

Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 17 November 1999. [disclaimer](#)

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REV. DOUGLAS BAX: Chairperson, Commissioners, our delegation consists of myself, Douglas Bax, Pakiso Tondi and Allistair Roger who is the General Secretary of the church and has come along to support us.

May I just begin by explaining that - oh we have to take the oath.

ADMINISTERS OATH.

REV. DOUGLAS BAX: I was going to explain that in consultation, my colleague, Pakiso Tondi ruled that I should begin for two reasons. One, that he belongs to a generation that...he is of the generation to which the present and the future belongs, whereas I belong to the generation that is passé. And secondly, because as he put it, "You as a white Presbyterian have much more to confess for white Presbyterians than I do as a black Presbyterian!"

But I would like to point out, Mr Chairperson, that he is the man who is wearing the gold socks, if you are able to see underneath the table! Let me say that everything that I will now say is qualified by the recognition which we all have that the witness of the Presbyterian Church, like the witness of all the mainline churches against Apartheid, was weakened by internal dissent, lacked appropriate outrage and vigour, and apart from a few things, failed to move beyond mere protest to action. At the same time, it is also true, that like the other mainline churches there are, we did make a stand to some extent for justice. Although we may now very much wish that it had been far more resolute and heroic.

When our church was formed in 1897, it was the bringing together of a number of white congregations and Presbyteries, with some of the congregations and Presbyteries of the Scottish Mission Churches. That led to the fact that we actually started off as a church that was to some extent separately organised in that for a long time the Presbyterian Native Missions Committee supervised the black congregation. Sometime before 1940, the name of this was changed to African Missions Committee, but it still remained a somewhat paternalistic way of doing things and only ended in 1962/3. Even then, congregations continued to be racially designated until 1970. On the other hand, from the very beginning, all regional courts in the Presbyterian Church of South Africa have always been fully integrated and in principal all congregations have always been open to all races. We hesitated for a long time to elect black leaders, partly because of this way of running things and one of the causes for shame, really, in our church is that such an outstanding black leader in the Presbyterian Church as George B. Molefe, who was a very prominent educationalist and community leader in Port Elizabeth, was elected only to be Moderator of the Presbytery of Port Elizabeth and never succeeded in Moderator of the General

Assembly, which is the denominational Synod. The first black Moderator of the General Assembly was elected only in 1972, to serve in 1973/4 and he was Dr. James R. Jolobe, a prominent Xhosa writer and poet. He was incidentally, originally a member of the so-called, of what was then the Bantu Presbyterian Church.

We have recently elected the seventh black Moderator of the Assembly and he is a black lay-person, a Professor at Umtata. Economically the PCSA has remained a church in which there is a great deal of discrimination in the payment of its ministers. The Assembly sets minimum stipends, but unlike the Anglican church for instance, each congregation pays its own ministers, except that those ministers whose stipends fall under the minimum are assisted from central funds. As most black congregations though much larger are much poorer than white congregations, many black ministers are on the minimum stipend or close to it. By the early 1960's in some qualification of that, it had at least been ruled by the church (SIDE TWO) ...[inaudible] even whether the ministers had contributed or not. Because in some of the black congregations, they could not contribute. But it remains true that this was the system and only in 1981 was there a move actually to implement the principle of equal stipends. The next year, however, the whole idea was dropped, partly because no black Commissioner would stand up and support it. One must therefore recognise that to some extent that education and certainly the money and the majority factor, because whites have always been the majority in the Presbyterian Church of South and later Southern Africa, led to basically white control in the denomination. Now, before 1948, as far as protests against racial injustice are concerned, I think we have to confess that the Presbyterian Church of South Africa as it was then, was really more concerned with issues like temperance and Sunday observance, than racial injustice as it purports to the Assemblies and Assembly resolutions. Nevertheless, in 1941, the Assembly did appoint a committee to contact other churches to draw up a joint statement calling for a reconstruction of the social order based more fully upon the moral principles of the Christian religion and to present this to the government. And made other statements as well. In 1948 of course, when the white electorate elected to government the National Party with its more crudely racist platform of apartheid, this provoked the Presbyterian Church to more frequent, more outspoken criticisms of the racial situation beginning, let's say in 1949 by supporting the statement of the Christian Council of South Africa opposing Apartheid and in 1950 with the attacking of the disenfranchisement of the coloured voters. Various assemblies appointed took fairly strong protests against various bills and policies of the government, but I don't want to go into that too much because as Bishop Dowling said in the previous submission, the government didn't really take notice of that and in any case, I would add, it to some extent served as a kind of sock to the conscience of the church as well as to the conscience of its members and in a sense almost strengthened the government because the church was doing nothing. The church at this stage, never thought of moving from the comfort zone of such statements of protest to the more difficult and costly path of action. For instance, there was no thought of joining the early demonstrations against apartheid, like the defiance campaign in 1953. The leaders of the church were white and conservative and they would have seen that as dirtying the church's hand with too direct a hand in politics. But there was one man,

