

The SACC since 1994: Ecumenism in Democratic South Africa

Jonathan Michael Womack

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2930-2128>

University of Pretoria

Church History and Polity

jonnymwomack@gmail.com

Jerry Pillay

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5188-3550>

University of Pretoria

Church History and Polity

jerr.pillay@up.ac.za

Abstract

Prior to 1994, the South African Council of Churches (SACC) was a major role-player both globally and within South Africa, fulfilling a vital role in the struggle for justice in South Africa. Yet, since 1994 the SACC has all but disappeared from both the global as well as the popular South African ecumenical scene. The history of the SACC since 1994 is relatively unknown and sparsely documented. This article attempts to fill in some of that missing detail and to explore what has happened to the SACC since 1994. Working predominantly from news articles and documents from the SACC, the authors have endeavoured to piece together the state of the SACC since 1994. This article shows how the SACC emerged from the brink of closure and has once more started to function as a prophetic voice in South Africa. This movement from almost extinction to a rejuvenated function has been designated into three stages, namely survival, discernment and regeneration. However, the challenges are not over and this article concludes by highlighting two main challenges that the SACC is currently facing.

Keywords: ecumenism; ecumenical; South Africa; SACC; reconciliation; prophetic; contemporary history; original research; CORAT; holistic; Faith and Order

Introduction

Prior to 1994, the South African Council of Churches (SACC) was a major role-player, both globally and within South Africa. As an ecumenical council it played a major role in uniting denominations to stand against the injustices of apartheid. This history is well documented. Yet, since 1994 the SACC has all but disappeared from both the global as well as the popular South African ecumenical scene. The history of the SACC since

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1994 is relatively unknown and sparsely documented. From a wider perspective, ecumenism in general has also fallen on hard times (see Asprey 2008, 3). Ecumenism would currently seem to be in a bad way inside South Africa (Maluleke 2005, 117–119; Pillay 2015, 635); as “being in a time of crisis,” and generally needing to rethink its strategy (Conradie 2015, 524; see Pillay 2015, 647). So in this ecumenical winter, we need to consider the question: What has become of the SACC?

It is the aim of this article to provide a historical overview of the SACC since 1994.¹ Further to this aim, it intends to look at how the SACC has adjusted to the changes brought about by post-apartheid South Africa and how it is functioning in a “free” society. This analysis will be divided into four chronological sections. The first, 1994–2006, will look at the SACC in what this research calls its *survival* mode. Then, from 2007–2012, the SACC is deemed to be in a state of *discernment*, critically assessing how to recover a lost prophetic voice. The period 2012–2016 shows a renewal of this prophetic voice, and is termed the *regeneration* phase. The final section will conclude by drawing out some concerns about the SACC’s current state. While the historical overview will show that the SACC has come a long way, bringing itself back from the brink of extinction, it is not safe yet and still has much work to do and many challenges to face.

What is Ecumenism?

Before providing the history of the SACC since 1994, a working definition of ecumenism needs to be provided. The SACC was intended to be an ecumenical council, so, in order to judge its success, an understanding of ecumenism within the South African context is essential.

The root definition of ecumenism is somewhat evasive. Coming from the Greek word *oikoumenē*,² meaning “the inhabited world” (Conradie 2012, 18; Macqueen 2013, 449), the term has taken on new definitions from its historical use. This historical baggage has led to ecumenism being understood as relating to unity in relation to theological

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- 1 For an overview of the SACC from its formation in 1986 to 1993, see Spong and Mayson (1993). For more on the roots of ecumenism in South Africa and its development in relation to the CCSA/SACC up until 1960, see Strassberger (1971).
 - 2 This phrase in Greek developed from *oikein*, meaning to inhabit, and it relates to *oikia* (house) and *oikos* (household). In English, *economy* and *ecology* also share this root (Clements 2014, 597). *Economy* originally related to the ordering of the household and was not directly related to money; economics itself literally means “the law or the management of the household” (see Meeks 1989, 3). *Ecology* is understood to be the study of the interconnected relationship between organisms, their environment and each other (Lawrence 2011, 193). Originally a secular term, through the popularisation of the faith, *oikoumenē* came to be related to the spreading of the gospel. As Christianity became normalised, the term developed more to deal with a united witness throughout the Christian empire (Conradie 2012, 19–21). Through the modern awakening of the ecumenical movement, the term also developed strong link to *social justice*.

