

Baptist Union and Baptist Fellowship. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 19 November 1999. [disclaimer](#)

---

REV HOFFMEISTER: Thank you Chairperson, my name is Reverend Desmond Hoffmeister, I'm the General Secretary of the Baptist Convention of South Africa and I'm accompanied by our President on my right, Reverend Michael Mathikela who is the Pastor of the Orlando Baptist Church in Soweto.

We also have a delegation from the Baptist Union of South Africa - Southern Africa, that is led by Reverend Terry Rae who is my counterpart, the General Secretary of that denomination and I'm going to ask him to introduce the group that he has come with.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much.

REV RAE: Our delegation is made up of myself, General Secretary of the Baptist Union, the Reverend George Ngamlana former Associated General Secretary and Ex-President of the Baptist Union and the Reverend Peter Hollness who is a Pastor in East London on our national executive and also past President of the Baptist Union.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. I presume that all five of you at one time or another are maybe going to speak, so will all five of you please stand?

BAPTIST UNION CONVENTION: (sworn states)

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. We do welcome you warmly and are very grateful that you have come. You will be aware that we are working within certain time constraints and the whole operation will be about 30 minutes - I have to keep repeating this because you will say: no, I didn't say it to you, I was saying it to those other people - Baptist really - I mean, Baptists can't be restricted. Thank you very much.

REV RAE: We thank the TRC for this opportunity of sharing in the Commission. The Baptists appear before this Commission in two separate groups, The Baptist Union of South Africa and the Baptist Convention of South Africa and we are extremely glad to be able to make this submission together, after a painful division in our Baptist ranks in past years.

On behalf of the Baptist Union, comprising 426 churches excluding roughly a similar number of fellowships with an active membership of 42.000, not including adherence in children. The Baptist Union of South Africa is culturally and racially diverse, Evangelical in it's theological persuasion and congregational in it's system of government, with each local church being autonomous.

We would like to outline briefly what the Union did in speaking against apartheid over the years. Secondly, we want to express our confession in not putting our reservations to practice, both as a denomination internally and then not sufficiently challenging the legitimacy of apartheid policies in actual practice.

We would like to express our repentance for the hurts and pain that the actions of the Baptist Union cause, both to its own membership and to the wider body of Christians and citizens in South Africa.

Finally, we would like briefly to express what God has enabled us to do in putting our own house in order and in building relationships towards reconciliation and forgiveness with fellow Baptists in the convention and within our country as a whole.

Firstly then, during the years of apartheid the assembly of the Baptist Union which met annually from 1877 and made up of delegates from members churches, passed a resolution after resolution against racism and apartheid. And I've asked the Reverend Peter Hollness if he would briefly summarise these resolutions.

REV HOLLNESS: Archbishop and Commissioners, I'll try to be a brief Baptist confining myself to four minutes. My task is to summarise briefly what the Baptist Union of Southern Africa did ...[no sound] We certainly didn't do enough, we were too pietistic and theoretical and we didn't do justice to our own Baptist heritage which is rich in its prophetic witness to society.

Compared to some, our contribution is modest but nevertheless it should not be overlooked. Many individual Baptists actively opposed apartheid, others exercised a ministry of caring and compassion. Some local congregations protested against iniquitous practices such as forced removals, in one instance by standing in front of the bulldozers and on another by symbolically planting orange trees.

Baptists were prominent in opposing and in fact changing the law relating to military conscription. Whilst principle was often not converted into practice, the Baptist Union consistently and frequently expressed its rejection of apartheid through assembly pronouncement, correspondence and delegations to the government. Apartheid was rejected on both theological and compassionate grounds, it was sinful and immoral and hurtful, not to mention unworkable.

I quote a few examples to illustrate our Baptist Union position over the past half century. The 1948 assembly condemned - quote:

Social and economic injustice of early apartheid and the breaking of solemn pledges given to the non-European people of the Union. The 1949 assembly condemned the economic and political repression of the apartheid system and urged the government not to remove coloured voters

from the voters role and to repeal the Mixed Marriages Act.

