

350 Years Reformed in South Africa: The contribution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa¹

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Abstract

This paper traces the development in terms of its heritage and legacy of a Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, from its beginnings in the Scottish Mission, to the present. It notes the oppressive role of missionary dominated Mission Councils throughout most of its history as well as the formative events of the formation of the PCSA and the Mzimba Secession. This led to the establishment of an independent, albeit not autonomous church in 1923. The RPCSA had a proud record of participation in the ecumenical movement and in socio-political issues, in particular in education.

1. HERITAGE

The roots of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (RPCSA, which was formed as the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa in 1923 and adopted its new name in 1979) are to be found in Scottish Presbyterianism. Although mission was integral to the life of the Scottish Church (Preface to the Scots Confession of 1560), the ordination of the Rev John Ross in 1823 by the Presbytery of Hamilton, and his setting apart for missionary work, came only on the eve of the Church of Scotland officially recognising the necessity of overseas mission (1824). He joined the work in the Eastern Cape at Lovedale Mission which was established in 1823, to be followed in the early 1830s by the

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foundation of Burnshill, Pirie and Balfour Missions. These were missions of the Free Church of Scotland, the Glasgow Missionary Society having transferred its work to the Free Church in 1845 following the “Disruption”. By the time the Free Church of Scotland and the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland united in 1900, there were twenty-eight congregations of the Scottish mission in South Africa with 14,402 members (Hewat 1960:184). Educational work was fundamental to this mission work. The foremost educational institution was Lovedale, opened in 1841. Other institutions were opened at Mgwali (1857) and Blythswood (1877), while other missions were established in the Transkei, East Griqualand, Natal and the Transvaal.

The history of the Scottish mission was largely influenced by the formation of Mission Councils for “the maintenance, administration or independence of our Mission in South Africa” (Cory MS 14859, *Our Missions in South Africa*). This meant that general policy would be determined solely by whites in the Mission Councils while presbyteries were relegated to the role of exercising discipline predominantly over blacks as if mission was not part of their remit and concern. Had presbyteries been organised differently and given appropriate powers and jurisdiction, there would have been no need for Mission Councils and blacks would have been eligible contributors to the development of mission policy and probably its most able interlocutors. Further, the fact that Mission Councils fell into disuse for a period preceding the end of the nineteenth century demonstrates that they were not vital for the furtherance of the mission of the Church. Hence, it was the missionaries’ perceptions of the context in which they lived and worked which influenced and determined policy formation in Scotland. In theory, Mission Councils were a temporary expedient during the period in which the indigenous church was being established, this being the avowed and alleged aim of the Scottish sending church. However, Mission Councils became self-perpetuating and a source of future resentment and conflict, especially in their control of finance and property.

Two events in the closing years of the nineteenth century paved the way for the formation of an independent black church. The first was the formation of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa in 1897 as a result of the coming

together of a number of independent colonial congregations and presbyteries with the same of the Free Church and United Presbyterian Church in Scotland. The Mission Synod of Kafraria along with the Natal Free Church Mission retained their separate existence. The Free Church of Scotland favoured a single presbyterian church containing all races and constituent parts of the mission. While this view was sincerely held, it displayed a certain naivety with regard to the developing political situation of the time with regard to racism. A separate black church would clearly provide greater scope for blacks to demonstrate and exercise their gifts. D V Sikutshwa attributes the situation which arose: “to the fact that 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 (1946:4)”.

While the Christian ideal is clearly a non-racial church, the fear of domination was a real issue (Brock 1974:55). The Synod of Kafraria agreed to the formation of a black church in 1907, but perhaps this was more the result of the second significant event which happened in 1898.