(dogma), practical (churches working together for socio-political justice) and missional (the spread of the gospel) aspects.

Within the rise of the modern ecumenical movement, Faith and Order, Life and Work and the International Mission Council can be identified as relating to these three key aspects.³ More broadly, though, ecumenism is understood as being based on God's love for the whole world and a desire to unite all with him (see Gregorious 2006, 3–7). This, then, presents a definition of ecumenism as a dynamic term that should involve multiple aspects and be primarily rooted in the love of the Triune God. These aspects all converge on God's uniting love, but each with a different focus; to have only one focus is not enough.

Yet, while ecumenism should involve all three of the above aspects, often activities are classed as ecumenical even when only one of the aspects is present. While not necessarily incorrect, ecumenism should always strive to be a holistic endeavour and not be satisfied with only a singular function.

Within South Africa, ecumenism has been incorporated into a formalised movement since 1904 (see Strassberger 1971, 198). Within this context, discussions on theological unity have been avoided.⁴ Here, predominantly due to the socio-political landscape, ecumenism has come to relate more to the spread of the gospel and social justice. This focus on social justice becomes particularly clear after the reconstitution of the Christian Council of South Africa (CCSA) into the South African Council of Churches (SACC) in 1968.

3 After the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, considered to mark the start of the modern ecumenical movement, two key approaches to ecumenism developed. The Life and Works movement focused on unity on the practical front, holding that social, political and industrial issues should be the site of unity for Christian witness (Tanner 2005, 557). In its first years this movement worked under the slogan “doctrines divided, services united” (Asprey 2008, 8). Yet it was realised that this was not a sufficient approach to ecumenism. As such, the Faith and Order movement came into being. Faith and Order focused on bridging the divide between denominations in areas that had once been the cause of division (Tanner 2005, 557). It held a doctrinal focus and sought to establish unity on a theological front. One of the key works to come out of this side of ecumenism, and a work which has provided a solid foundation for ecumenism in general, is *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry*, which is an extensive document highlighting areas of theological connection and unity between various documents (see Radano 2010, 33; Tanner 2005, 560; Wright 1988, 219). Another key aspect of the modern ecumenical movement is the International Mission Council. Coming from a missionary background, this council formed out of the effort to incorporate an ecumenical focus to bring various mission organisations together. Instead of competing, these organisations began to work together to spread the gospel. In 1961, all three of these movements were formally brought into the WCC (see Tanner 2005, 557).

4 When the General Mission Council formed into the Christian Council of South Africa (CCSA), a clause was introduced into Council's constitution, which specifically forbids examination of “ecclesiastical faith and order which represents denominational differences” (see Strassberger 1971, 238; cf. Spong and Mayson 1993, 15).

The publication of “a message to the people of South Africa,”⁵ the SPROCAS projects⁶ and the decision to back the Programme to Combat Racism⁷ are all key examples of the SACC’s practically-based ecumenism. As a result of these events, the SACC came to be seen as a voice for the poor and the marginalised in society. Its role as an ecumenical body was to establish unity and justice for all citizens of South Africa—and that meant providing a voice to the voiceless. The commitment to this stance of ecumenism and its effectiveness is personified through the actions and treatment of the SACC in the 1980s.⁸ Therefore, by the advent of democracy, the SACC was a well-known and strongly established factor in South African society.

