man was sleeping, the new religion took him by the hand and led

him out of a land of thick darkness, gloom, and horror – filled with malevolent shades and dreaded spectral powers – and brought him into the clear, sweet light of a simple belief in a God of goodness and love, such as Christianity reveals (Stewart 1894:42-43).

Throughout the nineteenth century, the distinction between settled indigenous peoples and settlers was emphasized as the result of the frontier wars of dispossession, the collapse of traditional society through the destruction of the authority of tribal chiefs and the social, cultural, religious and economic structures they represented and upheld. Again, this had an ecclesiastical impact:

The relentless expansion of ‘settler’ attitudes and the hardening of political and social attitudes had a definite effect on the churches whose members represented both racial groups. Missionary credibility and optimism shrank in their wake and the complex problem of inter-racial relations was left to individual churches to work out (Van der Spuy 1971:26).

Even in church, Black ministers “met with [W]hite men who refused to worship with them” (Van der Spuy 1971:27).

The Presbyterian church has always opposed racism. However, the long-term historical situation, where the church adopted many anti-racist deliverances, is succinctly stated by Bax (1997:22):

In spite of the protests that it did make the Church never thought at this stage of moving from the comfort zone of such statements of protest to the more difficult and costly path of action. ... the leaders of the church were quite conservative, and that would have dirtied the Church’s hands with too direct involvement in politics.

R.H.W. Shepherd, Principal of Lovedale Missionary Institution and Director of Lovedale Press, writing prior to 1940, distinguished two views regarding union:

African congregations should be an integral part of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa, even though that body was a predominantly European one. Others felt that such a union between peoples at very different stages of Christian experience and development [read civilization], separated by language and tradition, lacked real unity. Not that this need mean dissension, but it was felt that the African Christian needed to be in circumstances where he could best develop his own Christian manhood, so that he might be free to engage in the tasks that were peculiarly his (Shepherd 1971:88; cf. Duncan 1997:125-132).

It is interesting to note how Shepherd's former view was clearly against an autonomous Black church.<sup>1</sup> Shepherd exemplified the paradox of commitment and service in the exercise of his vocation. He served as a UFCoS missionary from 1920 and a minister of the BPCSA from 1923 until his retirement in 1955. Thereafter, he moved to the PCSA (Bax 1997:21), where he served until 1968 and remained a member until his death in 1971. He moved from a lifetime of missionary service among Black people to membership of a White congregation not two kilometres away, while there was a vacancy in Adelaide in his own BPCSA (1956:2) Presbytery of the Ciskei. He remained a minister of the Church of Scotland throughout (Oosthuizen 1970:119). His commitment to the Black church was ambiguous, if not covertly racist.

## 5. MISSION COUNCILS

The formation of Mission Councils in the 1860s confirmed that Scottish mission policy was not "the product of an indigenous organisation", but that it was "informed certainly by those on the spot" (Brock 1974:24), all of whom were White. It curtailed the growth of indigenous leadership, despite the passing of a Minute of the Foreign Mission Committee (FMC) in 1866 which confirmed the FCoS' support of the Three-Self principle. Henry Venn had recently formulated this formula with a view to producing self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating churches (Schenk 1977). This

reflected a greater optimism about the abilities of new churches planted by the missions to assume full responsibility for their own affairs in a short time ... (Sundkler 1961:29; Reese 2010:21).

The FCoS opined that it was appropriate that the mission church should be self-propagating, because as soon

as native congregations are formed, the care of them ought as speedily as possible to be consigned to the native pastorate (Brock 1974:439).

Missionaries were, therefore, to be pioneers "for the native congregations [who] were to be in time delivered over to additional native pastors" (FMC 1866). This would necessarily involve training an indigenous ministry. Brock (1974:61) questions the inability of Blacks to achieve greater power in the Mission. There were Black ministers in the Mission, but they were in a minority in the Presbytery. In addition, very few Black ministers were ordained during this period:

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1 See Shepherd's negative reaction to the Mzimba secession of 1898 (1971:59-60) and the formation of the BPCSA (1971:88-89).

