

SUBMISSION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

TO THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

18TH AUGUST 1997

The Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa and Apartheid

Introduction

This submission is based on the TRC's request for contributions from the faith communities in its investigation into "the extent of cross human rights violations" and "to know how the different faith communities saw the context in which they acted, as well as the motivation for their viewpoint and actions". It deals only with the witness of the PCSA against Apartheid in South Africa. But it needs to be said that the Church and Nation Committee (Rhodesia) failed ever to propose to the Assembly any emphatic indictment of the policies of the government of Ian Smith or any kind of support for the liberation struggle there.

When the PCSA was formed at first a separate 'Missions Committee' (later 'African Missions Committee') of the General Assembly administered black congregations in the denomination. A strong element of white paternalism pervaded the system until it ended in 1962-63. On the other hand all regional councils ('courts') within the PCSA have always been fully integrated, as has the General Assembly.

The first black Moderator of a Presbytery in the PCSA was the Rev George Molefe, who was elected Moderator of the Presbytery of Port Elizabeth in 1953. The first Black Moderator of a General Assembly of the PCSA was elected only in 1972, to serve in 1973-74. He was the Rev Dr James Jolobe. In 1996 the sixth black Moderator of Assembly, the Rev Dr Maake Masango, began his term of office. It was only in 1995, however, that the General Assembly of the PCSA first met in a black township.

1. What the theology, decisions of the General Assembly and the actions of individuals did to guard against gross human rights violations during the apartheid era.

In 1949 the Assembly endorsed a Christian Council statement opposing apartheid and called for a qualified franchise for all races. In 1950 it

opposed the government's intention to disenfranchise Coloured voters and again called for a qualified franchise. In 1951 it protested against government measures as 'diminishing the rights of the non-European'.

In 1960 the PCSA participated in the famous Cottesloe Consultation on apartheid. A Consultation Statement was produced that opposed apartheid in worship, in prohibition of mixed marriages, migrant labour, low wages, job reservation and permanent exclusion of 'non-white people' from Government.' The Assembly of the PCSA approved the statement and encouraged congregations to study the Consultation's reports.

Various PCSA Assemblies also protested against:

- the right claimed by the Minister of Native Affairs in the 'church clause' in his Native Laws Amendment Bill to prevent mixed congregations from meeting (1957 and 1962);
- the right the General Laws Amendment Bill gave the Government to detain blacks or control their movements (1962 and 1963);
- influx control, the 90 day detention clause and detention without trial (1964); and
- the requirement of permits for mixed audiences, aspects of the Suppression of Communism Act and the amended Criminal Procedures Act (1965).

From 1968 and particularly from 1979 onwards there was a change in the Assembly. There was a handful of leaders who kept bringing to the notice of the Assembly and Presbyteries the urgency of taking a stand against apartheid and cutting across it in both life and policies. Criticism of apartheid and its laws sharpened. Assemblies became the scene of heated debates between politically liberal and conservative commissioners.

Only in the 70's and 80's did the PCSA become more united and vociferous in its opposition to apartheid through its theological and ethical standards set forth by the Assembly. These were in opposition to apartheid and should have prevented Presbyterians from participating in 'gross human rights' violations.

In 1970 the PCSA endorsed the critique of the apartheid ideology in the **Message to the people of South Africa (1968)**, after the conservative wing had blocked this for a year. In 1971 it commended all publications of the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (SPROCAS) to ministers, sessions (local church councils, consisting of minister and elders) and members for study.

In 1973 the General Assembly was held in Benoni. The Town Council of Benoni was persuaded to allow the use of the Town Hall for the Assembly services and a multi-racial reception hosted by the Mayor. The Assembly approved a **Declaration of Faith for our Church Today**. This was a contextual confessional statement proclaiming Christ to be Lord over the political arena and the gospel to be opposed to racism. It was written in credal form for use in worship.

A revised form was given more definite status as an official doctrinal standard of the PCSA in 1986. With it the PCSA became the only Church besides the DRM (Coloured) Church with its Belhar Confession (1982) to recognise that apartheid was so serious as to demand a confessional statement and actually to promulgate such a statement against the heresies involved in justifying apartheid. In 1992-94 the Declaration was revised, again with the intention that it should not be a general summary of the faith, but a contextual one.

In 1979 the Executive Commission of the PCSA endorsed and published a small book called **A different Gospel: A Critique of the Theology behind apartheid**, debunking the biblical exegesis with which the DRC had sought to justify apartheid. This book was effectively used by the delegates of the DRM Church at the General Council of the WARC in Ottawa in 1982 in persuading the Council to suspend the DRC's membership until it turned its back on apartheid.