From this brief sketch a picture emerges of an ecumenical council with a deep concern for social justice and a strong public and political profile. Yet, as this article is identifying ecumenism as a holistic endeavour, it should be highlighted that the SACC was only practising ecumenism in relation to socio-political action. Hence its effectiveness should be seen in its conquest over the evils of apartheid and the fact that the SACC functioned as a strong and viable council. It, however, was not practising holistic ecumenism; and it was this that needed to be addressed post-1994.

Survival (1994–2006)

Since 1994, a very different picture of the SACC began to develop. With the transition to democracy the SACC anticipated a change in its own function. Meeting in 1995, and resulting in the publication of *Being the Church in South Africa* (1995), the SACC envisioned its new role in a democratic society and pondered some of the challenges it would have to face. De Gruchy (1995, 13–14) highlighted the need for matters of Faith

5 Published in 1968, *The Message* launched the SACC into new headlines as it theologically opposed apartheid and upheld that theological unity should result in social unity (see De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2005, 115–118).

6 The project ran for four years and was operating in two phases. The first stage “(Spro-cas 1) in 1969, which ran for two years under director and liberal educationist, Peter Randall, to gather (primarily white) academic and leading public opinion on political and economic alternatives to apartheid. The second stage, the Special Project for Christian Action in Society (Spro-cas 2) ran for two years from 1971, and sought to implement the Spro-cas report findings” (Macqueen 2013, 453). It addressed six main areas through six commissions, namely: “Education beyond Apartheid; Towards Social Change, Power, Privilege and Poverty; Apartheid and the Church; Law, Justice and Society; and South Africa’s Political alternatives” (Spong and Mayson 1993, 111).

7 The PRC was a programme set up by the World Council of Churches which controversially provided financial support to liberation movements (see Sjollema 1993, 826). In 1978 the SACC, under threat from the government, came to unanimously support the programme (Gous 1993, 256–257; Thomas 2002, 212–213).

8 The bombing of Khotso House in 1988 and the attempt to assassinate F. Chikane in 1987 are two clear examples of the desperate means used by the National Party to try and silence this formidable organisation. Also in this time, the SACC began to play a vital role as mediator between various political parties (Göranzon 2011, 157) and in preparing the country for the transition to democracy (Maluleke 1997, 67).

and Order⁹ to be discussed. Raiser (1995, 32–33) highlighted the need to address the effects of the apartheid “virus,” and Chipenda (1995, 35) stressed the change from a singular problem to a plurality of social evils and the need to engage with these. In short, the need for holistic ecumenism was presented. However, in the following years, as a result of the loss of key leaders to political offices and the loss of external funding, the SACC found itself on hard times, lacking a clear vision for the future, let alone exercising a strong and prophetic voice. Also in this time, churches had begun to pursue their own agendas and the commitment towards ecumenism strongly faded (De Gruchy 1995, 12).

One of the earliest and clearest examples of this survivor state is gained through the SACC’s presentation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) at the specially convened Faith Communities hearing on 17 November 1997. The hearing itself ran from 17–19 November and gave all faith communities an important chance to voice their story from the struggle, as well as to present what they could bring to the process of reconciliation in a democratic South Africa (Meiring 2005, 146). The presentation by Miss S Bam, the then General Secretary of the SACC, formed the opening presentation at the hearing. Looking back on the SACC’s role, the presentation highlighted the consequence of its strong prophetic approach; for example, being subjected to security raids and the detainment, torture and death of its personnel (TRC 1999, 75). However, when asked about their current situation, it was admitted that the SACC had been “caught totally unprepared” for the speedy transition to democracy (TRC 1997, 6). On one side the SACC was struggling to adapt its relation with the government (now compiled of so many of its former members), and on the other, it was finding many church members no longer actively participating (TRC 1997, 7). Without the evil of apartheid there was neither clear opposition to speak out against, nor a clear imperative for ecumenism.¹⁰ The practice-based, even project-based ecumenism that the SACC was so accustomed to, suddenly found its *raison d’être* (reason for being) gone and the SACC was in a crisis of identity. With the lack of discussion on Faith and Order matters within South Africa, the SACC suddenly found it had no theological underpinning to fall back on to motivate commitments to ecumenism in such a rapid change of context. While the SACC did offer theological motivations for its actions during apartheid, the lack of discussion on Faith and Order meant this theological underpinning was contextually based, and so when the context changed, the foundation for ecumenism in South Africa disappeared. Also, without the enemy of apartheid, the funding for the SACC had dried up and it was openly admitted that “the SACC is in crisis” in relation to its financial affairs (TRC 1997, 8). Due to a lack of funding, projects were being sponsored and driven by government bodies of local churches (TRC 1997,

