

United Congregational Church of Southern Africa. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 17 November 1997. [disclaimer](#)

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The Congregational Church represented by David Wanless and John De Gruchy. Thank you very much and we have to express our appreciation that you have shown so much patience waiting for this to happen. We are grateful.

ADMINISTERS OATH.

REV. DAVID WANLESS: Chairperson, Ndade, I present the submission of the United Congregational Church which was prepared by our Secretary Designate, Rev. Des van der Walt and Dr Steve de Gruchy. I'm also very grateful that Professor John de Gruchy is here to assist me where my faith falls short. In case I overrun, let me begin with the end, if I may Sir, and say what our confession is. Like many of the other churches today, with the benefit of hindsight we need to be honest with ourselves and with the country and confess that for all our statements, sermons and letters and reports about the evils of apartheid, we really did so little to rid our beloved land of its tyranny. We did so little to bind up the wounds of those who were victims of the system and to labour with them for justice. We so often relied on the one or two who were willing to stick their necks out and as a people we were scared and anxious to be bold and prophet witness. And so we apologise to those whom we abandoned in their difficult plight and to the nation for failing in our moral responsibility.

We knew all along that hideous things were happening, and that is often why we said what we said, and did what we did. We recognise that what is being revealed by your commission will have a profound impact on future generations in the country. There are sins to be forgiven, wounds to be bound up, hatreds to be reconciled, buildings to be re-built, pupils to be taught, leaders to be held accountable and this is the task of the church of Jesus Christ. And although we are a small church with few resources, we acknowledge this calling and commit ourselves to nurturing this truth, healing the nation and building a culture of tolerance and justice, so that our children and their children may never again suffer the evil which has so plagued the life of our nation. How, Sir, did we get there? We are numbered among the English speaking churches, although I think the predominant language in our church is Afrikaans, probably the second most common language in our church is Zulu, followed by Tswana. But we prepare to celebrate 200 years of congregationalism in South Africa in 1999, when we mark the arrival of the first London Missionary Society missionaries in Cape Town. And although one can criticise the strategy and actions of many of the missionaries in our country that came from overseas, I think they all understood something of what Dr John Phillip, the first supervisory representative of the LMS meant when he said,

"If a minister is guilty of dereliction of his duty and advocating the cause of the oppressed or in relieving the necessities of the destitute, I plead guilty to that charge". And I think many of our ministers in the United Congregational Church would echo those words of Phillip. Phillip was the precursor of a long line of missionary heroes, such as Robert Moffat, Newton Adams after whom Adams College was named, Alden Grout after whom the town of Kwa Zulu Natal was named, David Livingstone, John MacAud, and in our time, of our own memory, the Reverend Joseph Wing whose statements form a large part of our submission.

We are glad to number among the congregational heroes of our faith many prominent people. In fact it was the first president of the ANC, the congregational minister Reverend John Dube who helped to address the questions then arising in 1912, and he then, even then, charged that christianity had an offensive smell to a large number of natives, as people of colour were then known. And with the greatest love and respect for you, Sir, and your achievements as a Nobel Peace Prize winner, we are proud to claim that the first Nobel Peace Prize winner was a Congregationalist, Chief Albert Luthuli, and this year [APPLAUSE] when the church established a Roll of Honour, his was the first name to be enrolled. But like many of the other denominations that have been present here, Sir, we must acknowledge that although resolutions were taken at Executive Assembly level and statements issued by our Secretariat after hours of debating, these were very often the positions of the leadership, and they were not embraced by the average occupant of the pew in the white churches of our denomination. I recall a time when I was a minister in Uitenhage and you, Sir, had done something that had particularly offended the authorities of the day and I said from the pulpit that the day would come when people of South Africa would be grateful for people like Bishop Tutu and later in that week I was visited by two of my deacons, who advised me against making such inflammatory statements from the pulpit. But I praise you for your consistency, Sir, because when you advised or called upon the ANC to suspend the armed struggle, you were then the flavour of the month in Uitenhage and I could smile in the pulpit once again.