In 1981 the PCSA at last began to face up to the fact that mere protest is of very little use without active resistance. The Church and Nation Committee put certain proposals before the Assembly and after a tense debate, the Assembly voted to defy the Government on three issues the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act the Group Areas and Urban Areas Acts (by supporting any ministers who chose to live near their congregations in defiance of the Acts) and quoting persons and literature banned for political reasons

This made the PCSA the first Church in South Africa (apart from Archbishop Clayton's defiance of the proposed 'church clause, in 1957) officially to espouse the principle of active civil disobedience. Though several congregations, one of them a large congregation, left the PCSA and though the Church was threatened by the Government and accused of stirring up civil disobedience, the PCSA's stand caused other Churches to join it and helped push the Prime Minister to review both the Mixed Marriages Act and section 16 of the Immorality Act. The repeal of these acts later in 1985 was the first key part of the apartheid system to be dismantled.

In 1984 the General Assembly authorized and commended for public worship a prayer that prayed not for the Government but the courage to remove from power, if it was God's will, those rulers who had misgoverned and oppressed in favour of leaders who would obey his will, enact just laws and eradicate the divisions in South Africa.

In 1986 the Assembly welcomed the publication of the **Kairos Document** and endorsed aspects of it.

In addition to the General Assembly adopting resolutions which opposed apartheid and which gave the PCSA the opportunity to act, certain individual ministers as well as members played a decisive role in opposing apartheid at considerable personal cost. It is not possible to mention all by name, but here are a few examples:

In 1962 the Rev Rob Robertson started a congregation in North End, East London and later in 1975 in Pageview, Johannesburg, with the specific purpose of bringing together white and black, rich and poor. Dr Dawid Venter, in a 1994 doctoral thesis, cites the North End congregation as the first move to take actual steps to reverse the segregating effect of apartheid on congregations and to set an example to the nation.

In 1979 the Rev Douglas Bax wrote the publication already referred to called **A Different Gospel: A Critique of the Theology behind Apartheid**. He was also to a large extent responsible for bringing to the Assembly's attention, and so to the PCSA, the need to make a stand against apartheid. To quote a convener of the Church and Nation Committee, of which the Rev Douglas Bax was a member in the late 60's: "Douglas brought forward a large amount of material, most of which became incorporated in the Committee's deliverances. I believe that those reports constitute the beginning of the PCSA's voice being officially raised in protest against apartheid".

Others like the Rev Mamabolo Rhapesu were imprisoned for their vocal opposition. Others again like the Rev Ian Thomson were taken into custody and given suspended sentences.

Then there were those like the Rev Nemedi Mphahlele, the Rev Dr Maake Masango, the Rev Pakiso Tondi and others, both white and black, who made their own distinct contribution.

Amongst the members of the PCSA one person stands out in particular and that is Dr Wendy Orr, who perhaps came the closest to opposing gross human rights violations by revealing the extent of the torture of prisoners in detention without trial and the medical profession's complicity

In 1971 and repeatedly thereafter the General Assembly supported the right of conscientious objection on both political and pacifist grounds. In 1973 it called on congregations to pray not only for servicemen, but also for those fighting for liberation on the other side. From 1979 on the General Assembly paid particular tribute to Peter Moll, Richard Steele and later conscientious objectors, political and pacifist, as 'courageous confessors of the faith'.

In 1982 the Assembly approved for distribution to its congregations a study pamphlet on **War, Revolution and Military Service** that sought to stimulate clear thinking about the role of the military and conscientious objection in an apartheid society and actually aimed at moving the denomination towards opposing service in the SADF. In 1990 it endorsed a document on 'The Different Approaches to the Ethics of War and Conscientious Objection' that further challenged the principle of service in the SADF and by stating:

The Assembly expresses repentance that our Church failed to take a clear stand long ago in favour of conscientious objection to serving in an army that was used to defend the apartheid system by military threat and action.

In the period 1990 - 1994 the PCSA concerned itself to a large extent with the process leading up to the first democratic elections in South Africa. The focus was very much on the National Peace Accord, where Ministers and elders were encouraged to become peace monitors. Many did become actively involved in monitoring the elections or as electoral officers.

The General Secretary of the PCSA was instructed to sign the Peace Accord on behalf of the denomination in 1992. The PCSA Assembly appointed representatives to the Conference in 1990 that drew up the Rustenburg Declaration. The document was sent to Presbyteries and Sessions for study and comment.

The PCSA also supported the SACC in its stand against the armaments industry.