Missionary enthusiasm for ordaining African pastors was declining by the 1880s as the arbiters of a segregationist culture began to separate church congregations and limit contact between [W]hite and [B]lack clergy (Switzer 1993:125).

The FMC promoted self-support in relation to the authority of White missionaries. Rev. John D. Don, Presbytery Clerk of Kaffraria, argued that self-support implied self-government, and called this “evil” (Don to Smith, 4 September 1886, National Library of Scotland [NLS], MS7797). The Presbytery opposed the challenge of self-government and, unfortunately, the FMC did not pursue it at that time. FMC policy with regard to the issue of the union of Presbyterian bodies was consistent in the pursuit of a three-self church, but whether this issue could best be resolved in the formation of a multiracial or Black church would become a very contentious issue. Mission Councils were powerful elitist bodies (White, male and ordained) and suffered from a sense of superiority towards their Black brethren.

The deficit in mission policy was its restriction of decision-making, policy formation and control to White missionaries, mainly ordained who ruled from the central mission stations, while sending Black pastors, catechists and teachers to do the main part of the mission and evangelism among the people in rural areas. Thus, it was self-propagating, while not self-sufficient and self-governing.

## 6. THE CONTEXT FOR UNION

It is important to set the formation of the BPCSA in the broader context of encroaching racism. From 1850 to 1900,

... missionaries relinquished their original intent to establish “native churches” quickly and became convinced that tight control must be maintained over indigenous evangelists (Elphick 2012:34).

The missionary principles of Henry Venn (1796-1873) and of Rufus Anderson (1796-1880) stated clearly that the main aim of missions was a “native church” under “a native pastorate”, where missionaries should surrender control of the churches they founded, and not take ownership of the “native church”. But their approach was far from the policy of their masters in Scotland:

The home boards of several English-speaking missions, notably the ... Scots Presbyterians ..., were convinced that missionaries should rapidly work themselves out of a job and move on to unevangelised



areas; they accordingly pressed their missionaries in South Africa to ordain more Africans ... (Elphick 2012:85).

In 1901, the Convener of the FMC, Dr Lindsay, claimed that the South African missionaries “do not seem to have grasped the idea of a Native Presbyterian Church” (Brock 1974:49). The term “native” church is open to various definitions. It might simply be a church whose membership and leadership is restricted to or only composed of Blacks in the South African context. It might also mean native to a particular region. The Scottish mission operated in rural areas and this defined its membership. The PCSA, by comparison, operated in urban areas and established missions in the adjacent peri-urban areas. In this instance, it was both. There was no ethnic connotation in this case compared with the Tsonga Presbyterian church derived from the Swiss Mission, a Tsonga-speaking denomination. Lindsay claimed that it was the aim of missionaries like himself to form a Black church “in harmony with the church’s avowed policy” (Lennox to Henderson 24 May 1901, UFH). This indicates that missionaries themselves were obstructing development. They were living in a period of rising imperialism which was itself

a religion – a religion remarkably like Christianity in its emphasis on morality and character; in its call for dedication, sacrifice and duty (Elphick 2012:62).

During this period, it was

[B]lack Christians, who most clearly drew out the implications of the gospel’s insistence on the equality of all souls before God, and the equality of all languages and of all ministers as bearers of the word of God (Elphick 2012:64).

As [B]lacks themselves increasingly assumed responsibility for evangelism of the ‘heathen’, many missionaries came to see their work as a contribution to what Henderson called ‘world utility’, that is, South African future (Elphick 2012:652).

This gave the lie to the idea that the missionaries themselves were the prime agents of conversion.

However, the missionaries claimed that they knew best in terms of developing the mission; they, after all, were the people on the ground in touch with knowledge of the local context. They protested, in the words of Scottish missionary, J. Davidson Don, that the home board’s policy was

based on a radical misunderstanding of the conditions existing in this country. ... A native is not made fit to occupy the position of a missionary in charge of an old station with its schools, its finances

and manifold relations to the European community and to the government by passing through the educational mill (Brock 1974:49).

