

CELEBRATING THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNION OF THE UNITING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA (UPCSA)

by Andries Combrink.

In gratefulness and with joy we celebrate in 2019 the 20th anniversary of the union that founded the UPCSA.

The History of the UPCSA.

Several attempts to unite the Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPC) and the Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (PCSA) were pursued during the 20th century. All failed until, at the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994, the RPC initiated a new attempt. This culminated in the formation of *the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA)* on 27 September 1999.

This is the Union that we celebrate during 2019.

The nature of the Church of Christ.

Through the Word and the Spirit of God the Church is called into being and the Holy Spirit sustains it as a people gathered into fellowship in Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ is the King and Head of the Church. The Church's purpose and function is to bear witness to God's saving gospel to the entire world, to build up in faith, hope and love those who believe in the Triune God, to proclaim his sovereignty over all of life, and to work for his will in the world.

Origins of the Presbyterian Church

The Presbyterian family of churches, like all true Christian churches, traces its roots back to the apostolic Church in the New Testament and stands in the tradition of the Church fathers of the first century.

We are also rooted in the work of the 16th century Reformers such as Martin Luther, Huldreich Zwingli, John Calvin and John Knox, who called the Church to return to the gospel, both in its Confession of Faith and form of church government. The *Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa* belongs to the Reformed family of Churches, which stems from the Reformation in Zürich, Geneva and Scotland.

The Reformed Reformation spread across the globe to amongst others Germany, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Scotland, England, Hungary, Scandinavia, the USA and many other parts of the world, including South Africa and the African Continent as a whole.

Reformed and Presbyterian churches in Africa are rooted in *Algeria, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Swaziland, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.*

The following denominations in South Africa are members of the **World Communion of Reformed Churches**:

Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk)

Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika)

Netherdutch Reformed Church in Africa (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika)

Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa

Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ

People's Church of Africa (Volkskerk van Afrika)

Presbyterian Church of Africa

Reformed Church in Africa

United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (VGK) and the

Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA).

The beginnings of Presbyterianism in Southern Africa

Since 1806 Britain occupied the Cape Colony. Some of the occupying troops were Scottish, and W. Reid, a missionary of the London Missionary Society, inspired them to form a 'Calvinist Society'. They met every week for prayer, Bible study and public worship and invited any passing missionaries to preach.

In 1812 George Thom arrived at the Cape. He was a Presbyterian minister on his way to India as a missionary. A meeting with the Calvinist Society led him to stay at the Cape and establish the first Presbyterian Church in 1813. By 1824 a growing number of Presbyterians established a strong congregation.

In 1827-29, with help from the British Government as well as the Dutch Reformed Church, they built a church building in what is now the centre of Cape Town, first called 'The Scottish Kirk' and later 'St Andrew's'. This is 'the Mother Church' of Presbyterianism in Southern Africa.

In 1827 Dr John Adamson arrived from Scotland and served as minister until 1841 and amongst many other initiatives, helped to found the University of Cape Town (UCT) where he served as the only professor for quite a while.

Mission work in the Eastern Cape

In 1821 the Glasgow Missionary Society (GMS) sent its first two missionaries to work in the eastern region of the Cape Colony: John Bennie and William Thomson. Others soon followed. In 1824 they established a mission station named Lovedale after Dr John Love, former secretary of both the GMS and the LMS. In later years, under the leadership of Dr James Stewart, Lovedale became the most famous and influential Presbyterian institution in Southern Africa.

As early as 1823 a Presbytery was formed and churches spread rapidly throughout the whole Eastern Cape region. Within a few years this work developed into three Presbyteries.

Meanwhile the 1820 British Settlers had also arrived in the eastern part of the colony. They erected the first Presbyterian church building actually completed in South Africa, at Glen Lynden in 1828, and continued to spread through the eastern Cape.

In KZN and in the interior

The beginnings of Presbyterianism in Natal (today KZN) go back to missionary work. Organised Presbyterianism began here in 1850, when Presbyterians met in the Congregational Chapel and resolved to form what they called 'The Presbyterian Church of Natal'. William Campbell, a minister of the Free Church in Scotland, accepted a call to become the first minister of this young congregation the next year.

The growth of the Presbyterian Church in other parts of South Africa followed in the wake of the Great Trek that began in 1830, the discovery of diamonds in the Northern Cape in 1870 and the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand / Johannesburg region, in 1886.

In Zimbabwe and Zambia

In 1896 the first Presbyterian congregation in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was formed at Bulawayo, and in 1903 another at Salisbury (now Harare). Others soon followed. Several important educational institutions such as David Livingstone Secondary School, Glog Ranch and Mondoro Secondary School were also started.

The first Presbyterian congregation in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) was established in 1926 at Livingstone and named after this famous Presbyterian as the David Livingstone Memorial Presbyterian Church.

Formation of the PCSA and the BPC

Meanwhile in 1882 St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Cape Town initiated a move to unite all Presbyterians (of all regions and back grounds) in South Africa. This led to the meeting and constitution of the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in South Africa in Durban in 1897. By the end of the next year this had brought together congregations and mission stations scattered all over the Cape (west, east and north), Natal (today KZN) and the regions north of the Vaal River, as well as the congregation in Bulawayo in today's Zimbabwe.

Some missionaries and church leaders feared white domination in a united Church and felt that the Scottish missions should stay out of the union. Tragically the negotiating committee could not maintain unity and as a result the majority of the Presbyterian Church mission stations and African congregations eventually stayed out of that union. The intention nevertheless was that all the groups would one day unite. In 1923 all the mission stations and congregations that had stayed out of the PCSA, united to form the Bantu Presbyterian Church. In 1979 it renamed itself the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (RPC).

Meanwhile in 1958, the PCSA, because its work in the countries north of South Africa, had now expanded and also changed its name, to the Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa.

THE UNITING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA (UPCSA)

With the coming of democracy in South Africa in 1994, the RPC initiated a new attempt to unite the two denominations. This culminated in the unification and therefore the formation of the **Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA)** on 27 September 1999. This is the Union that we are celebrating during 2019.