But from the beginning we took the position that apartheid was not simply wrong and evil in terms of its results, but of itself, and we were early in the decision after the Presbyterians, to embrace the Ottawa Declaration that apartheid is a sin and its theological justification a hierarchy. And for those from the reformed tradition to label anything a hierarchy in the calvanist understanding of it, gives you some idea of how earnestly we took the opposition to apartheid. Like many of the other churches we were a trans-natioanl church and some of the victims of apartheid were in neighbouring countries. Our church life in Mozambique was devastated by the civil war initiated by Renamo. Zimbabwe suffered terribly through a civil war in which the white minority government of Ian Smith received moral support from the apartheid regime. Namibia was held as a vassal state and Botswana suffered greatly from cross border raids. Besides the violence and destruction of a policy, our churches suffered. Our church in Graaff Reinet was just one example to which I will refer later, of many congregations that had to be uprooted. And Joe Wing, our General Secretary for the first 20 years of our life, said in 1987 that it is the ultimate ...[indistinct] to designate

God's green and brown earth as black or coloured or white land. We lost many of our institutions, like Tiger Kloof, which count among their illumine the first two presidents of Botswana, and we share with the pain of other churches in the trauma of the closing of the Federal Theological Seminary which still resounds on our church life today.

The advent of the tricameral parliamentary system was particularly hurtful for the Congregational Church, Sir. Two of our ministers, former chairman in fact, the Reverend Allan Hendrikse and Andrew Julies, led the Labour Party into accepting rolls in the House of Representatives. But the UCCSA Assembly moved swiftly to distance itself from that and in fact that difficulty persists. Just this very year, two months ago, the Assembly had to resolve that in the interim, until we can do it constitutionally, ministers of the UCCSA should not contest elections or accept political appointments at any level. The opposition to the apartheid regime and particularly something that has already been touched on, the programme to combat racism, we never in the UCCSA questioned the rightness of that, even though it cost us our mother church, the Union Church in Kloof Street, which left the United Congregational Church because of our support of this programme to combat racism. And that schism still remains and is hurtful to many in our denomination today. We encouraged our ministers to oppose the Mixed Marriages Act and encouraged the registration of children without reference to their racial classification. The Congregational Church has a long tradition of passivism and so from the start, it was in the forefront of its opposition to conscription and support for the End Conscription Campaign. The UCSA was the only church to make a clear and unambiguous stand in favour of the Kyros Document which was produced amidst the horror of the 1985 State of Emergency. And throughout we have remained mindful of the fact that we had to challenge the laws and policies of apartheid, while at the same time trying to minister to its victims.

And so, we must admit Sir, with the other churches, that it is to our shame that the UCCSA in many places mirrored the apartheid society of the church. We are not unmindful of the fact that there was something hypocritical about condemning apartheid in the State and yet being a racially divided church in ourselves. Resolution after resolution was passed, church programmes were introduced to enable black, white and coloured member churches to be integrated, but with little success. Even attempts to move ministers and to cross cultural and racial settings were not produced with vigour. If I may end, Sir, by going back to the reference I made to the Graaff Reinet church. In 1993 the UCCSA held its Assembly in Graaff Reinet, and after that I wrote and broadcast on the SABC and subsequently incorporated into a book of meditations that I published on behalf of my local church, during which we had this to say:

"During October 1993, in Graaff Reinet, we met to consider the affairs of the church, and the one irony that we could not escape was the fact that we were meeting in the Parsonage Street Congregational Church, which is no longer situated in Parsonage Street. You see, some twenty odd years ago, the authorities of the day decided that the

good christian folk of that church were of the wrong racial group to be worshipping slap bang in the middle of the white part of town. They were forced to leave the historic old church building which is today used as a theatre. And they had to move under the Group Areas Act to the more politically acceptable coloured part of town.."

