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The Presbyterian Church of South Africa: The early years, 1897–1923, and future prospects

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The formation of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa (PCSA) in 1897 was an acknowledgement of the principle of not doing separately what can be done together. The implementation of this principle was essential to the continued existence of Presbyterianism as opposed to the prevalent independency and the development of a specific brand of South African Presbyterianism. This paper describes and analyses the processes involved in the development of the PCSA during the years 1897–1923, a time of rapid change in church and society, drawing mainly on primary sources. This is the first attempt to investigate the early development of the PCSA.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The challenge of this article is to investigate the specific circumstances in which a new church denomination came into being and developed its distinctive form of polity in a context of existing and growing racism and to discern the issues that militated against the formation of a multiracial or nonracial church. This has implications not only for the history of Christianity in Africa but also missiology and ecumenical studies.

Keywords: Presbyterian Church of South Africa; Free Church of Scotland; Presbytery of Kaffraria; Synod of Kafraria; United Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

Introduction

The Presbyterian Church of South Africa (PCSA) was birthed in the context of trauma. In the political sphere, the British and Afrikaners were on the verge of engaging in the South African War (1899–1901) resulting from economic and political competition, in part arising from the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley (1870) and gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886. In the social sphere, many white liberal South Africans were pursuing the policies of paternalism and trusteeship, which were an offence to black people. This liberalism formed 'a fragile tradition of paternalism and conservatism' (Kallaway1975:9–10) while not departing from 'the major consensus of white South African politics that power shall be retained by the White group' (Trapido 1970:206). In the religious sphere, the Ethiopian secessionary movement was growing, and the Tsewu secession from the Free Church congregation in Johannesburg in 1896 (Duncan 2012) and the impending Mzimba secession of 1898 (Duncan 2013) posed a serious threat to the mission to Africans. This was especially the case for African Presbyterians, because the secession threatened the growth and development of Scottish Presbyterian missions of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland (UPCoS) and the Free Church of Scotland FCoS), which were expanding rapidly throughout Southern Africa. Their influence was spreading as the result of the provision of education at all levels, which was evident in the emergence of a black intellectual elite (Duncan 2022), whose commitment led to the birth of organisations such as the South African Native National Congress in 1912. These two Scottish denominations would unite in 1900 to form the United Free Church of Scotland while their missions in South Africa and elsewhere remained separate. It could be said that the formation of the PCSA was the result of the implementation of the 'safety in numbers' idea, as independent congregations and presbyteries, by nature and experience, were finding it difficult to operate on the separate development principle and were adhering to the 'conform no longer to the standards of this present world' (Rm 12:2) principle. For the greater part of the 19th century, settler-colonial Presbyterians had forged their faith without the formal structures of Presbyterian polity, but the time had come to move from independency to interdependency, consistent with the spirit of Presbyterianism (Duncan 2022:2:6). Until this time, 'the PCSA was actually a congregational, rather than a presbyterian, church that operated without a clear denominational approach to mission' (Duncan 2022:6).

The initiative leading to union

As Presbyterianism developed in South Africa as a group of disconnected congregations and presbyteries, it was natural that a time would come when thought was given to the idea of becoming truly Presbyterian in the sense of belonging to something larger, to which individual congregations could relate and where mutual support was available; this was the essence and genius of Presbyterianism. In South Africa, some of the Presbyterian congregations were related to the UPCoS and others to the FCoS, while still others were independent bodies (Duncan 1997:113). Although a draft basis of union had been prepared in 1880, no further action was taken (Report of the Committee on Union between the Free and United Presbyteries of Kaffraria 1884). This was because of the persistence of congregationalist and independent views of church polity that militated against local church autonomy. In 1892, interested parties formed a Federal Council to pursue the possibility and process of bringing these units into a Presbyterian denomination. A Federal Council was formed and met six times with commissioners from seven presbyteries. This included the Scottish mission presbyteries. The independent congregations of Port Elizabeth and Kimberley were also represented (Bax 1990:10; Davenport 1997:53). At this time, the Colonial Committee of the FCoS wished for a union that would include its missions in pursuance of its long-term global mission policy, which aimed to evangelise indigenous peoples and develop existing achievements (4th Federal Council, East London, July 1895, Ac1971/Ahl1.1-1.2, William Cullen Library). It was also looking to this policy to relieve it of the financial responsibility of its South African missions. So this idea had the support of the sending church; however, it did not understand the racial implications of forming one multiracial church at this time. This realisation would only come in 1920, when deputies from Scotland came to assess the situation that led to the formation of the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa (Ashcroft & Houston 1920).