The Baptist Union rejected so-called Bantu education and would not operate it's mission schools within this system. In 1957, the Baptist Union threatened civil disobedience when the government tried unsuccessfully to enforce segregated church worship.

The 1985 assembly authorised a letter to the State President, which declared unequivocally that apartheid is an evil which needs to be repented of and urged it's immediate dismantling. It also called - quote:

On the basis of true christian justice for universal franchise, one national education system, the abolition of influx control and the dom pass, equal pay for equal work, the accountability of the South African Defence Force and police forces, the termination of the state of emergency and of detention without trial, the removal of the group areas act and the release of political prisoners and the return of political exiles.

Our assembly resolutions were defective in several ways, notably in their caution, limited focus and theoretical nature. They were however, a sincere attempt to relate biblical principles to South African society. Assembly resolutions did not put all the blame on government policies, many recognised the weaknesses in our own denominational structures and practice.

The 1991 assembly agreed that even though we can't bear all the blame for apartheid, we can't ignore our part in it - it was sinful, hurtful and wrong. The assembly confessed that as Baptists, we too have been guilty. We have sinned in our attitudes and in our actions, for this we humbly repent. We acknowledge that true repentance will go beyond mere words and will manifest itself in a change of attitude and in positive action.

Then followed a commitment to be involved in the process of building a new nation. This assembly therefore urges the Baptist Union and all it's constituent churches to exercise a constituent prophetic ministry and to work for the creation of a new society, based on the biblical principles of respect, justice and righteousness. We shall seek - by precept and by practice, to bring about a moral and spiritual reformation in all aspects of our community life.

Commissioners, it is in this spirit and with this commitment that we appear before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, thank you.

REV RAE: Mr Chairman, we want to make it clear that those resolutions were passed by the Baptist Union Assembly when the Convention and Union were one body. However, one of our members has said that we might have plastered the walls of parliament with our resolutions but notwithstanding these resolutions, the Baptist Union did not put them into practice both internally or externally.

We confess that within the structures of our own Baptist Union, we practised apartheid. For instance, we established theological training institutions to cater to for the cultural diversity of our denomination and it was only in 1986 that we closed the college exclusively to train Black pastors, in order to train students for the ministry together.

Our national executive was dominated by White members and right up until 1989, had only one Black representative on the leadership body. It follows then that decision making and policy setting for the Baptist Union was done by Whites, most often without any consultation with the Black members of our churches.

Right up until 1987, we kept separate lists for White and Black pastors and White and Black churches. Many of our decisions mirrored the status quo during the apartheid years and for this we humbly repent. Associations within the Baptist Union are also formed on racial and linguistic lines - for instance, within the Baptist Union was the Association of Churches from the Afrikaans community which formed the Afrikaanse Baptiste Kerk, the Black churches formed the Baptist Convention, the Indian Churches the Baptist association of South Africa and the Baptist Mission. As you can see, our denomination reflected apartheid in it's overall structure.

During these years - apart from the resolutions that we passed, we did not sufficiently challenge the legitimacy of unjust institutions in our country or the apartheid policies. We tended to marginalise those who wanted to do more than simply speak against apartheid within our ranks. We did little to alleviate the sufferings of the oppressed people of South Africa. The White members of our denomination benefited from apartheid structures socially and economically.

The assembly in 1991, expressed the Baptist Union's repentance in the following words:

"This assembly of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa gives thanks to God that statutory apartheid has been abolished. We acknowledge that statutory apartheid was but a symptom of tradition, traditional and ingrained attitudes within society and sadly, even within our church.

As Baptist we too have been guilty and to our shame - as individuals and churches, have sinned in our actions and attitudes, we've allowed them to be governed by the pattern obtaining in society. We have conformed when we ought to have confronted.