The 1993 General Assembly approved the holding of "Be Real" encounters. The following report was brought to the 1994 General Assembly:

"Be Real" weekends (were) to promote healing and community building within our Presbyteries and local churches. A subcommittee was established to design a programme and ran the first "Be Real" weekend in May.

Eighteen participants representing nine Presbyteries met from 6th-9th May at Modderpoort. The male/female, black/white, youth ratios were well balanced. All the participants felt it a worthwhile experience and were enthusiastic about setting up similar weekends in their own areas.

It was a new experience for some participants to sit in a circle and share together without a formal agenda. But all participants discovered that when they got to know the personal stories and experiences (especially cross-cultural) of another person, the dividing barriers began to fall away. The process is not an easy one - time and space must be provided to build the trust necessary to build bridges. Each participant needs to take equal responsibility for what happens in the circle. In the end ALL were amazed by the process, where with each session, they were able to be more and more "real" with one another.

In addition to the Church and Nation Committee there was an Ad Hoc Committee on Military Chaplaincy.

Theology and action taken by the PCSA's Ad Hoc Committee on Military Chaplaincy to de-escalate the conflict of the past and actively oppose (gross) human rights violations.

1. Theology of the role of Military Chaplain

In 1984 the Ministry Committee of the PCSA put a proposal before the General Assembly that an Ad Hoc Committee be formed to "investigate theologically the role of the Military Chaplaincy". The proposal was adopted by the General Assembly and an Ad Hoc Committee was formed.

At the 1985 General Assembly, the Committee put a proposal to the General Assembly that chaplains be sent to minister to the armed wings of the ANC and PAC, as well as the Zambian and Zimbabwean Defence Forces as it did in respect of the SADF. The Assembly adopted the proposal.

At the 1986 General Assembly, the Committee put three proposals to the General Assembly:

1. The principles to govern the role of Military Chaplaincy
2. The Ministers of Defence, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa, as well as the Secretariat for the ANC and PAC to be informed of these principles of Military Chaplaincy with an offer to discuss them with the respective parties.

3. The Ad Hoc Committee on Military Chaplaincy to arrange a conference on ministry in situations of conflict.

These 3 proposals were adopted by the General Assembly (p 213, Proceedings and Decisions of GA 1986).

The 1987 General Assembly adopted a proposal from the Committee to draft a Church-State agreement in regard to members of the PCSA serving in the SADF.

1. The 1987 General Assembly noted the response from the Chaplain General of the SADF to "The Principles of Chaplaincy Ministry" and authorized the Committee to negotiate with the Chaplain General's office and report back to the 1988 General Assembly.

2. At the 1988 General Assembly, the report of the Committee stated that copies of the Principles of Chaplaincy were sent to the various parties agreed to at the 1986 General Assembly resulting in:

- a. an official view from the SADF through the Chaplain General, and
- b. a reply from the ANC making mention of their Chaplain in Lusaka and indicating a willingness to enter into dialogue.

3. The Principles were negotiated with the Chaplain General. Amongst those principles agreed upon was Principle No. 3:

"The presence of chaplains should not be construed as moral support for any government or military group. Neither should it be construed as an approval of violence as a means of resolving disputes. Further, the chaplain shall not allow himself to be used as a morale-boosting agent".

In the report to the 1988 General Assembly the following was stated:

"During the past 2 years, the Ad Hoc Committee on Military Chaplaincy has ... achieved much in its understanding and opening the lines of communication, but very little has changed as regards the status quo. If we are to safeguard our integrity and the effectiveness of our witness, the Church would seriously have to consider the possibility of withdrawing from the chaplaincy service".

The Committee brought the following proposal to the General Assembly:

"The PCSA withdraws all PCSA chaplains from the SADF with effect from 1 January 1990. This decision to be sent down to Presbyteries and

congregations and if adopted by a majority as reported to the General Assembly, will become effective from that date".

The General Assembly, after considerable debate, did not adopt the proposal.

4. The Committee negotiated a separate meeting with both ANC and the PAC delegations in March 1988 in Harare to discuss the Principles of Chaplaincy and the possibility of chaplains being appointed to the two liberation organisations.

According to Bishop Stanley Mogoba, the PCSA was, to the best of his knowledge, the only denomination to meet with the ANC and PAC in this manner by taking a delegation from South Africa with the specific purpose of having dialogue. Other denominations had taken the opportunity to make contact with the two liberation organisations if they happened to be in Harare or Lusaka on Church business.

It would be reasonable to say that the General Assembly, in receiving the reports from 1985 to 1990, showed its readiness to confront the SADF and the liberation organisations on the matter of the use of violence as a means of resolving conflict. In that respect, the PCSA is seen to have worked to resolve conflict by dialogue.