The consummation of union

The final meeting of the Federal Council, appointed in 1891 in order to promote the cause of Presbyterian union, held on 17 September 1897, passed a resolution to dissolve the Council into the First General Assembly. This was approved (PCSA BB 1897:3). This took place at the Commercial Road Presbyterian Church, Durban. The name of this new denomination was the PCSA (PCSA BB 1897:4). Revd J. Smith was elected Moderator, with Revd J. Laing as Clerk of Assembly and Mr G. Roger as Treasurer. The constituting bodies were the Presbyteries of Adelaide, Cape Town, Kaffraria (Free Church of Scotland), Natal, Transkei (FCoS) (PCSA BB 1897:1), Transvaal, Kaffraria (UPCoS) and the Presbyterian congregation, Port Elizabeth (PCSA BB 1897:2). Twenty-three congregations of European origin had voted in favour of union, while 20 remained outside the union at this time, including three white settler-colonial congregations: Adelaide (UPCoS), Kaffraria (FCoS) and Transkei (FCoS; PCSA BB 1897:2). To finance the new denomination, assessments were set at 1% of the total income of congregations; every mission congregation was requested to take a collection annually to support the work of the denomination (PCSA BB 1897:15). This was another indication of the Presbyterian ethos of the denomination as it became necessary to establish a central administration and to be able to offer support to projects of the church.

The XXIV *Articles of Faith*, and its *Appendix*, of the Presbyterian Church of England were adopted as a statement of faith (PCSA BB 1897:4) in the first instance. This indicated a commitment to retain the Reformed faith as it was affirmed in the Westminster Confession of Faith Westminster Divines (1647 [1995]) and previous and subsequent Reformed confessions of the world Reformed movement. (PCSA 1960:viii). The *Westminster Directory for Worship* was adopted as the standard for worship in the PCSA (PCSA 1924:3), and the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church of England (1894) was adopted as the polity of the PCSA on a temporary basis, to be revised (PCSA BB 1897:10). This was approved in 1908 (PCSA 1960:ix). The English form of order was considered to be 'best suited to the circumstances of the Church in South Africa' (March 1909 in PCSA 1924:v). This form of government was one of a representative form of democracy (Bax 1997:13), although it was more representative than democratic as not all of the membership had a vote in the courts of the church. Prior to the union, there had been no unanimity in the use of an order (PCSA 1942:v). It is interesting to note that the standards of doctrine and polity of English Presbyterianism were adopted rather than those of the Scottish churches, as there had been ongoing discussions with the missions of the FCoS and UPCoS. This was because, at this time, the majority of PCSA members were white settlers of British descent (De Gruchy 2009:29). While Presbyterians in South Africa came from the English and Scottish Presbyterian traditions, earlier references to matters relating to church polity all came from the Scottish Presbyterian tradition, as was the case with St Andrew's congregation in Cape Town, where it was clearly designated as a congregation consisting of Scottish Presbyterians who had their roots in the Church of Scotland (*Resolutions passed at a Public Meeting of the Scottish and Presbyterian Community* on the 25th day of November 1824 (Quinn & Cuthbertson 1979:8).

In addition to the Presbyterian structure, four synods were established – North (Natal and Transkei), Transkei (Transkei [FC], Kaffraria [UP] East Kaffraria [FC], Adelaide [UP], West Cape Town, Port Elizabeth) (PCSA BB 1897:7–8). This was a part of Presbyterian polity, although synods never operated on an optimal level, as presbyteries seemed better equipped to deal with synodical issues. These appear to have been superfluous and died out as time passed. It is interesting to note that synods have been formed in the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa after its formation in 1999 as the result of a desire (and sometimes need) to relate on the matter of wider rather than smaller presbytery units.