The Mzimba Secession occurred in the context of growing resistance to colonisation, segregation and oppression in the secular sphere which resulted in black people becoming “involved in a wide range of inventive political responses and innovative forms of action” (Beinart 1984:108). However, resistance also flowed into ecclesiastical life too giving expression to “feelings of resentment which could not be easily expressed otherwise” (Duncan 1997:72). The resultant African Initiated Churches (AICs) were:

an attempt at the establishment of a Black Church ... as a symbol of African religious boldness and novel theological creativity, a step towards the construction of an authentic Black religion for Africa of the twentieth century Churches that have emerged as a protest phenomenon ... [which] have swum on the current of a renaissance or

a radical affirmation of African humanity and black selfhood [which are] a symbolic enactment of liberation.

(Lamola 1988:5-6)

We might want to challenge the positive assessment of “theological creativity” but, that apart, Lamola’s assessment is correct. The Mzimba Secession stands in the tradition of Ethiopianism, which originated in the Eastern Cape in the 1880s. Mzimba was ordained and inducted to a charge in the Presbytery of Kaffraria at Lovedale in 1875. The occasion for the secession was a dispute which arose between him and his presbytery following a visit he had made to Scotland during which he raised funds for a building project. The control of these funds became a serious issue. However, there were more universal issues at stake including distrust and suspicion concerning contemporary events especially following the formation of the PCSA, reluctance to ordain black ministers, imported denominationalism, political unrest coupled with a growing black nationalism, missionary attitudes and racism cf. James Stewart of Lovedale’s clarion call “Whites must rule” (*Christian Express*, xxvii, Nov. 1897, 1:329). In this particular instance “money and property were the precipitating factors in the quarrel between the Free Church mission and Mzimba” (Brock 1974:354) along with the presence of “a strong personality to initiate it and carry it through” (Duncan 1997:88).

The “disruption” caused by the Mzimba Secession had an impact on mission policy to the extent that it highlighted grievances which had existed for some time arising out of previously implemented policy. It also provided a definite catalyst for change in Scottish Presbyterian policy especially through its impact among the younger generation of missionaries including James Henderson and John Lennox, local missionary participants in the “ongoing disruption” and its effects (Duncan 1997: 99).

These two momentous ecclesiastical events provided the context in which the Foreign Mission Committee (FMC) of the now United Free Church of Scotland (The Free Church of Scotland and the United Presbyterian Church of

Scotland united to form the United Free Church of Scotland in 1900) focused its attention on the future of mission policy. The FMC favoured the option of a united church within which black and white would subsist on an equal basis. “[T]his was an unrealistic view as the result of the racist attitude towards blacks, the colonialist ethos of the [PCSA] church, the desire to maintain white power and authority and the early desire to unite with the Dutch Reformed Church” (Duncan 1997:126). However, in 1902, the FMC paper “Our Missions in South Africa” had seemed to favour the option of a native church claiming that: “The Mission begins in order to create a native Church; the mission naturally ends when the native church has become self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating (Cory MS 14849, Henderson Correspondence).

It is possible that by “native” church they might have meant the same as united church though this is unlikely due to the preponderance of white members in the PCSA at that time. In any case this view had the support of the majority of missionaries, in addition to the black ministers, perhaps as the result of their greater experience of the mission situation. In addition the younger generation of missionaries had confidence in the ability of the African to reshape Christianity in an original and meaningful way (Burchell 1977:45). Henderson and Lennox already believed that the Synod of Kafraria was virtually independent. A significant step forward was taken by the union of the Mission Councils of Kafraria and Transkei. An attempt to include blacks in the Mission Councils failed as a result of the view that this matter was best left until the new church was established. In the meantime, the PCSA made various attempts to unite with the different branches of the Scottish Mission. These failed due largely to the degree of opposition which existed on the side of black ministers and elders.