9 Talks on Faith and Order, central to the modern movement, had still not been established in South Africa.

10 While practical imperatives for ecumenism persisted, the SACC had become so focused around apartheid (and a political aim) that it did not engage with or act on these imperatives. This further suggests that, had a theological basis existed, not only would this have led to a greater depth of unity, but the new practical imperatives may have been identified.

9). Here we can see the SACC putting its prophetic vocation into the hands of the local church and, more worryingly, the government. At this stage, the SACC seemed to lack vision and leadership and when it was asked how it would address the morality of the state, it was admitted that no answer or clear plan could be provided (TRC 1997, 10). This perspective shows the SACC struggling with its identity, losing its prophetic voice and becoming allied with the government; even its historically strong engagement in social action was wavering.

Following the TRC, it was hoped that the local churches and the SACC would take over the process of reconciliation. However, in the SACC's correspondences reconciliation is always coupled with the TRC showing a reluctance, or naiveté, over the need to advance reconciliation (cf. Göranzon 2011, 491). In the view of Göranzon, after 1994 the SACC began to practise a "church theology" (as defined by the *Kairos Document* 1988).¹¹ In other words, the SACC began to lose its prophetic voice and while not outright supporting the ANC, it did little to oppose it or to change any current ills within society.¹² When one studies the Central Committee (CC) Communiqué from 2006, this lack of a prophetic voice is clear to see, with the document even calling for a deepening of its partnership with government and other social institutions (SACC, 2006). While this partnership was aimed to better the general state of South Africa, one has to question if "partnership" is the correct methodology; a partnership working when only both members are satisfied, is not exactly prone to prophetic intent.

To sum up the analysis so far, it has been seen how during apartheid, the SACC was a strong and vital ecumenical organisation providing a voice for the voiceless, yet post-1994 the SACC entered a survival stage, losing its prophetic voice.¹³ While aware of the challenges it faced in the transition to democracy, it struggled to cope with the pace of change and to adapt adequately. As such, the SACC soon found itself without a clear foundation and struggling to carry on its usual function. In order to attain short term survival, it formed tighter links with the ruling government.¹⁴ Yet, this led to a loss of its prophetic voice, which would prove detrimental in the long term. While it did not

11 The term "Church Theology" is taken from the *Kairos Document* and refers to the neutral theology predominantly practised by the "English-speaking churches," who did not support apartheid, but also did little to oppose it (*Kairos Document* 1988, 16–24).

12 From my own reading of Göranzon, I find good reason to even go as far as to suggest that the SACC practised state theology during this time. Both its nicknaming as the "ANC at prayer" (CORAT Africa 2009, 40) and its practise of critical solidarity (deemed as a form of state theology) (see Vellem 2013, 177), give good reason to suggest the presence of a state theology

13 Göranzon's thesis (2011, 473–493), which is dedicated to discerning the SACC's search for a new prophetic voice, concludes that in 2004 the SACC was struggling to find a new focus and its prophetic voice was still missing.

14 A new line of investigation could be to ask if this link was necessary, or if the SACC could have potentially survived on its own, avoiding jeopardising its ministry. However, this article aims to give a historical overview, not a hypotheticalal analysis, and as such has presented what happened, not what perhaps should have happened.

cease to function in this time,¹⁵ the public profile of the SACC and its role in providing a voice for the voiceless was seriously jeopardised. Missing entirely from this period, though, is a clear discussion on the nature of ecumenism and how to address its apparent lack within South Africa.

