

CHURCH UNITY COMMISSION
REPORT FOR MEMBER CHURCHES - APRIL 2014

1. INTRODUCTION

The most significant event of 2013 was the passing of Nelson Mandela, an event that drew significant tributes from people from all walks of life. The Heads of the Member Churches of the CUC all made public statements at the time, and were significantly involved in the public services and the funeral itself. The most significant theme that ran through all of the tributes was the call for people to remain true to the vision that Madiba lived out in his own life, that of seeking unity and reconciliation in our nation and across all its peoples.

It would seem that there is no more important area for this to be expressed than in the way in which the Church continues to seek unity and reconciliation within itself as a witness to the world in which we seek to live out our faith. It is hoped that this report will reflect on the year past as well as giving some direction for the year ahead in terms of developing the vision of those who laid the foundations of the Commission in years gone by. It will also highlight some of the anomalies that have become evident during the past year and which will need to be addressed as the Commission moves forward.

2. UNITY AND MISSION CONSULTATION – JUNE 2013

The highlight of the work of the CUC in 2013 was the Consultation held at St. Paul's United Church in Mulbarton, Johannesburg, in June. The reflection immediately after the event suggested a new sense of energy and purpose for the ongoing work of the CUC, and this continued into the November meeting of the Central Committee at which a number of clear steps were identified.

The more specific features of the Consultation included:

2.1 Attendance and Representation

With the exception of the EPCSA, all of the Member Churches were well represented at the Consultation. The Observer Churches were all represented along with a number of representatives from individual United Churches.

Of significance was the attendance of the Heads of Churches with the Executive of the CUC, an occasion that enabled free and frank discussions on the new direction identified by the Central Committee for the CUC, the concern regarding the proliferation of ecumenical groupings and the overlap of particular areas of concern.

It was good to welcome Revd Canon John Gibaut, Director of Faith and Order at the WCC whose address to the meeting stressed the need for the CUC and the Member Churches to celebrate the progress made in the ecumenical endeavours of the Commission.

2.2 Keynote Speakers

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, Revd Dr Jerry Pillay and Revd Canon John Gibaut delivered the keynote addresses over the three days of the Consultation, and the Rev Purity Malinga preached at the final Service of Thanksgiving. Their input provided much food for thought for those attending. The first two keynote addresses were scheduled as 'open sessions' for the evenings on the first two days to enable interested people who were not representatives to attend.

2.3 Presentations

Presentations on ecumenical work were made by representatives from The Warehouse and the Westlake United Churches Trust and these projects provided much food for thought regarding the manner in which the Church can address the issues faced by many communities across the country. These presentations drew some animated discussion among the representatives over the following days.

In addition there was a presentation by members of St. Paul's United Church on the operation of a United Church in the community that it serves.

2.4 Follow-up Process

The original intention in the planning of this Consultation was that it should be the first of a series that would encourage the development of a united witness by the churches in addressing

social issues in the world. The meeting of the Central Committee in November considered in some detail the follow up process. This includes the setting up of regional consultations to take place in 2015 in preparation for a second Consultation in 2016.

The follow up will include an engagement with the groups within the Member and Observer Churches that are already busy in the fields that have been identified as Trajectories of Unity. This will be done through individual champions appointed from within the Central Committee to ensure good communication with the Central Committee and between the relevant groups within the churches. As work expands, the champions might draw together individuals from Member Churches to assist in the communication process for individual projects. It is particularly important that the follow up in each of the areas identified will respond to the specific questions that were raised by the groups at the 2013 Consultation. These will then provide the direction for the ongoing work of the Central Committee.

In addition, the Secretary General has been tasked with the work of engaging with the Regional leadership of the Member Churches during 2014 with a view to arranging a series of Regional Consultations in 2015 that will generate even greater participation in the next National Consultation in 2016. It is hoped that this will bridge some of the gaps that have developed between churches at regional level and also draw United Churches in each region into the work of the church in addressing the pressing issues faced by the churches today.

