

**CHURCH UNITY COMMISSION**  
**REPORT FOR MEMBER CHURCHES - APRIL 2013**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The focus of the work of the Central Committee over the past year has continued to rest on the two areas of developing the 'Trajectories of Unity' and improving communication between the CUC Central Committee and the National and Regional levels of the Member Churches as well as between the Central Committee and the individual United Churches across the country. The development of both of these areas is essential to fulfil the aim of supporting and growing the witness of the Church within the local community by encouraging individual churches to work together in their engagement with their community.

**2. TRAJECTORIES OF UNITY**

The trajectories of Unity were noted in the report of April 2012 and remain the focus of the development work of the Central Committee. These trajectories remain:

- Co-operation in ministry and mission at local level
- Development of common Preaching and Liturgical Resources
- Co-operation in training of students and post-ordination training
- Developing and strengthening Centres of Hope
- The ministry of oversight.

The Consultation in June 2013 is planned to encourage discussion on these trajectories so that the work of active witness of the Church in the community can be developed with the co-operation of the local churches of the denominations and the United Churches already established in many communities.

**3. UNITY AND MISSION CONSULTATION**

The Consultation in June 11-13 in Gauteng is regarded as vital to the ongoing work of the Church Unity Commission and it is hoped that the Member and Observer Churches will nominate representatives who will participate fully in each of the five trajectories set out above. There will be opportunity on the final morning for representatives to meet in denominational groups to discuss how they will best be able to report back to the leadership of their denominations so that the discussions started at the Consultation can be fed back into the life of all the churches.

In addition, it is hoped that the representatives of United Churches from the different regions will report back to the churches in their regions. The final denominational meeting will also give opportunity for the United Churches to gather and to raise matters that affect their particular situations.

**4. UNITED CHURCHES**

During the past year the Secretary General has made a number of visits to United Churches in Natal, Eastern Cape, Gauteng and Limpopo. These visits have been part of a concerted effort to improve communications between the Central Committee and the United Churches and to try to understand and so begin to address a number of difficulties that are being faced by the individual churches. The visits included churches in Limpopo, Eastern Cape, Southern Cape and Gauteng.

The difficulties can be categorised as follows:

#### 4.1 General Comments

The circumstances of the United Churches range widely. There are some large, well-established churches running multiple services led by a team of permanent clergy and lay leaders who provide a safe environment within which the members can grow in and live out their faith in the communities they serve. At the other end of the scale there are others, especially in the rural areas as well as historically disadvantaged who have no full time clergy and struggle to even have any vestige of sacramental and pastoral support. Between these extremes one finds a wide range of situations that vary as a result of their particular history as a community.

For a number of churches, the circumstances that prevailed when they were established have changed so markedly over the years that questions need to be asked about their continued efficacy in the community they now serve. For many the change in demographics has resulted in the establishment of additional churches in the vicinity by the Member Churches who have responded to the changed circumstances.

These situations raise questions that need to be addressed by the regional and national bodies of the Member Churches and the United Churches.

#### 4.2 Variety of Constitutions of United Churches

Each of the United Churches operates under a Trust Deed developed at the time of institution in discussion with the Regional Bodies of the Member Churches participating in the establishment of the particular United Church. Over the years the Model Constitution has been amended with the concurrence of the Central Offices of the Member Churches. At the same time, the individual Trust Deeds have also been amended with the concurrence of the Regional Bodies of the Member Churches responsible for their oversight. This has resulted in a number of differences between the Trust Deeds operating in any region leading to a lack of uniformity. This leads to difficulties for the administrators at a Regional level.

#### 4.3 Trustees – Appointment and attendance at meetings

The Trusts of the United Churches set out clearly the process by which the Member Churches appoint Trustees to each United Church. There are many who take the responsibilities inherent in such appointments, but there are also many who are not fully aware of the implications of such appointments which are vital to the efficient management of the churches concerned. For this reason there are delays in the passing of budgets of the churches and in the approval of decisions.

#### 4.4 SARS Compliance and Reporting

The responsibility of churches to comply with the requirements of SARS and of the PBO status has grown over the years. The Member Churches use different approaches to this. The basic unit in ACSA is the Diocese rather than the local church so compliance is dealt with by the Diocesan Secretary or Administrator and individual parishes simply forward their Annual Financial Returns to the Diocese and leave the rest of the process to that level of administration. Other Member Churches deal with the matter at local level which requires each church to ensure compliance.