The local missionaries occupied a dichotomous position: some had hardly any faith in Africans who were to administer organisations, manage money, rebuke sin, or maintain high standards of doctrine and morality. Yet, at the same time, many hoped that ordained Black ministers would assist them in their war against laxness and vice as proof to the world that missions were successful. This was stimulated by the existing economic situation. During

the 1890s, Africans' opportunities in cash-crop agriculture were shrinking, and they were barred from most professions; the ministry offered almost the only route to wealth and eminence outside the traditional economy (Elphick 2012:86; cf. Beinart 1994:20-25).

The one area missionaries were prepared to delegate was supervision of the perceived materialism and laziness of Black members; when the "native agents" failed to deliver, missionaries reasserted their control. As a result, for many Black ministers "who had sacrificed a great deal to gain professional equality with [W]hites, this was intolerable" (Elphick 2012:62).

## 7. THE MZIMBA SECESSION

The Mzimba secession (1898) took place in the broader context of the rise of industrialisation in South Africa and the ecclesiastical context of the growing Ethiopian movement in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It was a reaction on the part of Black Christians against racism (Sundkler 1961:53-54). African Initiated Churches (AICs), of which Ethiopianism was a part, expressed a protest against "the experience of religious manipulation, deculturalisation and racial subjugation" (Lamola 1988:6) of

an educated class of Africans conscientised with the obligation presented by the gospel, that dehumanising structures in the Black community had to be attacked and dismantled (Lamola 1988:7).

Black people saw a clear

contradiction between their attraction to the Christian message of human fellowship and their experience of racial discrimination both in society and in church (Lamola 1988:7).

As a result, it was particularly unacceptable for them to find that

at the same time the church was an agent of the process of dehumanisation and exploitation in the religious realm. It was not

strange then that [B]lacks began to think of establishing their own church, where they could rediscover their humanity together (Balia 1994:25-26).

Balia's comments have a further significance, for the church is often too aligned to the dominant power structures; English-speaking churches at this time were no exception.<sup>2</sup>

The missionaries were quick to equate "raw haste", *i.e.* the presenting factor in secessions, with the exponential growth in dissatisfaction with treatment of Black members within the mission bodies. Landau (2010:171) attributes this to "the mismatch of Christianity's promise with people's everyday experiences". Black Christians

sought a share in the power structure as decision makers – in allocating funds, controlling and administering property, choosing suitable candidates for the ministry and promoting them to positions of authority. In short, the ordained African clergy wanted to become equal partners with the missionaries in the ongoing life of mission and church. When they were denied this role, they felt they had no choice but to separate (Switzer 1993:187).

In Presbyterianism, "[r]ecurring negative causes expressed were colonialism, segregation, racism, discipline" (Duncan 2015:108).

On 6 April 1898, Rev. P.J. Mzimba tendered his resignation as a minister of the Presbytery of Kaffraria and of the Lovedale congregation (Mzimba 1898:209), after a ministry of over twenty years, because

the missionaries and myself always hinder one another. We generally see things in different (disagreeing) ways which introduces bad feeling and distrust (Mzimba 1898:209).

The long-term issue was money, which Mzimba had raised in Scotland during a visit in 1893. The presenting cause was the intention of the Lovedale congregation to erect a new sanctuary. A Scottish visitor, Mr John Stephen had commented on the state of the existing building: "I well remember ... how the walls were supported by props both inside and out to keep them from falling" (Stephen to Mzimba, 4 September 1893, UCTL, BC 106:C167.22, Stewart Papers). However, according to Mzimba (1898:211),

[t]he speeches of the missionaries contained words that gave great pain to the Church officers sent by the Congregation (words) that

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2 See Cochrane (1987), whose work relates to the period 1900-1930.

annoyed me too, such as, 'the church about to be built is too fine for natives'.

When challenged in this regard, "Dr Stewart denied having used these words: he might have used somewhat similar words but without the implied sting" (Presbytery of Kaffraria, 28 April 1898:211). Further, on the building issue, Rev. John Lennox stated explicitly: "Even if I am alone, opposed to thirty of you, I will not yield" (Presbytery of Kaffraria, 28 April 1898:212). He was supported by at least two others (Presbytery of Kaffraria, 28 April 1898:213). Mzimba ended his resignation letter by stating the following, with reference to the Tsewu secession in Johannesburg (1896):

The decision that the Free Church Native Congregation in Johannesburg is fit only for a [W]hite missionary and is not fit for a native Missionary, and all the European Ministers supported that view. ...