In order to resolve the issue, the United Free Church of Scotland sent a deputation to South Africa in 1920 where they met at Blythwood Institution with representatives of the PCSA, the Mission Synod of Kafraria, the Presbyteries of Kafraria, Mankazana and Natal and the Mission Council of Natal. The relationship with the PCSA was not considered to be the most urgent issue at that point. In their report, they concluded that the Mission Council which they had

hoped would be the unifying bond of their South African missions “proved unequal to the task, torn as it was, by controversies over the question of our union” (Cory PR 3983, Report of Deputies 21/12/1920:8). They aimed “to give increasing responsibility to the Synod with a view to forming, as early as possible, an independent, self-supporting church ... [and] the Mission Council should entrust as much business to it contenting itself with confirming arrangements made by it unless they seen so detrimental as to compel interference”! (Cory PR3983, Appendix 1:5). The views of the majority supported the formation of a black church and a Commission on Union was formed. *Inter alia* it discussed membership of the courts of the church including the role of missionaries, relationships with the PCSA and the membership of the Mission Councils *vis a vis* black representation. It was clearly envisaged the missionaries and the Mission Councils would play a declining role in the new church. This was an adventurous and innovative move for “granting autonomy to a Native Church was something completely new in South African society” (van der Spuy 1971:41), especially in a situation of political and social unease. This solution would provide “[a]n authoritative supreme court of their own ... in which the African ministers would have a real voice” (BPC Souvenir Programme 1971).

The reaction of the Mission Council was predictable (FMC Min 5518, 23/3/1921). The devolution of power to blacks was raised as an issue as was its timing. Matters of self-interest seem to predominate over the disruption caused by the Mzimba Secession as well as the potential for further destabilisation, not to mention the views of blacks themselves.

The convocation of presbyterian missions met at Lovedale on 23rd July 1923 and received the Synod of Kafraria, the Presbytery of Kaffraria, the Presbytery of Mankazana (and belatedly the Mission Council of Natal) into membership of the newly constituted church. The Rt Rev W Stuart, first Moderator of the General Assembly of the BPCSA, summed up the feelings of the Assembly describing the event as: “a forward step in the line of natural development” and a result of “earnest and prayerful deliberation, full and careful consideration of the many interests involved and persons specially concerned

The Church of Christ is for everyone ... irrespective of nationality, colour or tongue" (Bantu Presbyterian Church Blue Book General Assembly minutes: BPC BB1923:39).

In terms of practical development, the church would consist of seven presbyteries and its Assembly business would be conducted by seventeen committees. The role of missionaries was defined as "giving all necessary advice and assistance, but they shall leave the conduct of business as far as practicable to the native members"¹ BPC BB 1923 Min41.2(a). This issue was to remain a source of friction for a number of years.

Following the union, and prefigured in the formation of the PCSA, was the adoption of a federal structure which would enable each body to be represented by six members at the General Assembly of the other. It was hoped that this would facilitate the eventual merger of the two churches. Considerable tension arose and lasted for many years arising out of the work of the denominations in the urban areas. The PCSA was first to establish work there, but circumstances relating to migratory labour led the BPC to become involved in towns and cities too despite an agreement made in 1934 that "the Bantu Presbyterian Church should not develop into the cities but leave all work to the PCSA" (Xapile 1999:82). The major problem encountered by BPC members was the financial implication of being a member of two denominations which placed the PCSA at a considerable advantage as urban BPC workers would eventually return to their rural homes (homelands) at the end of their economically productive lives. Sadly, this decision also resulted in the duplication of resources in urban areas while the their rural counterparts were deprived of much needed resources in terms of finance and personnel. In addition, retaliatory measures were often taken in rural areas. Friction resulted, leading to "a situation where the PCSA and BPC were working in irritating rivalry to the detriment of both" (van der Spuy 1971:55) and this became an impediment in successive attempts at union until the matter was finally resolved in the early 1990s despite a BPC Assembly decision taken in 1955 that "both churches were free to extend their work where and as they found opportunity to do so" (BPC BB 1955 Min 2840).

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Within a few years of the formation of the BPC, problems erupted concerning Mission Councils and particularly the control of property. In 1926, two senior ministers, H Mama and TB Soga petitioned the General Assembly:

In view of the fact that the newly formed Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa has no direct control over the Property held in trust for them, the Assembly desires humbly to petition the Foreign Mission Committee of the United Free Church to associate Trustees of the Bantu Presbyterian Church with the Representatives of the Home Church trustees for the South African property, so, as to prepare ways and means on the question of the transference of property.