Discernment (2007–2012)

The SACC then entered into what this article has referred to as “the discernment phase.” During this phase, the state of affairs for the SACC did not immediately change. Rather, change was happening slowly behind the scenes with the SACC’s realisation of its lost voice and a desire to regain its once vital role in society. As such, this period is characterised by meetings and discussions over the state of the SACC. It was low-key, but it entailed a slow and essential discerning of what needed to be done and what direction to take. The clearest marker for the beginning of this period comes from the 2007 National Conference, which saw the launch of the SACC’s new constitution as well as the adoption of a resolution to assess the last 40 years of the SACC’s life (see CORAT Africa 2009, 13). This assessment would turn into the Christian Organisation Research and Advisory Trust of Africa’s (hereafter CORAT) report, which would be a catalyst in the life of the SACC.

Originally published in 2008, the CORAT report is an extensive analysis of the SACC, stretching over 76 pages. It focuses on the institutional function of the SACC, not the theological or ecumenical aspects, yet it still offers invaluable insight into the nature of the SACC. When published, it provided the wake-up call the SACC so desperately needed. CORAT highlighted how, after 1994, the SACC had been lacking “vision,” “theological rationale,” a “pastoral plan” to deal with the new South Africa, “strategy for development” and “credibility among communities” (CORAT Africa 2009, 21). The report also highlighted a feeling of isolation among the member churches (27); a gap between the mission statement and programmes of the SACC (57–58); an overlap with the aims of the state (39–40); and a strong lack of theological focus or reflection (see CORAT Africa 2009, 12, 20–23, 26, 33, 37, 44, 58, 61 among others). In short, the report confirmed the *survivor* status of the SACC and showed it to be a theologically weak society that is overly dependent on the government.

Reaction and comments on CORAT dominated the CC meetings for 2008 and 2009. Opening the CC meeting in 2008, Maluleke declared that “it is time for us to reinvent the SACC” (SACC 2008, 3). This opening portrayed the positive focus of the SACC, as it carried on to discuss the need for deep theological discussions on the state of ecumenism; how to reduce its dependency on the state; how to develop a TRC-inspired process in broken communities; the need to re-engage the youth in ecumenism; and the need to address the injustices and brokenness of society (see SACC 2008, 3–17). The

15 In 2005 and 2006 respectively, the SACC sent food to Zimbabwe (see Mail and Guardian 2005) and called for a concerted effort to tackle HIV/AIDs (see Mail and Guardian 2006), showing that a practical ministry within the SACC still existed.

following year a less positive tone was prominent at the CC meeting. In his opening address, Maluleke declared that ecumenism was in a crisis, lacking genuine engagement and stuck in an institutionalised norm (SACC 2009, 4). The majority of the meeting was then structured around the CORAT report and developing discussions on how to address its key findings. Topics raised include how to realign with the poor (14–15); the financial status of the Council (17–20); and the need for discussions on Faith and Order matters (SACC 2009, 19). This meeting ended by establishing a task team, assigned to put words into action. Both the 2008 and 2009 CC meetings showed recognition of the failings of the SACC and an attempt to discern how to overcome these challenges. This had resulted in a discussion focused around the objectives and practices of the SACC. While often raised, Faith and Order matters were a minor focus, as the SACC focused on more tangible aspects, such as projects and finances related to the historic function of the SACC.