Mr Makiwane, who was not at that meeting, was greatly troubled when he heard that decision, so much so that he said this was the third occasion that statements were made selecting colour lines as the grounds of the unfitness of a Missionary (Presbytery of Kaffraria, 28 April 1898:213).

The point is that the words caused offence. This raises the question as to whether it is the perpetrator, the victim or a third party who decides what is racist or not?

Rev. Elijah Makiwane, an opponent of the secessionists, was appalled by the racism inherent in the decisions and actions of his missionary colleagues on a repeated basis. In a paper, which he wrote in July 1899, he referred to an allegation by Mzimba's supporters of

the bad treatment which the natives were receiving from the [W]hite man, as evidenced by the salaries which the natives were receiving in all departments and the absence of promotion; ... that the night had passed and the morning had now come, and that it behoved the sons of Africa to better themselves and take their place (The Macfarlan Mission, UCTL, BC 106:C167.38, Stewart papers:4).

In the view of the FCoS, this was a matter "which should never have occurred" (Ashcroft & Houston 1920:2). Yet, its consequence was the formation of the Presbyterian Church of Africa (Duncan 2013b:52-79) and a significant disruption of the mission, though it was the first move towards a self-supporting, self-propagating, self-governing and self-theologising church.

Elphick (2012:90) has summarised the outcome well:

... the secessionists were highly religious people, indistinguishable in many of their ideals and aspirations, and in their faults, from their missionary antagonists. They were driven, perhaps, not by the missionaries' desire to carry the gospel to untouched parts of Africa, but by a pastor's ambition to lead an established congregation, and to enjoy the respect and status to which the missionaries themselves clung. The Ethiopians' struggle with the missionaries had all the bitterness of a quarrel among former friends, a divorce in a once happy marriage (cf. Duncan 2013b:52-79).

## 8. UNION

The first move towards union occurred in 1880 when the Free Church and United Presbyterian Presbyteries of Kaffraria was prepared (Report of Committee on Union between the Free Church and United Presbyterian Presbyteries of Kaffraria, 1884, William Cullen Library [WCL], University of the Witwatersrand [Wits], Ac1971/Ag2). Nothing came of this attempt.

In 1891, a further movement was initiated to establish "a union of all the Churches and Congregations in South Africa holding the Presbyterian form of Church Government" (PCSA, Federal Council 1895: Prefatory Note). A Federal Council was established. It is not clear who was invited to participate, apart from references to "the Churches concerned" and "brethren from all parts of South Africa". Certainly, by the time of the fourth meeting in 1895, a draft constitution was presented having been scrutinized by sessions, congregations and presbyteries. It was then sent to participating "Churches and Presbyteries", including the Presbyteries of Kaffraria, Transkei (Free Church of Scotland), Transkei (UPCoS), Transvaal, Adelaide (UPCoS), Cape Town, Natal and Port Elizabeth. The Colonial Committee of the FCoS expressed its support particularly in terms of "the christianisation of the native races, and the consolidation of the Christian communities in South Africa" (PCSA, Rae to Federal Council, Minutes 16 July 1895, 19 March 1895). At this stage, the UPCoS missions decided to participate in the union, although a number of ministers and congregations were uncomfortable with the arrangement as were many in the FCoS tradition; yet, the UFCoS missions voted to remain separate as the Synod of Kaffraria. It clearly "feared that the predominantly [W]hite PCSA would allow racial discrimination to determine its life and work, including its mission policy" (Hunter 1983:1). In addition, the failure of the PCSA to clarify the grounds on which Black congregations could achieve full status led the Synod of Kaffraria to conclude that the PCSA policy would be determined by

the principle of [W]hite trusteeship expressed in the political sphere. Both churchmen and politicians had to face up to the crucial question: What happens when the ward grows up? What determines his majority? (Hunter 1983:24).