While we have condemned the legislation, many of us have enjoyed the economic and social privileges resulting from it, for this we humbly repent. We acknowledge that true repentance will go beyond mere words and must manifest itself in a change of attitude and in positive action"

In 1987, the Baptist Union went through a painful division within our ranks. Approximately 60% of the Black churches within the Convention Association withdrew from the Baptist Union, to form a separate body namely, the Baptist Convention of South Africa. We acknowledge that attitudes and actions reflecting apartheid within the Baptist Union were partly responsible for this division.

The Baptist Union has acknowledged that our relationship with the Convention has caused much pain. And heart searching negotiations within our brother - and negotiations with our brother body have not been easy as we have sought to come to grips with attitudes and actions of the past, including our sins of commission and omission.

I've asked the Reverend George Ngamlama, lecturer at the Baptist Theological College, Pastor of the Nancefield Church and past Associate General Secretary of our Union to share very briefly, something of what we are seeking to do to address the sins of the past.

REV NGAMLAMA: Thank you Sir, thank you for reminding me to be brief, surely I will be brief. In looking into our denomination, we had to deal with certain matters concerning ourselves, so I'm going to deal with five points and then come to a conclusion. I'm going to deal with the structure, the leadership, the development and a word to our members and our relationship with the convention.

1. Looking at the BU structure: We have removed from the BU, associations formed on basis of race from constitutional structures of the Baptist Union. We are striving to reflect the unity of the body of Christ in our denomination.
1. Under leadership: The leadership of the Union in the past was predominantly White and male. We are striving to ensure cultural and gender inclusiveness in our leadership.
2. Development of people: We have embarked on a programme called: "Impact 2001" which involves utilising all our available human resources and developing leadership skills among all our people. For our member churches

we have initiated BU care - that is, Baptist Union Community Assistance and Relief and I quote: "To motivate and enable Baptist churches to witness to Christ through social concern and social action that will empower deprived communities to address their physical, social and other needs and to provide relief when necessary"

3. Our relationship with the Baptist Convention: After many years of struggle and conflict, we have committed ourselves to a process which will heal the hurts of the past and to work together in fellowship as brother bodies of Christ. In a joint resolution of the 8th of November this year and I quote "We are still committed to pursuing actively the ideal of structural unity but agree that we continue as two separate bodies for the present time".
4. In conclusion: As a denomination in partnership with others, including TISA, we are committed to building a nation based on truth, righteousness and justice.

Thank you Sir.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much.

REV HOFFMEISTER: Chairperson, Commissioners and honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, our President ...[indistinct] Mathikela and myself, greet you on behalf of the Baptist Convention of South Africa.

The Baptist Convention of South Africa was formed in 1927 as then known, the Bantu Baptist Church. This church was started as a missionary expression of the then South African Baptist Missionary Society, an extension of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa. In 1987, the Baptist Convention declared its independence from the Baptist Union for what it perceived to be institutional racism in the life of that community at that time.

...[indistinct] segregated church, we share a common existence up to that time with our sisters and brothers and therefore have to speak to that.

CHAIRPERSON: I don't want to butt in, you are not going to read the whole thing?

REV HOFFMEISTER: No, Sir, you can relax Sir, I will stick within my 10 minutes - I am not reading the whole thing.

CHAIRPERSON: ...[inaudible]

REV HOFFMEISTER: So, I think the submission will therefore focus on the experience of our church prior to 1987 and also subsequent to that. We as representatives are deeply aware of our constituency that we represent, people that have suffered and experienced a great deal of suffering, people like Fenus Mapetu, Simon Lukwe, Gideon Makanja and the late John Darries, the late Reverend Kumalo, Mahola etc. And we therefore are deeply thankful to the Commission for granting us

the privilege to place before this ...[indistinct], the experience of Black Baptists in this country.