(BPC BB 1926 Min 260)

Further clashes occurred between presbyteries and the Mission Council ostensibly concerning matters of power and control (BPC BB 1928 Min 535). This led to an investigation of the issues involved and a report was sent to the FMC in Scotland (no details are available concerning the issues delineated). The FMC responded (BPC BB 1929 Appendix FMC Minute on Relations to the Bantu Church) and while they rejoiced “in the growth and stability of the Bantu Church [They] “recognise the competent way in which business is conducted ... and sympathise with the desire of the Native ministers and elders to see their Church develop”. They further recognised that a stage has been reached where relations between the Mission Council and Church “must be carefully considered” and believe that “the very tender and Christian relations which exist between the two bodies will make adjustments easier than they can be through mere legal definitions”. Yet they “cannot overlook the fact that the Native ministry is not yet adequate to undertake full responsibility for the whole work formerly administered and now in process of development by the Mission Council” and agree that “the Assembly has autonomous powers in the organisation and government of the Church and in all spiritual matters”.

It was noted that European missionaries in Stations associated with Native congregations would be under the care and discipline of their Presbytery and that

when missionaries went on leave Mission Council would make recommendations to Presbytery concerning who would act as Moderator of Session. Any further changes would await the occurrence of vacancies. The issue of communication with the home church was particularly delicate and a source of irritation. The FMC did little to allay the concerns of the BPC:

The (FM) Committee will be glad to receive communications from the Bantu Church direct, but suggest that all matters which affect the relations of the Bantu Church to the Council, should be dealt with first by the Special Committee to consider matters of mutual interest [If this happens] the (FM) Committee will necessarily require to pass such back to the Council ... for their opinion before the Foreign Mission Committee's answer to the Assembly can be given.

After animated discussion in the General Assembly of 1930, a Memorandum (BPC BB 1930 Appendix, Response of the General Assembly of the BPC) prepared by Rev TB Soga on this matter was adopted. It was clear that the Scottish church was not prepared to leave the resolution of problems to the BPC as unresolved matters prior to union "are calculated to radically destroy the principle and object of the Native Church in South Africa". The Memorandum further stated:

The (FMC) Minute ... has been formulated from a friendly spirit; though it leaves the Native minister nowhere in the end; as it makes him a non-official church leader. What he decides in his Assembly must have to be transmitted to an intermediary committee of Assembly and Mission Council; yet at that Committee the member of the Mission Council has double capacity; as a full member of both the Mission Council and Bantu Assembly; while the Native man goes to that committee with limited powers.

Hence the Mission Council's executive powers constitute "an indirect way of nullifying the very autonomy of the Bantu Church. What the UF Church gives with one hand, it indirectly takes away with another". This had serious implications especially with regard to the control of land and property:

conditionally granted, subject ... to the approval of the Mission Council Conflict and distrust spring from people who have become members in full to more than one church. This is the fountain head of all existing misunderstanding, which must be removed or the whole religious atmosphere will remain unhealthy How can it be lawful and just for one Church to indirectly legislate for another?

Again, in the following year the FMC stressed again the need for the BPC General Assembly to appoint a committee to oversee matters in which both the General Assembly and Mission Council were “intertwined” (BPC BB 1931 Appendix, FMC Response). Such a Committee on Relations between the Assembly, the Foreign Mission Committee and the Mission Council was established (BPC BB 1931 Min 817) though it is difficult to understand the desire for another layer of committees unless it is to delay discussion and the resolution of the real issues. Using money as a means of keeping control of property the FMC declared “the trusteeship of the Church of Scotland has involved it in heavy expenditure If the South African trustees were in a position to take over the trust, these burdens would fall on them”.