The union was consummated on 27 September 1897. The Presbyterian Church of South Africa (often referred to as the South African Presbyterian Church [Lennox 1911:81], and what was “termed the colonial Presbyterian Church” [Shepherd 1971:88]) had four presbyteries along with the congregation of Port Elizabeth. Three presbyteries were predominantly White (Cape Town – 4 congregations [yet mission work had been established as early as 1838] (Quinn & Cuthbertson 1979:15); Natal – 11 White congregations and 2 “native” congregations; Transvaal – 7 White congregations and 1 “Native” congregation, and the UPCoS Presbytery of Kaffraria with 9 mission congregations. While the Presbyteries of Kaffraria (FCoS), Transkei (FCoS) and Adelaide (UPCoS) approved the union, they refused to participate in it at that time (Bax 1997:10-11). The following year, the Presbytery of Adelaide – 6 White UPCoS congregations and 1 “Native” congregation; the Presbytery of King William’s Town – 5 White FCoS congregations and one “Native” congregation, and the Presbytery of the Orange Free State – 4 White congregations (to be joined later that year by the congregation at Bulawayo), joined the PCSA:

The PCSA now had 24 ‘European’ and 10 ‘Native’ congregations, 110 mission stations, 2961 ‘European’ and 3778 ‘Native’ members, 3046 ‘European’ adherents and 1394 ‘Native’ candidates and 101 ‘European’ and 100 ‘Native’ elders (Bax 1997:11; see also note 21:32-33).

The Presbyteries of Kaffraria (FCoS), Transkei (FCoS) and Adelaide (UPCoS) all approved the union, but felt

unable to enter into the proposed union at present in consequence of the want of acquiescence on the part of native congregations in two presbyteries, and in view of discussions which have arisen among Europeans on the subject of the native vote in Church courts. ... [which required] First, that some method be devised of adjusting the balance between Colonial and Mission Churches, which shall be satisfactory to both races; eg, that a majority of [W]hite and a majority of [B]lack, separately and conjointly, be necessary to pass a proposed measure into law; or that, in view of future eventualities, the proportion of votes in both races in the General Assembly be strictly defined and preserved. Second, that there be a final Court of Appeal in certain questions be carefully defined (Proceedings of the First General Assembly, PCSA [1897], WCL, Ac1971/Ah1.1:6-7).

From the outset, issues of race and distrust were evident. While they were clear to those who opposed the union, they were viewed quite differently by White proponents of the venture. The General Assembly was not convinced of these arguments that were

not deemed sufficient to prevent the consummation of the union ... 1) that the application of Presbyterian principles will obviate difficulties as to the balance between Colonial and Mission churches; and 2) that the matter of a final court of appeal has been adequately dealt with ... in the draft constitution, and which has now been adopted by the General Assembly as part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa (Proceedings of the First General Assembly, PCSA [1897], WCL, Ac1971/Ah1.1:26-27).

This view was adopted unanimously. The result was clear. “Presbyterian principles” can be manipulated to support racism, as happened in the separation of mission into White and Black categories. All levels of Presbyterian polity allowed for representative government. Thus, in the PCSA, Black missions were not constituted as congregations, but remained as missions under White governance. They had hardly any representation in the courts of the denomination and, therefore, hardly any power to influence decisions. This accords with the prevalent paternalistic view of the period. Black people were rightly suspicious of the union because, alongside the missionaries, they did have certain limited rights in decision-making. In the PCSA, Black people constituted only a minority of the membership, while they would form a majority in the union and White people would be unable to tolerate majority Black decisions and possibly the scope they would have to express their gifts.

From the inception of the PCSA, mission work among the indigenous peoples became the responsibility of the Mission Committee, while mission work among Whites was the preserve of the Colonial Committee – soon to become the Church Extension Committee. As a result, those who expressed fears regarding union on the grounds of race were justified (Cory, MS Ac1971/Ag 2:8):

Initially the PCSA failed to perceive that mission to Africans and Whites were part of the same process. ... This dual mission policy was further complicated by the PCSA’s failure to formulate a clear and consistent policy whereby an African mission congregation could achieve full status (Hunter 1983:3).