Another key event during 2009 was the replacement of the SACC's government advisory role with the National Interfaith Leaders Council (NILC). When coupled with the SACC's internal affairs and reactions to the CORAT report, this event can be seen as a large catalyst in forcing the external function of the SACC. Those in favour of the NILC argued that the SACC was excluded due to its loss of influence and, as it was no longer sufficiently active on moral issues, a new partner had to be sought (Mataboge 2009). However, there is a strong correlation between the SACC's ousting and their criticism of the government.¹⁶ This move to sideline the SACC provided it with the freedom to more fully develop a critical/prophetic role and forced them out of the comfort zone they had come to establish. Throughout this period, the SACC started to become more critical of social ills and more aware (self-critical) of its role in society. However, it would still take a few years for the findings of the CORAT report to be worked out. A strategic planning meeting occurred early in February 2011, and was one of the last major meetings that aimed to address the findings of the CORAT report. Meeting over several days, it concluded by drawing up an action committee tasked to develop achievable points to address engagement with church leaders, the decentralising of the SACC, and the SACC's stability (SACC 2011, 16–18). This meeting marked a much more praxis-based approach. Now the SACC was to start a noticeable regeneration of its function. In the *discernment* phase the SACC came to be aware of its failings and their widespread nature, and started to discuss how to address and rectify these failings. However, it should not be overlooked that only a small portion of CORAT's findings had been dealt with.¹⁷ So, while the institutional function came to be

16 It was reported that the SACC was sidelined for a less politically-focused group that would support rather than criticise the president (Mail and Guardian 2009; Mataboge 2009).

17 The 2009 Central Committee Communiqué highlighted areas such as theological education and how to better articulate the prophetic voice; rearranging the power structure and organisation of the SACC; realigning itself with the poor and encouraging church participation; training for all staff in terms of both financial accountabilities and to empower members to feel a part of the SACC; and the need to create space for Faith and Order matters. Yet only institutional character and financial matters received sustained treatment (see SACC 2009).

better understood in this time, discussions on Faith and Order, as well as how to practically adjust to a democratic South Africa, were overlooked. The SACC was aiming to develop a historical role, not a new role adjusted to post-modern, democratic South Africa.

Regeneration (2012–2016)

Coming into what this article has termed “the regeneration phase,” the SACC’s media presence started to experience a boom. Narrowly avoiding bankruptcy and complete closure (see Sosibo 2012), the SACC also made headlines in 2012 for its role in a public letter which criticised the morality of the current government. The letter referred to the then leaders as “self-serving and arrogant” and further opened up the divide between the SACC and the government (see De Waal 2012). This demonstrated the SACC’s regaining of a prophetic voice and a willingness to face the consequences of standing with the poor and oppressed. Also during this year, the SACC played a key role in attempting to mediate between various parties at the Lonmin mine strike in Marikana, in an attempt to reach a peaceful resolution that made sure all concerned parties were heard.¹⁸ As such, it can be seen that the SACC had begun to regenerate and re-embrace its public role in society. This renewed understanding of the SACC’s public role is seen through the Strategic Review Plan, which portrays the SACC as striving to be “the moral conscience of the South African public life” (SACC 2014, 1). This document also highlights a reformed structure of the SACC, which was intended to improve its function and ability to fulfil its commitments to the South African people. Part of this restructuring involved the appointment of a communications officer to help keep members and interested parties informed on the happenings within the SACC (SACC 2014, 4).

One of the biggest programmes undertaken by the SACC, which signifies its regeneration mode, was launched on 16 December 2015.¹⁹ Still understanding itself to have a political role in South Africa,²⁰ the SACC launched its campaign, #SouthAfricaWePrayFor. Through this campaign the SACC implored churches “to identify, pray and act together on critical socio-economic issues that have a marked difference in the quality of life in the South African society” (SACC 2016a). A key theme of this campaign, as shown through the presentations at the opening ceremony,

18 Tragically, the SACC’s role did not succeed in keeping the peace. On 6 August 2012, police opened fire on protestors at Marikana, killing 42 and wounding 78. The protestors were mainly miners who had been striking for a wage increase. The incident was the worst case of police brutality since 1994 and has been paralleled to the Sharpeville massacre of 21 March 1960 (South African History Online 2016).

19 This date was specifically chosen, as 16 December is the Day of Reconciliation, and as the campaign was to have a focus on reconciliation, it was a fitting choice.