With regard to the place of missionaries “the Foreign Mission Committee have rejoiced in this striking example of brotherhood and co-operation between men (sic) of different races in the work of the Church of Christ, and they would regard it as a misfortune if, for racial reasons, it were brought to an end”. But the issue remains what were they prepared to sacrifice for this? The expressed desire for black s to be represented on the Mission Council drew the response:

the existing constitution of their Mission Councils does not at present allow for admission to membership of representatives officially appointed by courts of other churches. Under the existing constitution of the Mission Councils it is always possible to arrange for one or more of the pastors or teachers or other workers deemed specially suitable being recommended by the Mission Council to the FMC and the Committee thinks this to be a simpler and more satisfactory way of securing the end in view.

(BPC BB 1933 Appendix, FMC Response)

This completely misses the point of the request and kept the power of choice in the hands of missionaries. Yet this is what happened when, in 1936 Revs H Mama and S W Njikelana were the first black members who were appointed to the Mission Council. However, problems were not at an end by any means.

The struggle continued though there seemed to be a clear desire for improved relations though on whose terms was still unclear: "The Mission Council prays for a renewed spirit of consecration and mutual confidence in each other on the part of the Mission Council and the Bantu Presbyterian Church with a view to friendly and effective co-operation." (BPC BB 1937 Min 1286 Deliverance of the Mission Council of SA). Was this perhaps the beginning of a solution and did it indicate a renewed *modus operandi* in the face of a forthcoming FMC Commission to South Africa? The BPC made a clear submission (BPC BB 1937 Appendix, Bantu Presbyterian Church Address to the FMC Commission) to the Commission on a number of points revealing that there were still unresolved issues. With regard to staffing from Scotland, the BPC affirmed "we feel we must learn to *face our difficulties and be able to overcome them* We would ask to retain one Scottish missionary doing district work at each Presbytery for the next ten or fifteen years, and after that time the matter shall be examined in the light of the circumstances of that time". This was a somewhat new policy proposal. Concerning property the church averred: "The presence of a Mission Council, a separate body working in the Bantu Church, and a Bantu Church Assembly an independent body governing the Bantu Church, shall never harmonise. The two must be one and govern one church. We know it will be difficult to do away with the old regime; but we believe that we must work and plan for the new". Other matters raised related to the need for financial support for projects, including the Pension Fund, Theological Education and Church offices.

A constant irritant to the black members of the church was the fact that missionaries were not actually members of the BPCSA. This was challenged in the General Assembly of 1958 with a deliverance "That the Assembly wishes Scottish missionaries working in the church to become full members of the Bantu

Presbyterian Church, and invites them to do so (BPC BB 1958 Min 3136.1). To think that for so long missionaries who were not even full members of the church should assume to exercise such power over it! Fortunately, five missionaries had the sensitivity to rectify the anomaly by transferring their membership from the Church of Scotland Presbytery of South Africa (BPC BB 1958 Min 3342) although the anomaly remained in those missionaries who, on retirement moved their membership to the PCSA.

A further development occurred in 1962 with the formation of the Church of Scotland South Africa Joint Council to succeed the earlier Mission Councils (BPC BB 1962 min 3513). Now the Bantu Presbyterian Church would have equal representation with missionaries and later Scottish Church appointees, who were ministers of the BPC, when the number of missionaries declined. However, the problems did not disappear in the course of time but continued to afflict the new developing denomination. As much as the missionaries contributed to the life and work and witness of the church, they also hindered the development of black persons within it by dint of their own strong personalities and the continued feelings of inferiority on the part of black members who allowed themselves to be dominated and were encouraged to think they actually participated in power sharing. Matters relating to finance and property were still settled in Scotland and communication with the church there still took place through the Joint Council. It was only in 1981 that the Joint Council was eventually dissolved, there being only two missionaries serving with the now RPCSA (and only one being a member of the Council, albeit in the role of Secretary/Treasurer). Sadly, it was only at this stage, fifty-eight years after its inception, that the RPC became fully autonomous.

Various assessments have been made of the Bantu/Reformed Presbyterian Church over the years and not all of them positive (cf Van der Spuy 1971:72; Brock 1974: 60). Perhaps R H W Shepherd was not too far from the truth in his assessment:

The greatness of a Church does not consist in its perfection of organisation ... its financial resources. It is the spiritual life it is producing in its members I think we can say that these things have been produced But there have been failures – confusion in organisation, the desire for power, dispute and cases of discipline.