In 1974 a delegate of the PCSA at the National Conference of the SACC, in a long and dramatic debate, persuaded it to adopt 'the Hammanskraal Resolution'. This pointed out that the SADF was being used to uphold the political status quo and challenged member Churches to call on their individual members to consider refusing military service. Three top officials of the PCSA publicly dissociated the PCSA from this resolution and it was widely publicized that the Executive Commission of General Assembly had dissociated the PCSA from the Hammanskraal resolution.

Like the other Churches, the PCSA never took a radical enough stance on the issue of military service; too many of its members were taken in by the propaganda of the Government about the liberation movements as Communist controlled organizations.

2. What the PCSA failed to do to guard against gross human rights violations during the apartheid era.

The PCSA never thought of joining in any of the early demonstrations against apartheid, like the defiance campaign in 1953. The leaders of the Church were white and conservative and that would have been perceived as too direct an involvement in 'politics' with which to dirty the Church's

hands. To the extent that it openly opposed apartheid, this was limited to words, not action. In 1963-65 R.H.W. Shepherd, a conservative Scot who had worked as a missionary at Lovedale for many years and then joined the PCSA, convened the Assembly's Church and Nation Committee. Led by him, the Assembly during this period gave what amounted to qualified support to the Government. In 1964 it opposed sabotage and revolution aimed at 'transferring the governing power to other hands'. Much more naively, in 1965 it even defended the Bantustan policy against the criticism of the British Council of Churches **report, The Future of South Africa**. In 1966 it defended the right to freedom of speech, but supported the Government's attempt 'to prevent unlawful subversion'.

The issue of disinvestment came to the PCSA General Assembly in 1986 and 1988, but like all other mainline 'English speaking, Churches, except the UCCSA, failed to take a clear stand in support or to propose any effective alternative. Certainly white and also black economic interest inhibited support for the campaign, but the issue was complex. Polls showed black people themselves to be deeply divided over the issue because of the implications for the economy and hence the threat of unemployment on a large scale.

In 1983-4 the Presbyteries of the PCSA rejected union with the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA). There were several reasons for this, but the Moderator of General Assembly, who visited several Presbyteries at about the time they voted, reported to a meeting of ministers in Cape Town that he had sensed that the real motive was the fear of a black majority Church. It is tragic that the PCSA was unable to move into a united black majority Church ahead of the democratization of the body politic.

General Assembly often compromised its stand by a failure of nerve, influenced by the conservative element in the Church (white and black). At nearly every gathering of the Assembly pious resolutions on the South African racial situation were submitted to the government, expressing abhorrence of certain aspects of legislation and calling for their withdrawal, but these submissions at Assembly level appeared to have no impact on local congregations. There was almost a complete failure to give a lead in matters of a political nature. Any comment by ministers bold enough to refer to e.g. the death of Steve Biko would have been met with the accusation of "bringing politics into the pulpit" and members would have been lost. Apathy, fear, indoctrination and an unwillingness to forgo privilege all contributed to a climate conducive to gross human rights violations.

The PCSA maintained the facade of being united while black concerns were often ignored by Assembly and Presbyteries resulting ultimately in the formation of an entirely black organisation within the PCSA. In 1985 the black ministers began to meet annually in a Black Ministers' Consultation. In 1987 this was renamed the Presbyterian Black Leaders Consultation (PBLC) and opened to lay leaders. It helped greatly to empower black leadership and black commissioners became far more outspoken in debates on politics at Assembly.

One of the negative issues still prevailing in the PCSA is the discrepancy between the stipends for black and white ministers. (Congregations are responsible for paying their ministers, but can apply for grants from central funds if they are unable to meet the minimum stipend). Most black congregations are poorer and larger than white congregations and many black ministers are on the minimum stipend or close to it. As even now hardly any black minister serves a white congregation the effect of this is a clear racial economic divide. The General Assembly in 1981 charged three committees to investigate whether ministers could all be paid from a central fund. The following year the investigation was stopped. Strangely, most black Commissioners helped to vote down its continuation. Two committees are presently looking at the matter again.

In respect of military chaplaincy it must be seen that the Assembly did, in some respects, stop short of taking bold steps, such as withdrawing its chaplains from the SADF chaplaincy. It thereby lost the opportunity of stating categorically that it would not run the risk of being identified with the political agenda of the SADF and the SA government and would instead offer a different form of ministry to Presbyterians serving with the SADF.