The problem was that “the church as a whole failed to forge this new relationship” (Hunter 1983:20), partly because

the link between the [W]hite churches and the mission congregations tended to be tenuous and limited to financial aid rather than personal contact (Hunter 1983:20).

Such attitudes “effectively postponed the forging of this new relationship for more than sixty years” (Hunter 1983:20).

Rev. D.V. Sikhutshwa (1946:4) of the Scottish Mission commented:

... at a time when the two sections of the population were at different stages of development – religiously, educationally and socially – it would have been quite inopportune to run European and African congregations exactly on the same lines; and the attempt to do so would have been disadvantageous to both sections of the population.

This is confusing, because the 1897 PCSA General Assembly had affirmed that it was working according to “Presbyterian principles [which] will obviate difficulties”. The threat to White domination would be that they would not always get their own way (*Christian Express [CE]*, XXVII, July 1897:99). However, in the meantime, a threat arose from a different quarter which came as “a judgment on missionary attitudes” (Brock 1974:50).

## 9. PROGRESS TOWARDS A REALISTIC RESOLUTION

Further to all this, on the grounds of race, the combination of the formation of the Presbyterian church of South Africa in 1897 and the Mzimba secession in 1898 left the missionaries in a vulnerable position, realising that African demands for autonomy could not be resisted for long. The younger generation of missionaries, including James Henderson and John Lennox, realised that by

adopting a more consultative and cooperative stance, they might continue to influence a religious movement they had initiated but could not hope to dominate much longer (Elphick 2012:94).

This was not to be the case.

In 1901 and 1909, the FMC of the UFCoS supported the principle of a multiracial united church. Although James Stewart was opposed to joining the union, he was not yet ready to espouse the idea of an independent Black church as a result of the lack of readiness among those Black Presbyterians who may be

a hanger on to the wealthier [W]hite section – abject, inert, and lifeless and without any of the spirit necessary for its right vocation, the extension of missionary work as soon as it has



reached the position of self-support (James Stewart to FMC [1904], BPCSA Souvenir Programme).

Stewart's inherent paternalistic form of racism was expressed from within the context of the Black church. Regarding a native church, Stewart believed that this could be a natural development, as Whites left the PCSA as Blacks assumed a majority position. He appears to have been unaware of the deteriorating racial attitudes (Wells 1909:209). Yet, he was content to maintain the *status quo* in the medium to long term, *i.e.* "the foreseeable future". This was the general missionary attitude reflected in a comment by the convener of the FMC, Dr Lindsay, in 1901, regarding the missionaries who "do not seem to have grasped the idea of a Native Presbyterian Church" (Brock 1974:49). Congregations were consulted and, *inter alia*, the Burnshill Kirk Session declared:

If the Foreign Mission Committee cannot see their way to establish a Native Church, they wish, as a Session and congregation to remain under the care of the Home Church through the Committee (FMC, 25 October 1904, Min. 113; cf. Don to Young, 1 March 1897, NLS 7798).

The Synod of Kafraria struggled with the racial issues that delayed union, as was expressed in the pages of the *Christian Express* (XXXIII, April 1903:49):

If the attitude of the rank and file of [W]hite church members could be changed to meet the African in the same spirit as the missionary met him, a real union might be practicable; 'but so long as the Native minister or elder is only a "boy" to the [W]hite elder – a "boy" with whom it is not "good form" to shake hands or to invite into your pew in church, there may be a legal bond but there can hardly be a true union'.

The Synod of Kafraria stood firm on three matters: equal representation in all courts, free access for all at the Lord's table, and interpretation into African languages in the courts of the church (*CE*, XXXIII, April 1903:50).

Stewart died in 1905. In 1906, James Henderson, Stewart's successor at Lovedale, expressed a desire to pursue the matter of a Black church, and the Synod of Kafraria agreed in 1907. Rev. G. Robson, Convener of the General Interests Committee of the UFCoS, stated that, in terms of its resolution to unite with the PCSA, it was

recognised that it must be left to the brethren in South Africa [presumably [W]hite missionaries?], who were conversant with the local circumstances, to decide for themselves as to the time and manner of carrying out the resolution (Robson to Lennox, 15 January 1908, Cory MS 10711).