I want to elude briefly to the struggle of Black Baptists against apartheid in this country. The struggle for Black Baptists against apartheid was a struggle within the church, it was also a struggle to justify one's fight against that system to a church that was providing the moral, spiritual support for that system. The struggle meant challenging the import ...[indistinct] theological framework labelled as: "Conservative Evangelical".

This framework had an inherent arrogance that gave itself the right to declare that it discovered absolute truth all on it's own, it refused to accept the european cultural, social or political framework within this theology was formed. This led to a debilitating separatist ...[indistinct] mentality fuelled by such concepts as the remnant who were prosecutors and custodians of God's truth and values.

I just want to highlight some of the effects of this theology:

It ...[indistinct] life for Black christians between secular and spiritual and so it made us as Black christians, to separate our faith experience with our life experience. I mention for example, personally as a theological student while studying theology in the 1980's, living within a stones throw away from St Barnabus where many historical resolutions were taken by people like yourself Sir, Doctor Boesak, Naude and Chikane, and how that I could not reconcile those historic developments with theology. That that event did not inform my theology because it was politics and it was separate from my reality.

And so we live the kind of dichotomised life that was reflected in statements like: "You can rather send a man to heaven hungry than to send him to hell with a full stomach". Students at college - you know institutions, were victimised for taking part in simple marches like Pollsmoor, to call for the freedom of our President today, as well as also observing alternative holidays in those days like June the 16th. This was a dichotomy - it was also a dichotomy, it was also a theology that made Black Baptist to embrace the fears of Whites.

I refer to our submission to similar experience in the United States where the great leader Malcolm X talked about two kinds of Black people and those times, the house slave and the field slave and how that house slave developed an ethos, an experience to associate life his life experience with the master so that when the master was sick, he felt the same pain as the master felt and said: "Master, we are sick".

And in some ways we have as Black Baptists - when there was liberation in our country or also significant processes, we were deprived by our theology to enter into those experiences because inheriting that theology was the same fears of White people. The difficult thing for us therefore as Black Baptists, was not that we faced

the threat of communism or the threat of liberation theology but the pain of our experience is that our oppression came from our sisters and brothers.

We place ...[indistinct] on record however, even though we have not participated as we should have as Black Baptists in the struggle for liberation, we thank God for our international Baptist community, particularly our African/American Baptist community who made a major contribution to our liberation. We thank God for people like Jesse Jackson, Senator Bill Grey, Charles Adams, W Smith, Wyate Walker, Clifford Jones, Jerry Sanders and even Leon Sullivan, for formulating the Sullivan principles.

The Baptist World Alliance exerted continued pressure on the apartheid government even though they did not do enough. Individuals, such as Keith Clemmence, the present General Secretary of the European Council of Churches as well as Pierre ...[indistinct] a Norwegian church person, the American Baptist Churches in their fight for disinvestemnt was the forefront of this campaign.

In 1987, when we separated from the Baptist Union, we had to go on a journey to discover our rich Baptist heritage of liberation and freedom, we had to embrace people like Doctor Martin Luther King Junior and also the great President Doctor Jimmy Carter. ...[indistinct] the true Baptists have a reputation of being troublemakers - if fighting for freedom, is considered making trouble and yes, Baptists have a history of non-conformance.

Baptists were amongst the first free church type who refused to acknowledge the King and Queen, ...[indistinct] or any other secular person, as the head of the church and for this killed and martyred. And today we accept - it is with deep sadness that we regret that we, both Black and White Baptists have betrayed our ancestors and have not pursued the freedom fight with the kind of vigour and commitment demanded by our own tradition.

We have all been responsible for selling out our ancestors and defrocking our heritage of it's radical socio-political edge, allowing apartheid ideology to co-opt and relegate Baptist theology to racial exclusive church bench on a Sunday morning.

We want to note Sir, that we have had Baptists - we had to make choices and that we as a Baptist community disowned by our practices, those who were conscripts, those who suffered in Robben Island, those were in exile. And in 1977, when we were still part of the Baptist Union that reflected our ethos, it was the 100 years celebration of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa and at that time, to open that occasion the then State President, the Honourable Doctor Jim Fouché was asked to come.