In the well established United Churches there is a level of administrative expertise to deal with such matters, but there is a concern that many of the smaller units have not kept up to date with the administrative changes of recent times, and so are not compliant with the requirements. At present the Central Committee is not geared to assist in any way in these matters, and the present level of communication between the Central Committee and the United Churches will need to improve considerably before the situation can even be assessed.

#### 4.5 Pastoral support from Regional bodies of Member Churches

The Trustees of the United Churches have a purely administrative role in the oversight of the churches. Yet many of the issues raised at meetings of the Trustees are of a pastoral nature concerning the ministers serving in the United Churches and these are not always met.

Of particular concern is the provision of ministers in rural United Churches and where these are provided they have very little opportunity to provide pastoral ministry to the members who are seen so spasmodically. This creates pressure on the lay leaders within the churches who are then called upon to provide care to the membership without adequate support for themselves.

#### 4.6 New contacts with regard to United Churches

There have been a couple of enquiries about the establishment of new United Churches in specific areas. Information has been sent to these places and they will be followed up later in the year.

### 5. TIES WITH THE SACC

There remains a concern regarding the lack of representation from the SACC at Central Committee meetings.

### 6. CUC WOMEN'S COMMITTEE

The Women's Committee has struggled through lack of attendance from the representatives appointed by the Member and Observer Churches. Over the years this group has provided a wonderful conduit to the Women's Groups in the Member Churches and it is important that this continues.

### 7. OBSERVER CHURCHES AND WIDER MEMBERSHIP

Contact with the Observer Churches is a vital element in the promotion of ecumenical dialogue and witness, and it is sad to report that communication has not always been as consistent as it could have been. Often this is due to changes in representation such that notices and minutes do not always get to the current representatives. The work of the Chair of the Central Committee in this regard started to bear fruit towards the end of 2012 and it is hoped that the participation in the Consultation in June 2013 will strengthen these ties considerably.

### 8. WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

A concern was expressed last year at the cost of printing and distribution of the material for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. IT was agreed to distribute this in electronic form which was done early in January 2013 and the Churches were asked where possible to distribute this to the congregations they served. It was further advised that where

Churches wanted the material in printed form they could order it from the Secretary General. No replies were received by the end of February.

## **9. ROLE OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL**

It has been possible for the Secretary General to arrange a number of visits to United Churches in several areas over the past year. This has been a most fruitful part of the work as it has been possible to begin to get a picture of the very different circumstances within which the churches are operating, and the resources upon which they can draw. It is also important to try to understand something of the history of the individual United Churches to be able to see how they fit into the present situation in their local communities. It is hoped that this will bear fruit in enabling the Central Committee to have a clearer picture of the situation across the country.

It was a real pleasure to attend a session of the General Assembly of the UPCSA in Stellenbosch, and be able to bring greetings from the CUC to that body. However, notice from other Member Churches regarding their Synods and Conferences was not usually forthcoming and sadly there was not the opportunity to make personal contact with the churches on these occasions. It is hoped that the Consultation in June will provide an opportunity for the Executive to meet with the Heads of Churches present at the gathering.

## **10. ONGOING DISCUSSIONS ON FULL COMMUNION BETWEEN EPC, MCSA, UCCSA, and UPCSA**

The sub-committee that is being formed to continue these discussions has still to report back to Central Committee and the matter remains in hand.

## **11. REPRESENTATION ON CENTRAL COMMITTEE**

The Central Committee meets only three times during the year, and it is vital that the Member and Observer Churches are fully represented on those occasions. There have been times when none of the representatives of a Member Church have been present and it is hoped that there will be a concerted effort to appoint persons who have a real heart for the work of the CUC in building strong relationships between the Member Churches and providing a forum for the ongoing witness of the church in the communities that we serve together.

## **12. CONCLUSIONS**

It has been a steep learning curve for the Secretary General over this first year in office, but it has become clearer that the role of the CUC in the witness of the Church in the world needs to grow in providing practical support for local churches to work together within the community they serve. It is as we develop the relationships at the local level that the churches will begin to grasp the possibilities of living out Jesus' prayer for Christians in every generation, "May they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."