In 1898, a number of developments took place in the membership of the PCSA. The congregation in Port Elizabeth

voted to join the PCSA. A new Presbytery of the Orange Free State joined. Adelaide Presbytery voted to join the PCSA. Three new congregations were added to the PCSA – Kroonstad, Beaconsfield and Bulawayo – giving the new denomination a transnational perspective that would develop in time to include other congregations in Zimbabwe and also Zambia (Southern and Northern Rhodesia). The General Assembly received the congregations of St Andrew's (King William's Town), East London and St Andrew's (EL) from the Free Church Presbytery of Kaffraria, which was authorised to receive congregations at Alice and Fort Beaufort when they applied for admission as the new Presbytery of King William's Town. This happened during 1898 (PCSA BB 1897:46). The General Assembly also noted that several congregations were in process of formation – Indwe, Sterkstroom, Cyphergat, Cradock, Umtali. This was also the year in which the Mzimba secession occurred, which has a destabilising effect on the Scottish mission that had remained outside the union.

Moves towards an ecumenical resolution

From the onset of discussions to form a united Presbyterian church, there was a vision that it be a body that would include the Scottish Presbyterian missions. Many issues arose in this process, largely related to issues of racism, although it was only ever referred to obliquely.

Wellman (1993:25) defines racism as a 'system of exclusion and privilege *and* as a set of culturally acceptable linguistic or ideological constructions that defend one's location in that system'. A difficulty in this regard is that racism does not often rise to the surface in human interactions; it is expressed subtly and subconsciously, originating in 'unexamined (unconscious) assumptions of superiority of people who see themselves as morally good. These racist behaviours tend to be cloaked in the veneer of acts of love and generosity' (Denyer 2020:149).

At this time in South Africa, the concepts of trusteeship and paternalism through offering unwarranted protection from harm and denial of autonomy were rife in society and became ingrained in church practice. This was evident from a statement made by Revd Dr James Stewart of Lovedale in response to the support given to the union by the UFCoS in Scotland:

> If the Native element asserts itself, there will be the collision of views due to difference of education, or race interests, and various other causes. If it does not assert itself, it will be merely a hanger-on to the wealthier white section – abject, inert, and lifeless, and without any of the spirit necessary for its right vocation, the extension of missionary work itself as it has reached the position of self-support. (BPCSA 1971:7)

This was Stewart's considered view, offered in light of many years of experience in the black educational context. Although this appears to be quite paternalistic, it reflected the attitudes of many in South African society at that time. Undoubtedly, this view had a serious impact on negotiations between bodies from differing racial origins. This was the case in the promotion of union among South African Presbyterians.

The Scottish missions entered these discussions regarding union from differing standpoints. The UPCoS missionaries of the Presbytery of Kaffraria supported the ideal of a multiracial church and entered the PCSA in 1897, retaining their links with Scotland. The UFCoS of the Mission Synod of Kafraria preferred the option of a self-governing, self-propagating, self-supporting African denomination; these were views that were promoted by Henry Venn from 1851 and were widely discussed throughout the global mission scene from that time (Reese 2010:21–22). These differing attitudes towards union provided a significant problem when it came to negotiations (BPCSA 1971:6; cf. Duncan 1997:125–132). Despite earlier ongoing attempts at an enlarged union, which would include the Scottish mission bodies operating in South Africa, the Synod of Kafraria rejected union at this point. It was not possible to become part of a union while there was no uniform agreement among the African members in two Presbyteries of the Free Church Mission. In addition, there were problems arising from the white membership concerning the role of making decisions in a context where black people were in the majority (PCSA BB 1897:6–7).

Firstly, there was a need to find a way to balance the differential influence and powers 'between Colonial and Mission churches' (PCSA BB 1897:6) so that new legal provisions would have the support of a majority of both black and white constituencies. Then, for the future, the proportion of votes in both races needed to be clearly defined and maintained. Secondly, there was the recognition of the need for a final court of appeal for reference when specific matters causing conflict arose. It is clear from this that there was a significant lack of trust in relations between the two Presbyterian traditions that were racially based. This never materialised, and the situation that emerged was rather that of a federal relationship whereby each General Assembly would be represented at the General Assembly of the other (Duncan 1997:132).