At that same assembly it was announced that Steve Biko had died and would be buried that same Saturday. A resolution was taken that we should not express ourselves in any way, on the death of Steve Biko as that had no consequence to us. That demonstrated to us our ...[indistinct] as Baptists at that particular time.



We have amongst our ranks ordinary pastors like Pastor Lukwe, who - all he did was make the hall of his church available to the United Democratic Front at that time and was threatened by fellow Baptists to stop that kind of action. He was imprisoned, his wife came home and found that they were evicted from their manse, only because they made the hall of the church available to that community.

We have people like Gideon Mekanje that was arrested and that was interrogated by fellow Baptists. We have the late John Darries coming from a Baptist World Alliance Meeting and taken from the aircraft at Jan Smuts and taken to John Vorster Square for interrogation. We have a Baptist Missionary on the role of the Baptist Union, arrested in Zambia because he was found to be involved with dubious activities with the South African Defence Force.

The Baptist Union, the Baptists in general have embraced the military establishment, they've elected people that were in high office of the South African Defence Force, to the highest position of leadership. In 1989, the Baptists showed their colours by holding the annual assembly in the barracks of the South African Defence Force in Kimberly.

For these things, we as Baptists today feel ashamed but God has given us a second chance, God has given a vision called: "Vision Jubilee 2010" and God has given to us as Black Baptists, a promise that we believe he will fulfil and it says: "I will restore to you the years that the locust have eaten".

We know that God is going to help us to work towards the economic reconstruction of our country, to help us to re-educate theologically our constituency from a process of dependency to liberation. He will help us also to develop programmes of development, he will help us to develop leadership and to take our place as a reconciled community.

Amidst all of this pain and suffering we have kept our hands out to our sisters and brothers within the Baptist Union, to seek reconciliation on the basis of truth and justice. We thank God that the atmosphere amongst us has increased dramatically to make that possible. We thank God that we've committed ourselves next year to a Baptist Truth and Reconciliation Commission where we can expose our pain and ask those difficult questions - to seek forgiveness, repentance and healing and restitution.

There is much work to be done but we make a promise that as sure as we are seated here and we are sure that the promises that God has given to us, that we will take up our place as a Baptist community in rebuilding our country, in fighting poverty and developing the human resources of our people.

We thank you for these moments even though we had to shorten it dramatically to contribute to what we are saying. We thank God for your leadership Sir, for the TRC and we thank God that we were able in a small way, to participate and endorse in our

assemblies the objectives of this Committee both by ourselves and by our international partners. I thank you Sir.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very, very much, I'm very impressed at the restraint that you have shown that your sermons have been reduced in length. Just I think, a brief intervention - Mncebisi?

REV XUNDU: Thank you your Grace.

I do want to commend you for the open way in which you have shared with us your pain and your struggle towards coming together as a church and also making a tremendous confession of the sins of the past. You will have noticed that almost all the churches - the interdenominations, which had persons coming from different divides, shares in one way or another, the great degree of complicity that those who were privileged went on to enjoy at the expense of those who were not privileged.

Nonetheless, one can see from what you have given here, that you are undertaking to address those as far as it is possible and make sure that the scandal of division in the church is not perpetuated through your efforts. I do not have any particular question except to say those words, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON: We probably would have asked questions but I think that your submissions have been comprehensive and have covered the sort of areas that we would be asking questions about. And we do want to give thanks as we have been giving thanks to others for the candour, for the humility and the openness which as I said, we would hope will begin to permeate our society,

And we thank you for the efforts that you are making of being reconciled as the two groups, reconciled on the basis of truth and we will be looking with some interest at your own Baptist TRC. So, thank you very, very much and God bless you. You may stand down.

---

This verbatim transcript was provided by the TRC and is reproduced here unedited. RICSA does not assume responsibility for any errors.