(BPC BB 1949 Moderatorial Address, Non Separatist church: The History and Present Position of the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa).

A year later, he focussed on the future needs of the church and these are still relevant today: high standards of theological education, definite place for the vernacular Bible, effective used of the laity, concern for youth and evangelism in a troubled world. (BPC BB 1950 Moderatorial Address, Future of the Bantu Presbyterian Church).

All in all it might be concluded that the BPCSA expressed strong resistance to domination following its far from autonomous foundation. This facilitated the emergence of its identity which, in all probability, would have been totally emasculated within a united church at that time.

2. LEGACY

Surprisingly enough, it is its contribution and commitment to ecumenism that is one of the main legacies of the RPCSA to the Church. Throughout its history, it demonstrated this in its mission work. Its educational institutions like Lovedale were open to those of all denominations as were the majority of its staff positions. The same was true of its medical, agricultural and industrial work. This was also clear from the Scottish Mission's involvement in the General Missionary Conferences in the early decades of the twentieth century. But it was specifically as a church that its commitment was clear.

In world ecumenism, it was a member of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). It has maintained close relations with the Church of Scotland and a number of its ministers have studied in Scotland. It has also related to the Presbyterian

Church of the USA, the Mennonites in the USA and the Presbyterian Church in Australia. Within the African context, it was involved in the All Africa Council of Churches and made many informal relations with African churches through such contacts, particularly with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP).

It was closely involved in the South African ecumenical movement, being an active member of the Christian Council of South Africa, the South African Council of Churches (SACC), the Church Unity Commission (CUC) as well as in the regional branches of the SACC. Perhaps it was at its most effective at the local level, especially during the apartheid era. In 1960, the BPCSA was represented at the historic Cottesloe Consultation organised under the auspices of the WCC (BPC BB 1960 Min 3315). It became a member of the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa (ABRECSA), its first official contact with the Reformed tradition in South Africa. In the face of the challenge to the very existence of the Church during these years, it was perhaps easier for a common commitment to develop as a result of the mutually experienced threat than in less troubled and threatening times.

At various periods during the twentieth century, the RPCSA engaged in union negotiations with all its sister Presbyterian churches. During the worst years in the struggle against apartheid, in the 1980s, it had adopted the policy of uniting with its black sister churches as a priority. Despite negotiations having been completed with the PCSA and the Tsonga Presbyterian Church (TPC) union did not take place though it was agreed that “the Basis of Union negotiations between the Presbyterian Churches be kept as an open possibility before the three churches [and] that the three churches be urged to maintain and extend existing areas at local, Presbytery and Assembly level” (BPC BB 1973 Min 4572.1&2). Later union negotiations took place between it and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (EPCSA) in the early 1980s. Unfortunately these discussions failed when union was in sight, having been agreed by the RPC, and the EPCSA withdrew. Sporadic attempts, beginning in 1959 (BPC BB 1959 Min 3271 agreed to consider a basis of union with the PCA in the 1960 General Assembly, although there had been earlier attempts at union

negotiations) and again in 1974 (BPC BB 1974 Min 4670), were made to unite with the Presbyterian Church of Africa (PCA), to the extent of agreeing to prepare a draft basis of union in 1990, were hampered by the growing disunity within that denomination. The RPCSA also entered union negotiations with the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) though these came to nothing as negotiations between UCCSA and the PCSA failed.

It was at the third attempt that its negotiations with the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (PCSA) bore fruit in 1999. Earlier union negotiations had always faltered on the grounds of racism and the fear of domination on the part of the BPCSA. However, following the democratic elections of 1994, the RPCSA made a renewed approach to the PCSA feeling that this was the right time to approach a sister denomination now as an equal partner despite long held fears concerning loss of independence and white domination.