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 whose expressed fears regarding union on the grounds of race were justified (Cory, MS Ac1971/Ag 2:8). From the onset, the PCSA viewed mission to white people and black people as separate entities. The white mission was viewed as a church extension rather than a mission, while to the black population it was a missionary activity without distinction. This was the result of not having formed an inclusive policy, and a by-product of this was that it was very difficult for black congregations to achieve full status (Hunter 1983:3).

The Synod of Kafraria agreed on the possibility of two means by which this issue could be resolved:

> First, that some method be devised of adjusting the balance between Colonial and Mission churches, which shall be satisfactory to both races; for example that a majority of white and a majority of black, separately and conjointly, be necessary to pass a proposed measure into law; or that, in view of future eventualities, the proportion of votes of both races in the General Assembly be strictly defined and preserved; second, that there be a final Court of Appeal in certain questions to be carefully defined, say, to a Board at Home representative of the Presbyterians of the British Isles, or even of wider range, such as the Pan-Presbyterian Council could easily furnish. (PCSA BB 1897:7)

This was noted by the PCSA General Assembly, and a response was formulated in the belief that the concerns expressed were insufficient to prevent union because:

> (1) [*T*]hat 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 in certain questions 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. (PCSA BB 1897:10–11)

With regard to the reference to Presbyterian principles, it was never considered that the mission be viewed from a racial perspective that had led to the apparent support of racism that had resulted from mission work being placed under two committees on the basis of race. In the broader South African context, the Dutch Reformed Church, also with a Presbyterian polity, had no issues regarding racial separation. Subsequently, two standing committees were formed, the Church Extension Committee to advance mission among the white population and the African Mission Committee to promote mission among the black population (PCSA BB 1897:8). Later, additional mission committees were appointed to develop the mission in the coloured and Indian populations in 1958 (PCSA BB 1958:48). This situation was perpetuated until 1962 (Hunter 1983:2, 3). This was an area of church life that was fraught with tension. As early as 1902, a proposal was made. Despite this, in 1902 the General Assembly voted against an attempt to promote the complete equality in its courts based on Presbyterian parity among ministers and elders (PCSA BB 1902:268). It is little wonder that Africans who held office in their own congregations and presbyteries should be hesitant regarding incorporation into a body that rejected such a proposal.

From the perspective of the Scottish missions, Revd D.V. Sikutshwa (1946) commented that, despite the above decision:

> [*A*]t 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. (p. 4)

Sikutshwa was simply reflecting the realities of the situation that were marked by language difficulties, educational disparities, social differences, religious values and racial issues.

At this time, relations with the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) were such that a suggestion was made that the Cape NGK and the Presbyterians unite. This was the result of the fact that many NGK ministers were of Scottish descent, that members had joined NGK congregations in the absence of local Presbyterian congregations and that they adhered to a common inherited Reformed theological and evangelical faith (De Gruchy 2009:31).

Good relations were maintained for a time, but with the growth of segregation, the PCSA found itself in a predicament, although having a substantial black constituency and relations cooled somewhat. In the first Moderatorial Address in the PCSA, the Rt Revd John Smith addressed the issue of the union and referred to the historic traditions within Presbyterianism (PCSA BB 1897:19) and stated:

> Hitherto we have been like isolated, scattered lights; but now, by His good hand on us, we have been gathered into a cluster of lights, that we may henceforth shine with concentrated and increased power amidst the surrounding darkness of worldliness and heathenism. (p. 20)

Smith articulated his consciousness of Presbyterians acting together that surpassed the value of independency in facing contemporary challenges. He also looked forward to the prospect of union with the Scottish mission bodies, which would be a sign of diversity in unity and of possibilities for a future united Presbyterian fellowship. This theme was reiterated at the 1900 General Assembly where the Moderator, Rt Revd J.T. Ferguson stated:

> Hitherto we have been too congregational, too much absorbed in the prosperity of our individual congregations and caring very little for the prosperity of the Church as a whole. Ministerial selfishness and congregational exclusiveness are abhorrent to the genius of Presbyterianism, which concerns itself for the individual, but though the harmonious working of the whole. (PCSA BB 1900:204)

These addresses referred to the negative effects of congregationalism and congregational and ministerial self-interest, the disparate nature of 19th-century developments that included elements of both independency (Congregationalism) and Presbyterianism. With regard to Presbyterian–Congregational relations, a letter was received from Revd A. Vine Hall, Congregational Church, Claremont, seeking consolidation of Presbyterian and Congregational churches in Cape Town, in which he refers to 'the general feeling among us that there was no desire that any Presbyterian Church should be less Presbyterian, or congregational Church less congregational' (PCSA BB 1897:77). However, polity was not virtually identical (PCSA BB 1897:77), as Hall claims. There is a significant difference between the congregation being the focus of decision-making, where only local interests may be considered, and a

regional court of the church where the wider concerns of the church may be taken into consideration, thereby resulting in Ferguson's consensual operation of the entire ecclesiastical community (PCSA BB 1900:204). A response to the letter was referred to the next General Assembly.

There were ongoing attempts at union with the Scottish mission presbyteries. The Synod of Kafraria in 1902 agreed to enter discussions on union in fulfilment of the Foreign Missions Committee's (FMC) wish to work towards union. There were several delays until the Synod discharged its Committee on Union in 1905. Soon afterwards, in 1907, the Synod agreed to a recommendation of Dr James Henderson that consideration be given to the formation of a black church (Duncan 1997:122).

There appeared to be a missionary-supported move towards the formation of an autonomous black church that developed until a deputation was sent from Scotland in 1920 to South Africa in order to discuss the situation. Their recommendation was that a separate indigenous church be established, and this came to fruition in 1923 with the formation of the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa (BPCSA) (Ashcroft & Houston 1920). A federal arrangement came into being in 1924 (Bax 1997:17), with the PCSA ceding its Presbytery of Kaffraria to the BPCSA. From the beginning, a number of issues arose, which were determinative of the life of a developing denomination. From 1924, the PCSA was involved in a series of union negotiations with presbyterian and congregational bodies and also the Anglican Church of the Province of South Africa.

Wider attempts at ecumenism

In terms of relations with other denominations, the PCSA (following the Reformed tradition) was open to ecumenical participation, as can be seen from a letter from Calvin (1552). This tradition was maintained and developed despite a number of secessions from Presbyterian churches during the following centuries. As soon as it was established, the PCSA applied for membership of the Alliance of Reformed Churches throughout the world, holding the Presbyterian System (also known as the World Presbyterian Alliance) at its first Assembly in 1897. This body became the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1970 and the World Communion of Reformed Churches in 2010 (WCRC 2022:1). The PCSA was especially active in the WARC in opposition to apartheid. Beyond that, the PCSA was a member of the Life and Work and Faith and Order commissions, which united in 1948 to form the World Council of Churches. It had been involved in the work towards this union since 1944 (Bax 1997:16). A further involvement has been in the work of the Council for World Mission.

The first opportunity the PCSA had for ecumenical participation within South Africa was presented by the formation of the General Missionary Conference of South Africa in 1904 (GMCSA 1905; Thomas 2002:xix). The PCSA was a founder member of the Conference and was represented at its first meeting by Revd A. Brown, Fordsburg; Revd J. Gray, Pretoria; Revd J.A. Campbell, Stellenbosch; and Dr Ross (GMCSA 1905:212). Revd R.B. Douglas gave an address on behalf of the PCSA (GMCSA 1905:5). The PCSA was also represented at the 1909 conference (GMCSA 1909:163, 164) and subsequent conferences. It remained a member when the GMCSA was constituted as the Christian Council of South Africa (CCSA) and renamed the South African Council of Churches (SACC) in 1966. It was also involved in the Church Unity Commission (CUC) from its establishment in 1968.

Being a transnational church, the PCSA has been involved with the national councils of churches in Zambia and Zimbabwe and continentally in the All African Council of Churches (Mission 21, 2022). From all of this, it is clear that the PCSA's commitment to ecumenical affairs is substantial and has been ongoing from its inception. Nowhere was this more evident and successful in terms of the progress made than in the field of theological education, to whose history we now turn.