And this story can be repeated a thousand times over in South Africa. The challenge facing this committee and our country in the future is how we go about unscrambling our segregationist omlet and we don't know how to do it. We don't know yet fully how to go about restoring justness and wholeness to this land, ravaged for so long by the false gods of race and creed. Not many white South Africans feel particularly responsible for the collective sins of our apartheid past, but each of us, of whatever race group who have been part of the privileged class, have made individual slights or hurts for which we do need to feel utter regret. Even after showing our repentance by some form of righting past wrongs, many of us will still go on making the same racial mistakes. How will we repair the damage? Listen to God speaking to the Old Testament Prophet Joel: "I will restore the years that the locust has eaten and you shall eat your fill". And then note what St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "From the first to the last, this has been the work of God. He has reconciled himself to us through Jesus Christ."

And so to end Sir, I suggest that the way forward for every individual and for the nation as a whole is to allow God, who has broken down the dividing walls in Jesus Christ, is to come into our lives, our personal decisions, our national choices. To enable the process of reconciliation and of new beginnings to happen. He has welcomed us back to God's side, and Christ wants to restore the years that the locust has eaten, and I wrote, "So, Reverend Hufkey and your congregation in Graaff Reinet, this is my personal sorry to you and to all the others who have been hurt by actions like mine. I know you find it hard still to walk along Parsonage Street, past the lovely old building. I hope that one day soon, you will be able to worship within its walls again. Until that happens, let us join together with Christ in forgiving all that we must, in repairing what we can and go to the future in the confident hope that the scars will heal and that there will be singing when we are all, praise God Almighty, free at last !

Thank you Sir.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you, thank you. John? Thank you. Bongani?

REV. B FINCA: Chairperson, I've got two questions to your relief! You have referred to resolutions and statements and how good churches are in writing these and publishing them and make them known and then hide behind them. I think a number of us will find that statement very true, because if the resolutions made by churches were acted on, we would have been an example of an obedient church in the light of racism. And that confession, I think, resonates with a number of us who belong to the church. In your way forward you then report to us a resolution or a statement which perhaps needs to just be interrogated a little bit. Where you say the UCCSA wishes to place on record its respect for the TRC and its hard work, please be assured of our

prayers and support for your task which is so crucial for the future of our land. My question is how much of this is representative of the church that you speak on behalf of? How many members of the church, I know it's very difficult to say how many, but in terms of how much is the church making its own membership respond to the TRC? And how much of it is ending at the level of the top leadership in resolutions which do now get filtered down to the membership of the church?

REV. JOHN DE GRUCHY: Thank you for the question. I think it would be helpful just to give some background in order to answer that question. The majority of the church, the UCCSA, is black. Only 5% I think it is, is white. And the majority of the black membership, I think it is something in the region of 55%, is so-called coloured. The church is, to a large extent, a rural church. Very large concentrations in places like the Northern Cape, Botswana and so forth. And that all reflects something of the old missionary tradition. I mention this because the reconciliation that has to take place within our church is less between white and black, although that of course is important but it's a small white constituency, of the 350 congregations you can understand, not many of those are white, but there is a struggle in terms of the relationship between South Africa and the Christians in Botswana and Mozambique and these are very important issues which we don't think should be lost sight of in terms of the work of the TRC. The relationship between South Africa and the other countries of Southern Africa in terms of the role of the church (this has been eluded to earlier today by the Church of the Province so that when we are talking about reconciliation, that is a very important factor that has to be taken into account and secondly, the relationship between coloured members and African members in the church. This is an area, I think, that is still to be worked through, and I am not sure that it has been dealt with at all hitherto today in this Commission....[TAPE 5]..research that has been done recently on reconciliation within the coloured Catholic community in the Western Cape for example, the word "reconciliation" means something quite different to what we are talking about here today. And we need to recognise that and I think this is true within our own church. How to deal with these issues that are issues of the future is going to become quite critical and it has to do with a whole range of issues which I needn't allude to here. The role of the church in regard to this is going to be crucial and I think the fact that the church does exist in all the kinds of communities, is critical. I am not sure whether that answers the question, but I wanted to take the question, the answer, to a different point and maybe you anticipated...