Perhaps the RPCSAs greatest ecumenical contribution was made by its deep involvement in the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa (FedSem). Formed in 1963, it committed the totality of its resources to the FedSem along with the other black member churches (the EPCSA and the PCA). All of the other churches involved diversified their theological education programmes (the MCSA, CPSA, PCSA UCCSA) predominantly on racial grounds. A novel ecumenical opportunity presented itself in 1987 when negotiations began with the Lutherans and Roman Catholics (and later the Evangelical Bible Seminary of South Africa) which resulted in the formation of the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Institutions. The RPC's commitment to ecumenism was provided with a strong challenge when the constituent mainline churches withdrew their support for FedSem and closed it in 1993. Yet, the church remained open to the opportunities of ecumenical theological education in its return to Fort Hare in 1994 and continues to do so with its recent decision to train ministers at the universities of Stellenbosch and Pretoria which offers new possibilities of relating with our colleagues in the Dutch Reformed family of churches as well as with our former FedSem partners. The priority of theological education in an ecumenical context is further evidenced in the RPCSA's

involvement in the National Committee on Theological Education (NCTE), the Association of Southern African Theological Institutions (ASATI) and the South African Council on Theological Education (SACTE).

Following on the missionary era, the RPCSA maintained its strong interest in the main areas of missionary endeavour – education, health, agriculture and industrial education. Through its commitment to Lovedale Press in particular, the RPCSA made a substantial contribution to education and the development of vernacular languages, particularly *isiXhosa* with its promotion of black writers.

The place and role of women in the denomination had long exercised the minds of successive General Assemblies and lower courts, and continues to do so despite women being able to be ordained to the offices of Elder and ordained minister since 1977. Gender issues came to the fore with the decision to increase the profile of women in the church (BPC BB 1997 Min.6678).

The RPCSA had a proud record of resistance to injustice in the South African context, not only as a denomination but also, as the result of individual and congregational commitment. The deliverances of General Assembly are often a poor guide to the actual process of resistance, yet they bear intellectual witness to the struggle against manifest evils in society. The words of Rev GT Vika, spoken in 1974, may express more of the actual truth for that time: “Apart from a few Christian protesters in isolated cases the Church has done nothing to improve the position of our unjust society” (BPC BB 1974:49-53. Moderatorial Address “Whither Bantu Presbyterian Church?”). This was written in the context of “current events which pose a challenge to the Church in this country, and call for it to declare its stand in the face of what seems to be a church-state confrontation”. Hence the policy of terminating the practice of sending “loyal addresses” to the State President, regularly followed since 1923, due to them being remitted to the Department of Bantu Administration.

Notwithstanding the above, successive General Assemblies at the very least took note of and objected to matters which were of national and international interest and concern, including the Group Areas Act, influx control, unrest in universities, conscientious objection, banning and the role of ministers

as marriage officers, unrest in Natal, capital punishment (BPC BB 1947 Min 2050; 1958 Min 3146; 1963 Min 3564.5; 1972 Min 4495; 1974 Min 4738; 1977 Min 5135; 1978 Min 5191; 1989 Min 6195) as well as its strong response to the Bantu Education Act which seriously affected its educational work. Cumulatively, these were part of the General Assembly's repeated "stand against apartheid as a heresy and the source of violence, hatred and oppression in our country" (BPC BB 1984 Min 5886.3). Perhaps the closest the denomination came to actual physical participation in the struggle was in the formation of the Standing For the Truth Committee with its remit "to discuss the witness of the RPC against apartheid and formulate proposals to promote this" (BPC BB 1989, Min 6198) with the further concern that since "at most of our Assemblies resolutions on the socio-political problems are passed without sufficient knowledge and information hence the reluctance to implement those decisions on a grassroots level" it was agreed that the Social Responsibility Committee should report on the state of the nation annually at General Assembly" (BPC BB 1990 Min 6262.1).

3. CONCLUSION

Despite being a small denomination within the presbyterian family of churches, the RPCSA has borne a witness which is out of proportion to its size which, as far as its records reveal, has never reached 50,000 members. It is a record of which its successor, the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, can be justly proud.

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