Theological education

There is no evidence of the situation prior to 1987, but there is a reference to probationers (PCSA BB 1897:18). Until this time, Presbyterian theological education proceeded on an *ad hoc* basis where 'everyone [each congregation] did what was right in his own eyes' (Jdg 17:6). The General Assembly agreed on the desirability of a defined theological education scheme and commended such to the membership for financial support for the establishment of a training centre.

In 1902, it was noted that the minimum requirement for entry to the ministry was a pass in the BA exam of the University of the Cape of Good Hope or an equivalent in Latin, Greek, mental and moral philosophy and English literature. A 2-year course of reading in Old and New Testament exegesis and systematic and apologetic theology was also required. At end of 2 years, students were licensed with a continued reading programme. The probationary period was to last at least 18 months. Then it was agreed to extend ministry formation by preparing a scheme of training for lay preachers (PCSA BB 1903:41). Shortly after this, Church history was included in the theological curriculum (PCSA BB 1905:xxii).

In 1906, it was noted that the University of the Cape of Good Hope had introduced a BD degree. This qualification had the potential to become the standard of attainment of admission to ministry. The Assembly Theological Education Committee recommended that suggested amendments to the scheme be sent to the university (PCSA BB 1906:53).

No further developments took place until 1918, when the General Assembly decided that because of 'the great development of University education in South Africa' its Theological Education Committee should look into the opportunities for the development of theological education programmes which would offer a more appropriate form of training, either on their own or in cooperation with other

churches, through engagement with universities and with the provision of hostel accommodation in order to develop an awareness of denominational distinctives (PCSA BB 1918, Theological Training report, Resolution 5).

As the result of no progress having been made, the 1924 General Assembly decided to adopt a full university course for ministers (PCSA BB 1924, Theological Training report, Resolution 3) for white students (PCSA BB 1925, Theological Training report, Resolution 2).

There was also no urgency with regard to clarifying their approach to African theological education. Dr W. Soga described it as being in an 'embryonic stage' (PCSA BB 1900:214), and it needed to be developed in the face of a lack of candidates (PCSA 1903:108). In 1910, a clear decision was taken to train Africans for the ministry at Lovedale (PCSA BB 1910:31, 1911:49, 1912:136–137).

Prior to the introduction of apartheid, two events confirmed the ecumenical intentions of the PCSA with regard to theological education. Firstly, the Methodists, Congregationalists and PCSA made an arrangement to train their white candidates for the ministry at the Faculty of Divinity at Rhodes University from 1947. Single students were housed at Livingstone House from 1949 (Denis & Duncan 2011:23). Then, the opening of the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa (FedSem, a project of the World Council of Churches) in 1963 marked one of the most significant ecumenical experiments of the twentieth century. The PCSA joined the Presbyterian St Columba's College (Denis & Duncan 2011:47, 48). The PCSA supported the union of the Congregational Adams College with St Columba's to form the Reformed Albert Luthuli College in 1977 (Denis & Duncan 2011:47, 48) in another ecumenical advance. Sadly, FedSem closed in 1993 at the end of apartheid (Denis & Duncan 2011:321–266).

Property

The issue of church property has for many years been a delicate matter in South Africa. Duncan (2015:88–92) has discussed the sensitivities surrounding the land issue and property in South Africa, especially where this relates to church property. Since the arrival of settlers in the country, there have been many misunderstandings between settlers, colonists and indigenous peoples relating to the acquisition, use and disposition of land. Since that time, churches have acquired vast tracts of land for various purposes, including education, agriculture, medical and industrial missions, in addition to the need for land for specific religious purposes such as building churches and missions.