one Presbyterian minister who wished to go further, in particular that I want to mention, perhaps particularly because this was in this very city of East London. Under the impact of apartheid legislation after 1948, only a very few integrated congregations survived in South Africa, and nearly all of these were in the Anglican and Catholic Cathedrals in the large cities, and even in some of those the races sat separately. But Rob Robertson, the minister in this, at that time very conservative city, resolved to start a congregation that would specifically seek to be a congregation bringing into fellowship across the racial divide white and black and rich and poor. And so he resigned his post in the church that he had here, and started a new congregation in the poor and still racially mixed suburb of North End, in 1962. Dr Dawid Venter, sociologist in the Dutch Reformed Church, and an academic, has said in a thesis that he has written on this, that this was the first deliberate move by any denomination to establish an integrated congregation and so reverse the whole trend towards greater segregation that had been underway for so long. This project received a lot of support from the denomination but unfortunately there was not enough support for it in East London and eventually in 1970 the members of the congregation decided to close down the congregation and joined other congregations in East London in order to make them multiracial. In 1975 Rob Robertson moved to Pageview, Johannesburg, to run a similar congregation there, St Anthony's, and that was to become a spiritual base for christian activists against apartheid and for objectors to military conscription.

From 1968, and particularly from 1979 onwards, the criticisms of apartheid made by the General Assembly became sharper and sharper. In 1970, also, I need to mention that the Presbyterian Church came under tremendous pressure because it was the first church that had to decide its response to the programme to combat racism grants. And the government brought great pressure not only on the churches in general, but particularly on the Presbyterian Church precisely because it was the first one that had to make the decision. To the extent that Mr B.J. Vorster actually invited the incumbent moderator and the previous moderator to go and have dinner with him, where he treated them to a great meal and also some alcohol, in the hope that this would soften things up. And one of those ex-moderators actually led the debate to leave the World Council, but in the end what happened was that the Presbyterian Church, although it decided to cancel its subscription, and we can't really use the excuse that the government had said that it would not allow any money to go to the World Council anymore, because I think most of those present actually felt that they wanted to do this, but it did at least take a swipe at the government that was harder than that of its criticism of the WCC and it also said that it wanted to invite, it extended an invitation to the WCC to send people out to explain its point of view on this. In 1973 the Assembly invited all sessions to display a notice outside their churches that people of all races were welcome to all services, and in 1977, that was interpreted as a directive. In 1973, the Assembly took a step further in its opposition to apartheid by approving the declaration of faith for our church today. But the whole reaction of the church to that was fairly typical, because there was an attempt to make this an official confession faith, or declaration of faith by the church. And out of its conservatism, feeling that it already had a declaration of faith, a confession of faith, Presbyterian confession of faith, there was resistance to this until thirteen years later.

Partly as a result of the fact that this was now being used by Presbyterian churches overseas. This was actually made an official confession of faith of the church and so the Presbyterian Church became the only church besides the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, with its Belhar Confession in 1982, to adopt a confessional statement against apartheid, and in that sense officially declare that apartheid was a hierarchy, because this was a statement against the kind of pietism which tries to separate faith from politics by emphasising the lordship of Christ over the political area and also by emphasising the fact that the gospel opposed apartheid.

Another important Presbyterian document against apartheid was drawn up in 1979. That year, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches organised a conference for all its member churches in South Africa on the "Church and Social Responsibility in South Africa" and the Dutch Reformed Church sent out to all the delegates its official memorandum for the conference as its official memorandum, copies of its report adopted in 1975, the so-called Landman Report, "Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkere Verhouderinge in die Lig van die Skrif" which had a much more innocuous title of "Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture". Well, what happened then was that I as one of the delegates to the Conference drew up a statement which examined the whole basis of this document and was then officially endorsed by the Executive Commission acting on behalf of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, and so it became an official church document that was presented to the conference. It caused consternation and great anger amongst the Afrikaans Reformed Church delegates, but in the end, partly because it was a bit controversial, or very controversial amongst some sections, the conference decided to focus on practical issues instead of facing the underlining theological differences and so got nowhere. This was published in 1979, that same year, in a revised form with a title, "A different Gospel – A critique of the Theology behind Apartheid" and distributed to all ministers to study. It was the first and indeed the only published in-depth examination and debunking of the biblical ...[inaudible] with which the Afrikaans Reformed Churches for so long sought to justify their support for apartheid. And it was used as the basic document by Dr Alan Boesak and others when the General Council of the World Alliance Reformed Churches met in Ottoway in 1982, to get that body to declare apartheid as a hierarchy, or the theological justification as a hierarchy. Pierre Rossouw, the ecumenical officer of the Dutch Reformed Church also later admitted that it had played a significant part in moving the Dutch Reformed Church away from that Landman statement to its later formulation called "Kerk en samelewing" which for all its faults, did at least recognise that the apartheid ideology was a mistake.