Arising out of a joint consultation between the Synod of Kaffraria and the PCSA, held in 1914, the following events occurred. The Kaffraria Mission Council came into being in 1917 on the union of the Kaffrarian and Transkeian Mission Councils (FMC, 21 March 1916, Min. 3746). An early step forward was taken when it was agreed to “invite certain outstanding natives” to join the mission council (FMC, 16 July 1917, Min. 4397:1). The Natal Mission joined in 1922 (FMC, 16 October 1922, Min. 6166, 21 November 1922, Min. 6194).

This was a discriminatory move on the part of White missionaries. Who would do the selection? However, John Lennox stated the racial positions of the respective ecclesiastical bodies with some clarity:

It was easy to fail here, easy for the individual missionary to forget the temporary character of his mission office and to fail to shape his work in preparation for a day when the mission will be withdrawn and be replaced by the permanent native church; easy for the church through a high sense of its Christian duty and a noble scorn of racial distinctions in the church, when we are one in Jesus Christ, to place [B]lack and [W]hite in a juxtaposition and professed equality of standing in the sight of God, in which the native Christians quite unintentionally but really shall be overshadowed and dwarfed by their European brethren (Lennox to PCSA General Assembly, 20 September 1915, Lennox correspondence, File Synod 1914-1916, UFH; cf. Burchell 1977:53).

At this point, Lennox and Henderson were in a minority among the missionaries. Yet, they realised that, whatever resolution was adopted, it would not accommodate everyone:

You [ie. the PCSA and its missionaries] have stood for the visible unity of all in one church. We have stood for the liberty of the development of the Native Christian community which we believe was not sufficiently secured by your method. Each side had, I believe, been conscious that it lacked something and had not reached finality (Lennox to PCSA General Assembly [PCSA GA], 20 September 1915, Lennox correspondence, File Synod 1914-1916; cf. Burchell 1977:53).

The issue of potential White domination and intimidation of Blacks was still evident, despite General Assembly motions indicating a more inclusive attitude. In 1911, following the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, the PCSA General Assembly passed a resolution which “views with apprehension the serious inequality in the administration of justice as between Europeans and Natives ...” (PCSA GA, 335, WCL Ac1971/Ah1.1:). Yet, in terms of representation at General Assembly, Black participation

was minimal, at least in the first twenty-five years of the PCSA, largely due to the lack of full status of African congregations.

The Presbytery of Mankazana was established in 1915 with the aim of allowing Blacks as an arena for the “mutual discussion of matters peculiar to the Native portion of the Church” (PCSA GA, 1915:31). This, however, only exacerbated the racial divisions. The PCSA still hoped for a union and made attempts in both 1915 and 1916. It instructed its Native Mission Committee to promote another approach regarding union (PCSA General Assembly Minutes 1916, WCL Ac 1971/Ah1.3-1.4:30; PCSA GA 1917:77, WCL). The PCSA General Assembly presumed that because the Synod of Kafraria “offered no constructive criticism” of the basis of union, the planned union was still “impracticable”. In 1919, it was reported to the PCSA General Assembly that “an approximation towards it [union] has been attained” (PCSA GA 1917:180, WCL). This perception was manifestly incorrect. By 1920, nothing had changed substantially, except that, having been a denomination for over twenty years, the PCSA had much more experience of being a church than the Black mission (TB Soga to Lennox, 15 November 1920, File “Commission on Union” HPAL; cf. Burchell 1977:54). The Rev. Donald Fraser raised this same matter with Henderson by letter on 12 June 1922 (Cory, Henderson correspondence):

... the committee is fairly sound on the general principle that the African is not ready to manage his own affairs, and that his executive gifts have got distinct limitations.

If this was so, then how does Fraser know this if the Africans referred to have been given no opportunity to develop these gifts? This is again a racist assumption grounded in the power of the missionary.