REV. B FINCA: Thank you very much Dr de Gruchy. My second question perhaps related to the answer you have given to the first one and I wanted to direct it straight to you if I may. It is on the question of the statement which was made earlier by the CPSA in their very moving submission to the Commission this morning. Bishop Nuttal drew a distinction between costly reconciliation and cheap reconciliation. At the time I did not have the chance to ask him to unpack, although I suspect I know what he means, but I do not know how much is being said from churches in their teachings to their own members about the real cost of reconciliation and how much people in this country today think that reconciliation is going to come out just very

cheaply. Is there work that is being done in terms of spelling out, unpacking the concept of reconciliation and how costly and painful this process is if we are to follow it in this country.

REV. JOHN DE GRUCHY: That is clearly not a question addressed to the UCCSA but more broadly and I'm happy to respond. It does, I think, I think it is clear that reconciliation is a long process and it's already been said many times by the Chairperson of this Commission and others that when the work of the TRC ends, reconciliation still has to be achieved. This is a catalyst and I think today we have been celebrating in some ways the many people who have suffered and died in the struggle against apartheid, who identified themselves as christians, and who, I believe must be regarded as the martyrs of the struggle in South Africa. I think it is very important for us to remember them because it reminds us of the cost, not only of achieving what we have achieved so far, but that what still has to be achieved will be presumably at cost as well. Hopefully, not at as great a cost, but nevertheless, at cost. And we would want to, as a church, identify with what the ICT said earlier this morning, and with what was said by Professor Terblanche; we wouldn't want to comment on the economics of this in terms of its economic correctness, but unless there is a far greater sharing of the wealth in this country, unless there is money that will bring about the kind of drastic reparation that is required, there will not be reconciliation. And in this respect, can I just make one please, we are a relatively small church, but we lost 400 mission schools, we had about 100 churches removed by Group Areas Act. That's a small church, suffered in that way. Other churches which are much larger suffered more greatly in terms of buildings and loss of schools and that's been alluded to by the Catholic Church and others. I hope that in the whole question of looking at the role of the church in the future, and talking about the role of the church in terms of education and other things, that this be kept in mind. I don't think the church is asking for reparation, that would be totally out of place in terms of the enormous reparation that has to be made to the poor people and the victims of apartheid, but it is indicative of the cost that the church has to face, and we need to take courage and strength from those who during that period of time held the faith courageously and to realise that that is the tradition in which we stand and to which we have to align ourselves. So yes, indeed, reconciliation continues to be costly.

REV. DAVID WANLESS: If I could just add to that within our own church life we must freely admit that in all the racial groups there are congregations, communities, where the work of this commission is a non-event, or in fact where it is regarded as being destructive, but I think that there are sufficient of our ministers and leaders who are committed to the whole process of reconciliation, which after all, is a very christian word. And as the church's media officer and the editor of its journal, certainly my commitment is that from this kind of gathering, the message needs to go out that because we have been reconciled by God's action and Jesus Christ, we have got to be reconciled to one another. The most biblical word of all is what you're doing, and that's remembering. It sums up the Old Testament, it's at the heart of the christian eucharist: remember. And by the telling of certain stories, we can't hear all the stories, but if I know that someone else's story has been told, then my story of

hurt has been told. And I think that's got to be our commitment of all the churches, that we have got to remember and repent and be watchful.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. I have sort of ritually to look to my right and left, just so that they don't feel I am leaving them out, but I am in fact leaving them out. I want again just to say that somehow we hope that what is happening here can be communicated to our people. It is not easy, but I mean the mood, the texture of the moment – it's not always the words, it's the gestures, the tone of voice, the things that get to touch hearts. Of course we are the incarnational and so it is ultimately human beings who have to keep communicating and we hope that somehow what has been happening here today will in fact get communicated to people out there just for them to know that this is a very, very large part of what we are about. Thank you very much.

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