In the Presbyterian context, prior to the formation of the PCSA, without an institutional centre, congregations acquired properties to erect church buildings, and each congregation held their own title deeds. However, when a denomination is established, it is natural that the title deeds of the land components are vested in the name of the denomination and cared for by a Board of General Trustees, though maintained by each congregation. In the PCSA:

> All property vested in trustees for the benefit of particular congregations or Mission Boards may continue to be so vested, or may be transferred by their owners to be held in connection with The Presbyterian Church of South Africa, and nothing in these presents contained shall be held in any way to prejudice existing Trusts. (PCSA BB 1897:8)
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> [*A*]ny properties acquired between the present and the next meeting of the General Assembly be vested in the Moderator and Clerk of Presbytery and their Successors in office. (PCSA BB 1897:12)

This change was a natural development as the property arrangements were formalised. This was a natural aspect of Presbyterianism, that immovable assets belong to the denomination and not to a local body. One persistent problem has arisen out of the independent status of many congregations prior to 1897. These congregations were unwilling to vest their properties in a denominational body and remain so, despite the benefits of having access to financial support when it came to substantial maintenance repairs.

In 1904, a Model Trust Deed was adopted by the PCSA. In part, it stated:

> That the General Assembly while not committing itself to the principle of vesting the several church, manse and other properties now held by the Presbyteries and congregations in a General Board of Trustees for and on behalf of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa, resolves that this important matter be remitted to the Finance Committee to prepare a tentative scheme upon such proposal, to send same to Presbyteries at earliest possible date for consideration and conference with the Committee and that report thereon be presented to the next General Assembly. (PCSA BB 1904:53–54)

These indicated tentative moves towards adopting a more Presbyterian approach to property. The tentative nature of the inclusion of the above clause indicates the delicate nature of the matter that could easily become a source of conflict and damage the unity and growth of the young church. Congregations that were unhappy regarding developing church policies could leave the union and take their properties with them. This was inimical to the spirit of Presbyterianism of mutual support and encouragement. It indicated that there were financial implications related to the ownership of property, and because this potentially involved a fundamental change in the polity of the PCSA, it was necessary to send it down the presbyteries for discussion and comment. Interestingly, the title deeds of Vrede, Aliwal North, Sterkstroom, Koffyfontein and Naaurpoort congregations were deposited with the denomination in 1905 (PCSA BB 1905:50). This indicated a degree of trust in the future of the PCSA.

When the first *Book of Order* (1924:181) was published, it indicated that all properties should be registered in the name of the Trustees of the General Assembly in the meantime.

This phrase indicated that there was a fluid situation regarding church properties which was still to be resolved. However, it also allowed for properties to be registered in the name of the trustees of congregations and presbyteries. This would legislate for the existing practice of congregations and presbyteries registering properties in their own name. It was only after the union of the PCSA with the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (RPCSA) in 1999 that further attempts were initiated to bring all immovable property under the control of the General Assembly Trustees (Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa [UPCSA] 2017:9, 10, 11, 14). This brought it more into line with the RPCSA, which had a clear policy regarding the depositing of title deeds with the General Trustees of the denomination (RPCSA 1958:118–119). This book of order was derived directly from the *Manual of Practice and Procedure of the Free Church of Scotland (1927).*

The end of the South African war

At the conclusion of the South African war in 1902, the Moderator, Rt Revd J. Gray, addressed the challenge to the PCSA:

> But one sometimes wonders why, after the physical conflict is over, professing Christians should continue to cherish that toothless hatred towards others we sometimes see, and which, as it is entirely spiritual, must be more hurtful to the one who feels it, and more offensive to God than war so called. One of the most palpable duties lying upon every would-be servant of Christ is to rise above all unkind and unbrotherly feelings, and whether it is reciprocated or not, to love the brotherhood as Christ loved us, without racial or political limitations … If the war is over, let it be over in the heart as well as in the field. (PCSA BB 1902:322)

This posed a significant challenge to the church as its record of relations with other races in South Africa was not particularly inspiring. Deep animosities remained between the British and Afrikaners, and Church members were encouraged to act in a manner appropriate to the faith they professed. No account was taken of the contribution Africans made to the war effort (see Nasson 1999).