In 1979, the Assembly took a very strong stand against the information department scandal. One of the interesting things that happened was that the business committee of the Assembly and the General Secretary at the time refused to print some of the proposed resolutions because it was afraid of government action and asked the convenor of the committee please to reformulate them. He refused, however, and the Assembly supported him by voting in favour of all of those proposals. But I think that the basic issue that the churches had to face, and this was recognised by some of

us, was at that we had to move off the safe ground of statements or fairly safe ground of statements, into the area of action. And that was why we began to think a great deal about the issue of military service and conscientious objection. Because so long as christians in our churches protested against apartheid, but still were willing to serve in the police or especially in the defence force, which was there to back up the police by its presence, by its threat of force and by its use of force and still keep the political status quo in place, nothing would change. So in 1971 and repeatedly thereafter, it was proposed to the General Assembly that it should support the right of conscientious objectors on political grounds, that is on so-called Just War doctrine, as well as on passive grounds. And in 1973 it called on congregations to pray not only for servicemen but also for those fighting on the side of the liberation fronts. In 1974, occurred the Hamanskraal Resolution, at the annual national conference of the SAC, which was proposed by myself as a Presbyterian delegate and seconded by Dominee Beyers Naude, that was fought tooth and nail by very prominent members of other churches represented here, whom I will not name now, and in fact was not supported at all by the General Secretary of the SACC, even though Bregalia Bam has mentioned this as a resolution of the SACC, because John Reece was very unhappy about it and blocked communication between us and the newspapers, so that they could not get much copy. This caused an uproar in the Afrikaans newspapers particularly, and the government reacted very sharply and B.J. Vorster saw that they quickly passed a special law that any person who used any language or does any act or anything with intent to recommend, encourage, aid, incite, instigate, suggest or otherwise cause any other person to refuse or fail to render any military service (that sounds typically Nationalist Party Government) ...[intervention]

CHAIRPERSON: I'm sorry, but I thought we had agreed that you would have a total of thirty minutes, meaning thirty minutes for the presentation and the question and answer session. Now you have, well even if you haven't agreed, you have already got thirty minutes in this, and you have still got your colleague and the question time. I will give you another, I mean we have fifteen more minutes which would mean you have 45 minutes.

REV. DOUGLAS BAX: Well, we started at half past, but let me continue then.

The next year I tried to pursue this matter further, but John Reece and the staff of the SACC actually blocked that. The PCSA itself never took a radical enough stance on the issue of military service, but it did regularly pay special tribute to people like Peter Mar, Richard Steel and other conscientious objectors as courageous confessors of the faith and in 1982 approved a document to be distributed to all congregations to help members of congregations rethink the whole issue of conscientious objection and in 1990 did the same with another document called "The different approaches to the ethics of war and conscientious objection". That year it also adopted the following motion:

"The Assembly expresses repentance that our church failed to make a clear strong 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".

It also came very close, not only to refusing to appoint further military chaplains, like the Anglican Church, but also to withdraw all its military chaplains and adopted a motion that we should appoint chaplains if possible, to the liberation forces of the ANC and PAC and actually met with those bodies in Harare, and I understand was the only body to do that in order to try and arrange that, although nothing came of it. Let me just say that, let me just quickly end by saying in 1981 the General Assembly moved quite specifically off the base of protest to action by voting to defy the government on three issues. One was the prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, by calling on its ministers to marry across the racial line. The second was the Group Areas and Urban Areas Act, by supporting any ministers who chose to live near their congregations in the other racial area in defiance of the act, or other racial areas, and thirdly by defying the government on the banning of people like Beyers Naude and banned political literature by encouraging ministers to quote them, deliberately quote them from pulpits when this was relevant. This made the Presbyterian Church the first church in South African, apart from the defiance of the proposed church clause by the Church of the Province that Archbishop Clayton threatened in 1957, officially to espouse the principle of act of civil disobedience and this was quite a costly decision because we lost several congregations as a result of that. But several other churches came out in support of the Presbyterian Church then as far as the Mixed Marriages Act was concerned. I think I'll end there except just to say this: that in 1990 the Assembly hailed the promise of a new democratic and more just constitution for South Africa and on behalf of the Presbyterian Church, expressed repentance 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 and instructed that a short liturgy of confession along these lines should be distributed to all congregations in South Africa for use at special services of repentance on Soweto Day.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much Douglas. Pakiso Tondi?