In summary

To sum up, it could be said that the PCSA never tried to justify apartheid on biblical grounds, as did some Churches. Nor did the PCSA at the level of General Assembly and Presbytery practise racial separation, as did some Churches. The PCSA through its General Assembly gained insight and courage in the 70's and 80's to oppose apartheid in word and deed, although inhibited by the wide range of theological views from liberation theology, with its emphasis on political freedom, to charismatic theology, with its emphasis on personal healing. This contributed to the PCSA's frequent failure of nerve to grasp the moment of opportunity to oppose apartheid vigorously and courageously at the level of General Assembly, Presbytery, Congregation and the personal.

The PCSA, then, has much to repent for but also some things in its witness to rejoice over. It was one of the first Churches, if not the very first, to issue

a statement of serious repentance for its own failure and the failure of its members to oppose apartheid more resolutely and with a spirit of greater self-sacrifice. The Assembly in 1990 hailed the promise of a new, democratic and more just Constitution for South Africa and expressed repentance on behalf of the PCSA

for all the many ways in which we, as Presbyterians, have collaborated or compromised with the apartheid system and failed to stand against it with enough prayer, courage, determination and self-sacrifice.

It instructed that a short liturgy of confession along these lines be distributed to all congregations in South Africa for use at special services of repentance on Sunday 16 June 1991.

4. How should the PCSA confront the Present and the future to help heal the past and reconcile those historically in conflict with one another.

1. Repent. In spite of the 1990 call to repentance there should be further opportunity for PCSA ministers and members to do so, as it is very possible that there was a number of ministers and members who did not actually make use of the opportunity. Furthermore, having had opportunity to hear of some of the gross human rights violations through the TRC hearings, as well as the submission by Dr Beyers Naude and others, it may be even more appropriate and more desired now to confess and repent.

2. The PCSA and other Churches and religious groups should conduct their own "TRC" within their Church or religious group, making their confession before God and to those who suffered, both black and white, by telling and listening to one another's stories. And then forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us.

3. We need to work consistently for justice, e.g. economic justice, starting with the PCSA but seeking to avoid the perpetuation of dependence of black ministers and congregations on their white counterparts, e.g. via stipend grants from the PCSA's central funds, which are derived from assessments levied on congregational funds.

4. We need to make our congregations a home for people of different ethnic backgrounds.

5. We need to promote Kingdom values now with regard to sexual behaviour, family life, honesty and a godly approach to work and relationships at work.
6. We need honest and earnest prayer for people and for justice and reconciliation in specific matters.
7. We need to minister to and pray with victims of human rights violations, sharing God's love and restoring grace while repenting of our disobedience to God in not taking up our cross in opposing apartheid.
8. We need to give the opportunity for ministers and members to make personal confessions such as some ministers have done, e.g. "Some of us spoke, wrote and lived for God's Kingdom and a shared society. But in retrospect one regrets not having sacrificed more so as to give a stronger lead for change". And again, "That I personally could have done more, there is no doubt. That the PCSA could have done more is obvious. But we did have some real heroes".
9. We need to care for and counsel those traumatized by the past. Trauma centres are already make this possible.
10. The PCSA, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the UCCSA need to accept the challenge, to put to the DRC and the three sister Churches of other races, to unite. It is therefore to be welcomed that soon after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the RPC and the PCSA Assemblies agreed to re-open negotiations for union.

5. Finally, a comment on the TRC and its late request for a response from the Churches.

We thank you for the opportunity your invitation gave us to reflect on our past, to rejoice in the positive things which were done to oppose apartheid and to guard against gross human rights violations and also to look at ourselves in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to say to all who suffered in any form whatsoever as a result of apartheid and whose suffering could have been lessened had we as the PCSA been more faithful to the demands of the Gospel, we are sorry and we will endeavour by God's grace to be more faithful in word and deed.

There is, however, a sense, especially amongst those who were most committed to opposing apartheid in word and deed, that while the work of the TRC is one way of guarding against history being repeated in respect of the gross violation of human rights, two questions remain:

1. Has the TRC not become biased in favour of the liberation organisations? One strong opponent of apartheid says, 'First I must state my attitude towards the Truth Commission. I have great admiration for some of its members, especially Desmond Tutu..., but I still find it a body biased in the direction of the liberation movements, and upheld in this by the presentation of Max du Preez on T.V... In the old days we bent to conform to the wishes of those in power, and we are doing the same again'. Another comments, 'Sometimes the TRC gives the impression of a clean hands, holier than thou attitude. If we all made a full clean breast of our lives, we would all be standing on the same place as people who have contributed to wrong, hurt and confusion'.

2. Why was the TRC so late in approaching the Churches? There was plenty of time. If reconciliation is the business of the Church, according to the Gospel, why did the TRC start with the political parties and the military and leave the Churches to the last?

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