Social reform

From the beginning of the life of the PCSA, the new denomination was not only concerned with strictly religious matters. Social reform occupied an important role in the early life of the PCSA. The Moderator in 1904 claimed that the appearance of matters in the agenda of the General Assembly was a novel innovation. However, this is not quite so as the subject of temperance had a place in the concerns of congregations and presbyteries and in discussions of General Assemblies from 1898 and remained prominent in the PCSA's concerns (see Hunter 1983:60–72). The PCSA was also involved in ministry in the mines and railways. The underlying principles of the scheme on Social reform are stated:

1. The Church's social work is founded on the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. She goes forth in her Master's name to 'seek' that she may save 'that which is lost'.
2. The special aim of the Church' social work, which includes both spiritual regeneration and social amelioration, is to secure these by the personal influence and help of converted men and women (PCSA BB 1904:101).

The heart of the Church should beat in sympathy with the privations and pain of humanity (PCSA BB 1904:102).

The 'native question'

The 'native question' arose out of the colonial domination of South Africa in the 19th century. The question focused on the future of indigenous peoples, who were considered to be less than fully human, and those who sought to resolve the problem did so from a paternalistic stance (McNab 2014). This forms a corrective positive step of asserting African identity 'following centuries of denigration, dehumanisation and oppression' where black people were considered not to exist other than to serve white people (Seepe 2005:1).

It was in the seventh General Assembly, held in 1905 that the Moderator, the Revd J.M. Auld raised the thorny issue of the 'native question':

> [*T*]he relations of white and black in this country, is a very great question; but it ought not to be called a difficult one. It is only when we allow race animosity to possess us, and race prejudice to blind us, and impatience to guide us, that it is so. And this native question is one to which the Churches of Christ in this land must very especially address ourselves …
>
> The natives of this country are undoubtedly to have their time; and their time seems now to have come. What they will rise to in the future we cannot say. There may be to us as great a future before the natives of Africa as was before our own Anglo-Saxon forefathers: we cannot say. But one thing is plain, we may either help or hinder them. Let it not be the latter. (PCSA BB 1905:103)

This was entirely apposite for the PCSA origins lay in settler-colonial incursions throughout South Africa. It was frequently called the colonial church by the constituents of the Bantu Presbyterian Church (BPCSAC 1971:6). The 'native question' here was demonstrated in racial prejudice. No response is noted to the Moderator's challenge, despite his charge that this was an urgent issue. It was not only the church that was derelict in this matter. It was a matter of national concern, and although various resolutions were attempted, not one was successful. Many years later in 1997, Revd Douglas Bax (1997:28) would comment on the tension between positive General Assembly decisions in favour of challenging apartheid and the negative response of churches throughout the PCSA.

Constitution of Women's Association of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa

This was one of the significant achievements of the early years of the PCSA, when the Constitution of Women's Association of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa was

received. This association was 'to include all the women in the Church' (PCSA BB 1906:147) and was to become a mainstay in the mission of the denomination and a substantial contributor to the projects of the church.

Conclusion

The PCSA had a gestation period of nearly 100 years before its formation in 1897. It had developed from a small group of Presbyterian soldiers in Cape Town to a group of presbyteries and independent congregations to a tradition ready for union. Not all the Scottish Presbyterians entered as early as 1898, but they did so progressively, as circumstances permitted. In time, some would withdraw to join the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa, formed in 1923. The aim of the total union of Presbyterians of Scottish descent was frustrated, however, although hope of the incorporation of the Scottish missions never faded and, in fact, continued periodically until 1999 when the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (former mission church) and the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa united to form the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa. Relations also extended to the Dutch Reformed Church and the Congregationalists. It never departed from the ecumenism which is inherent in the Reforming tradition.

The genius of Presbyterianism was expressed in the manner in which the courts of the church took responsibility for matters relating to finance, property and theological education. Its doctrine, order and worship were in continuity with British Presbyterianism within the broader Reforming tradition. It did not rush to adopt a specific approach to theological education, and this developed in a progressive yet racially separate manner.

The PCSA was well aware of the political, social and cultural milieu in which it was birthed and responded in a manner that was natural within the white paternalistic community. Social reform became an ongoing project, and the 'native question' was ever before it. By the end of its first 10 years of existence, it was poised to become a distinctive Church of European origin and would grow in both the white and black communities as a member of the worldwide Presbyterian community.

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