20 While being ousted by Zuma, the SACC still sees itself as a major player in the political arena, viewing the establishment of true democracy as one of its key tasks (cf. SACC 2015b, 4–6).

was reconciliation (see SACC 2015a).²¹ Finally, it would appear that the SACC was trying to take up the baton of the TRC which it had dropped so many years ago.

Besides the general focus of the campaign, the SACC also opened up the Unburdening Panel. This panel was the most concrete aspect of the campaign, which aimed to have a tangible impact on South African society. The Unburdening Panel was a forum at which the general public could come and express their experiences of corruption since 1994. Corruption was thought to cause significant financial damage to the country, but also emotional damage to its victims and so the SACC saw the establishment of the forum as a vital step to bring healing, while also addressing the challenge of corruption (see Khoza 2016; Mpumlwana 2016, 15). The information received was then published to help people see the level of corruption in South Africa and, where necessary, passed on to the relevant authorities (SACC 2016a).

While this was a creative way to address the challenge of corruption within South Africa, questions can be raised as to the ecumenical worth of this activity. From the outside it would appear to hold more of a political than ecumenical focus. So, while the SACC had regained a public and even prophetic role, it does not seem to have addressed the ecumenical climate of South Africa, and rather morphed into a political watchdog. This article contends that the SACC has not yet adequately addressed grassroots support or Faith and Order matters to further ecumenical efforts in South Africa. Rather, it has kept to its traditional role of opposing political injustices. Other events from 2016 demonstrate this, such as the SACC calling on Jacob Zuma to step down (see Khoza 2016; cf. SACC 2016b), and the SACC's efforts to mediate in the #FeesMustFall campaign, thereby putting pressure on the government to address the situation without the use of violence (Manyathela 2016).

While this article is by no means intended as criticism of these actions, it is asking if the SACC has lost its ecumenical focus. As such, this section can be summed up by saying that, although the SACC has indeed begun to practise a more prophetic role—which is needed in the South African society—and although its public presence has begun to expand, it seems to be playing more of a political than an ecumenical role in society. With these criticisms in hand, we now turn to investigate current concerns and challenges within the SACC.

Current Concerns and Challenges

One of the most glaring concerns of the current state of the SACC is the continued lack of sustained reflection on Faith and Order matters. As the recent history has shown, projects have tended to be focused on practical problems, with little to no discussion on

21 The officially stated key points of the programme were to: “Pray and act for Healing and Reconciliation; Pray and act for the destruction of Poverty and inequality; Pray and act for Economic transformation; Pray and act for the restoration of the Family Fabric; and to Pray and act toward Anchoring Democracy” (SACC 2015a, cf. 2016a).

theological or doctrinal matters. This has led to a continuation of an ecumenism built on unity in practice, overlooking unity in faith and, as such, could be one of the main reasons for the current political focus of the SACC.²² While previously debates have been held over the importance of Faith and Order vs. Life and Works, current scholarship is in agreement that both the reflective and the practical are necessary in order to practise a vital and healthy ecumenism (cf. Smit 2003a, 313; Le Bruyns 2007, 377).

At the onset of democracy it was highlighted how ecumenism in South Africa needed to develop reflections on Faith and Order matters (De Gruchy 1995, 14). Yet this has not happened and thus a theological and doctrinal unity between various churches has not been established. Rather, South Africa is experiencing great fragmentation between denominations, with some churches pursuing individual power and status over ecumenism (cf. Makgoba 2015, 502). If holistic ecumenism is to develop within South Africa, discussions around Faith and Order matters, and a theological basis for ecumenism in relation to such, need to be developed. A one-sided approach, as can be seen, leads to an overemphasis of the practical and a distortion of the ecumenical task. Social justice cannot be the ecumenical glue (Jordaan 1995, 157). Not only will it distort the ecumenical task, but without a holistic focus and imperative, ecumenism can become a tiresome and unrewarding task (Conradie 2012, 36).