REV. PAKISO TONDI: Thank you Chairperson, Sir. To save time I'm not going to go through some of the steps that we have in answering question number three, because that would be repetition as they have already been mentioned and we share the same sentiments as other denominations, English speaking denominations, that have given some principles insofar as how we can tackle the future. But I'm just going to highlight a few. We support what has been said this morning that churches need, and other faith communities, need to have their own TRC within their church, making confession before God and those who suffered, both black and white by telling and listening to one another's stories and forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven us. This is one thing that we think for us to address the future and make reconciliation a reality, that we need to tackle. And one of the challenges that we think faces not only the PCSA and other faith communities, is the war against poverty. We

think we shall wage a war against the abject poverty which is so obvious in our country and we think it shall be our task, because some of the business people are our congregants, to convince them that the wealth that they have accumulated during the apartheid era, it's time that they should show repentance, and bring it back so that it can be used to address this abject poverty that has engulfed our country. The PCSA and the Reformed Presbyterian Church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the UCSA need to accept the challenge that has been put to the Dutch Reformed Church 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 Reformed Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa's Assemblies agreed to reopen negotiations for union. We thank you for the opportunity, Sir, your invitation that has given us a time to reflect on the 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 and other faith communities been more faithful to the demands of the gospel: We are sorry and will endeavour by God's grace to be more faithful in word and deed. Thank you Sir.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. We are deeply grateful for that. Virginia?

MS V GCABASHE: Thank you Chairperson. I would like to commend this panel on the way in which you have made your presentation. When Dr Bax spoke about the Hamanskraal SACC Conference, you reminded me of the young Dr Bax who was so vigorous in opposing some of the things that were brought before the SACC, I can see that you haven't lost that spirit. The question I was going to ask has been answered partially because I was going to ask why we have so many Presbyterian Churches in this country when we are trying to come together? That was my one question. Then my other question was: How are you planning to address the question of white control in your church? I think you mentioned something about white control in the leadership of the church?

REV. DOUGLAS BAX: The reason why we have several Presbyterian Churches in this country is firstly because there were missions from different countries. There was a mission or two missions from two different churches, two different Scottish churches, in what is now called the Eastern Cape. There was a mission from a Swiss Church in the Northern Transvaal and there was a mission from the Paris Evangelical in Lesotho. And then there was a breakaway from...well let me first of all say when the Presbyterian Church of South Africa was formed in 1897 there was an attempt to include all the congregations that did subsequently join that church, plus all the Scottish missions, but some of the Scottish missions - one of the Scottish missions, particularly that of the Free Church of Scotland decided to stay out, largely to stay out, and then in 1921 or 1920 rather, some missionaries were sent out to look at the whole issue and they made a recommendation that it would be better if the black congregations first of all formed a church on their own that would much later join up with the white congregation, with the Presbyterian Church of South Africa. So in

1923 what was called the Bantu Presbyterian Church formed, and because the Presbyterian Church of South Africa at that stage was asked if it would release some of its black congregations to join that church, it gave them the option to do so, which many of them did. Some of them subsequently came back. For a long time the Assemblies of the two churches had representatives from each other present at all their meetings and the idea always was that eventually they would join up. There have been attempts to unite those two churches and what is now called the Evangelical Reformed Church which is the church in the Northern Transvaal, but these have failed. Partly because of the making the Transkei independent which aroused quite a feeling of nationalism amongst many people in the Transkei and made people in the Reformed Presbyterian Churches that subsequently became a bit hesitant to join us. Partly because I think of the experience of white paternalism in the PCSA. We hope now that things will move ahead. We have tried in the past and the attempts to unite have always failed.

REV. PAKISO TONDI: In as far as the second question is concerned, I can say that the fact that I'm here together with the two gentlemen is a sign of repentance. There is repentance in the PCSA as far as white domination is concerned. You can see that I don't even belong to their generation. We have just fallen short in bringing a woman, but there has been a great change because of the Presbyterian Black Leadership Consultation which was founded in 1985 and I'm glad to hear that the chairperson says churches also have in the Black Anglican Forum which will help to speed up, to make sure that there is equal representation in some of the churches.

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