By the 1920s, after Protestants had been conducting intensive missions in parts of South Africa for over a century, the fulfilment of the implication of their gospel – that the equality of believers before God entailed equality – was not yet realised (Elphick 2012:81). It is noteworthy that it was only in 1920 that the Scottish church considered the future of Black Presbyterian worthy of its serious concern. A conference called by the UFCoS focused on a way forward for Presbyterianism rooted in the Scottish tradition in South Africa. At a church meeting in Johannesburg on Sunday 19 September 1920, the Free Church of Scotland Deputies’ view was confirmed, namely that the General Assembly of the PCSA

was not a suitable supreme court for the Kafir congregations, nor a useful Assembly for the Kafir ministers, who would be much more at home in a united synod of their own; and for permission to secure

the change the deputies pleaded earnestly and successfully with the Assembly (Ashcroft & Houston 1920:8).

They had noted the “anti-[W]hite racism” among Black ministers and recommended that the solution was greater consultation and independence. This would result in a reduction in the number of missionaries, as greater autonomy was granted to Black ministers (Ashcroft & Houston 1920:Appendix I:8). They recommended what has been described as the “Native church” (FCoS Synod of Kaffraria) option and the “United church” (UPCoS Presbytery of Kaffraria) option (Ashcroft & Houston 1920:9; cf. Duncan 1997:125-132). The FMC of the UFCoS preferred the “United church” option and voted to this effect in 1901 and 1909. Ashcroft and Houston did not agree. They argued that such anticipated benefits had not accrued to the Presbytery of Kaffraria (Ashcroft & Houston 1920:9). While they regarded the situation concerning the Synod of Kaffraria as hardly better, they had the wisdom to recognise, at a meeting of the General Assembly of the PCSA, that

it was not a suitable supreme court for native matters. The differences of language and social condition are too considerable, and they sympathised with the irritation of the native ministers in being there at the consideration of business wholly connected with the colonial church. An authoritative supreme court of their own is needed, aware of the real needs of the Native Church, and in which the Native ministers and elders would have a real voice (Ashcroft & Houston 1920:9).

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, even with the “interests” of Black people at heart, there was a lack of consideration on the part of the elders and ministers of the PCSA for their Black colleagues, racist motives were operative.

Ashcroft and Houston recommended that the two black bodies unite, in order to resolve the issue of duplication and improve organisation and oversight. The Presbytery and Synod of Kaffraria were liberated in the sense of being permitted to discuss union. The matter of their future relationship with the PCSA was subordinated to the prime aim of union. Union was consummated in July 1923 and the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa came into being (BPCSA 1923:6-9). Brock (1974:60) adopted a rather cynical view that this was a not very “inspiring” example of ecclesiastical “separate development”. But this was the first Black independent church to be established through a process of delicate negotiation and

... despite reservations about the ability of [B]lack to handle their own church affairs, the birth of the BPCSA was a triumph of realism in the South African context (Duncan 1997:167).

## 10. CONCLUSION

Various problems plagued all the discussions and movements towards union of Scottish Presbyterian presbyteries, congregations and missions, which ultimately led to the formation of the BPCSA in 1923, but the issue of racism was ubiquitous. It was the unspoken agenda of every meeting and source of many problems. The church was not immune from the problems of society, in which White people possessed an increasing amount of power. Having power led them to perceive no particular issue with “separate development”, even within the church. For them, this was normative. It was the consequent resentment, suspicion, distrust and frustration among Black Christians that led to the Mzimba secession in 1898 and the formation of the independent Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa twenty-five years later in 1923. The period 1910-1948 has been dubbed the “Age of segregation”, leading to a “moderate African nationalism” (Elphick 2012:4). This was already an ecclesiastical issue, as was obvious in the formation of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa (PCSA) as a separate, White-dominated church with an African mission in 1897 and in the Mzimba secession from the Free Church of Scotland Mission in 1898 – one of a number of secessions from mission churches in the past decades of the nineteenth century. Despite all this, by the 1920s, even beyond the confines of the church, “the missionary influence in politics reached its peak” (Elphick 2012:5).

Racism resulted, in this instance, in the Presbyterian body presenting a divided witness to the South African nation, and

if a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand;  
if a household is divided against itself, that house cannot stand  
(Mark 3:24-25).

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## Keywords

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