Another concern that may on the surface not appear to be major, is the deficiency of the SACC's social media presence.²³ Considering that in 2014 the SACC appointed a communications officer, this should not have been the case; therefore this indicates possible concerns. Firstly, it would appear to suggest an organisational inefficiency within the SACC, specifically to market itself and engage with the general public. Secondly, seeing that social media is one of the main platforms used by the younger generation to communicate and engage with the world, the lack of a social media presence highlights the lack of engagement with the youth. In interviews²⁴ conducted for this research, nobody below the age of 25 had heard of the SACC or was aware of its work in South Africa. Of all the interviewees, those who were aware of the SACC occupied specialist positions which necessitated that knowledge.²⁵ It would appear that

22 Therefore, not having a balanced focus and not including Faith and Order and Life and Works matters, have led to a focus on action that has morphed from ecumenism to become just about action.

23 As of 11:30 on 16 February 2017, the SACC's official Facebook page had 899 likes (https://www.facebook.com/South-African-Council-of-Churches-302306103119496/?hc_ref=SEARCH&fref=nf) and Twitter had 136 followers (see <https://twitter.com/officialsacc>).

24 Between 27 September and 3 October 2016 six interviews were held in Pretoria with theological lecturers, church leaders and congregants. The interviews were aimed at understanding the respondents' understanding of ecumenism and the SACC and formed a central part of the thesis from which this article has been produced.

25 Interviews were conducted from a sample of lecturers, church leaders and congregants. Consistently it was the lecturers who held the highest knowledge of the SACC. A varied understanding existed among church leaders, while congregants were relatively unaware of the SACC's existence.

the SACC is failing to engage both the general public as well as the next generation of potential ecumenists. When this criticism is brought in line with the wider challenge ecumenism is facing in the post-modern world, it presents a very worrying scenario. With the rise of individualism and the fragmentation of society, ecumenism, in general, is at a challenging juncture in its history (Smit 2003a, 305–306; cf. Le Bruyns 2006, 584; Pillay 2015, 635). If post-modernism and youth engagement are not pursued, the SACC could easily face extinction once again. Yet embracing the postmodern world, and incorporating the technology that post-modernism has brought about to connect people from all over the world, may hold great positive potential (see Smit 2003b, 434–435). As such, the fact that the SACC is not embracing social media, while small on the surface, is in fact the tip of an iceberg that could potentially sink the SACC boat.

Conclusion

This article has shown how the SACC was once a powerhouse in South African society, but since the onset of democracy has been struggling to maintain its prophetic voice and to develop a holistic approach to ecumenism within South Africa. Immediately following the onset of democracy, the SACC came to be too dependent on government support, while church support dwindled, taking it away from its traditional role. This significantly jeopardised both the SACC's ecumenical function and its public witness. Thankfully the SACC awoke to the need to change and, through the influence of the CORAT report, was guided through a stage of discernment, seeking to regain its public role and prophetic voice. This discernment stage was judged to be effective and the SACC can now be classed as being in a state of regeneration. It has developed a prophetic voice and is expanding its public engagement. However, this article has also highlighted that the SACC has not sufficiently regenerated its ecumenical focus. Rather, it has developed into a politically-orientated body which acts more as a social watchdog than an ecumenical council. This criticism was raised throughout, but was especially highlighted when discussing the worrying lack of Faith and Order reflections within the SACC.

Another concern that was raised was the SACC's lack of a social media profile and what this potentially signifies in terms of organisational ability, youth engagement and adaptation to the post-modern world. This article contends that the SACC has come a long way from the Council that was in operation at the beginning of the millennium. It has awoken to its role in society to be a voice for the voiceless; it has broken crippling ties with the government; and it has begun to be involved in major national crises. Yet there is still a long way to go. The SACC needs to seriously engage with Faith and Order discussion and to engage the South African churches on a level of theological unity. Also, it needs to seriously reflect on how to adjust ecumenism to the post-modern environment and overcome the rampant fragmentation prevailing in the world today.

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