2.5 Centres of Hope as Beacons for Social Justice

An important development in the follow up will be the clearer definition of the fourth trajectory as “developing Centres of Hope as Beacons for Social Justice”. This change places the emphasis on the parallel thrust of both the individual projects that bring hope to local communities and on the response of the Church to the major issues that regularly boil over as communities respond to service delivery failures. It is regarded as important that the local situation must always reflect into the larger picture, while the national response must give direction to the local responses.

Of particular importance has been the need for the church at large to address issues regarding service delivery, xenophobia, youth employment and other matters frequently flaring up in different parts of the country. The churches are already engaged in many areas with work being done in association with local community organisations as well as local congregations. This work might be extended soon in the Eastern Cape as well as southern Kwazulu-Natal where rural communities struggle in extreme poverty.

Advice offices are needed to provide support for works of mediation, labour issues among the young people, development matters and post-traumatic stress counselling.

It has been suggested that the Site of Memory model be used in the Venda area of Limpopo as a mechanism for transforming and empowering communities that have been violated. One community has already started to consider the establishment of a United Church to help church and community to engage together to deal with the difficulties faced by migrants.

3. RECORD OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEMBER CHURCHES

Arising from discussions at the Consultation and questions at the Central Committee, it has been recognised that many of the newer members of the leadership of the churches as well as the representatives to Central Committee are not fully aware of the history of the CUC and the decisions already taken by Member Churches in that regard. The Secretary General has been asked to compile a single document that will include the Covenant relationship of the Member Churches and the subsequent agreements that have been adopted by the individual Churches.

4. UNITED CHURCHES

4.1 Constitutional and Relationship Matters

A number of questions have arisen during the year with regard to the constitutional matters for United Churches. It is apparent that there are procedural questions that need to be addressed at establishment, as well as other matters that are needed to improve relationships with the leadership of Member Churches at all levels.

A vital part of this process is to collect a full set of current and proposed Constitutions and Trust Deeds of all United Churches, and to set up a Constitutional Committee to look at them in terms of compliance with the requirements of SARS and other legal entities, as well as using the ideas to make any necessary adjustments to the model Constitution of 2003.

A further important step for Member Churches is to consider how the conditions of employment of a minister are compatible with the agreements entered into in the development of the relationship between the churches in terms of the CUC.

Finally, it is important for individual United Churches to be clear about their legal relationship with the CUC. There is a misconception that the Commission is seeking to develop a 'fifth denomination' alongside the Member Churches of the CUC. It needs to remain clear that the individual United Churches are always established within an agreement between specific Member Churches and that the ongoing life of each United Church must remain true to that initial relationship as amended in agreement with the Churches at establishment.

4.2 Individual United Churches

The St Francis United Church (Anglican and Methodist) was established in St. Francis Bay during 2013 and the Secretary General was able to visit Churches at Camps Bay, Hoedspruit, Natal Midlands and Secunda during the year.

4.3 Regional Meetings of United Churches

It is planned that alongside regional meetings with the leaders of the Member Churches in 2014, there will be opportunity to meet with the leaders of United Churches in the regions as well.

5. VISITS TO NATIONAL SYNODS, CONFERENCES AND ASSEMBLIES

5.1 Catholic Bishops' Conference - January 2013

The Chair and Ven Reg Gersbach attended the SACBC and presented the vision of the CUC in terms of the Trajectories for Unity. They were well received and encouraged by the discussions that followed with the Bishops.

The Secretary General attended the Clara Lubich Memorial lecture in Pretoria on 9 March.

5.2 UCCSA - June 2013

The Secretary-General attended the Induction of new SA Secretary General

5.3 ACSA Provincial Synod - October 2013

The Chairperson attended the opening service of the ACSA Provincial Synod and spoke to the new directions that the CUC was taking. Later during the Synod, ACSA adopted a resolution that:
 "Congratulated the CUC on the recent Unity and Mission Consultation held in June
 Encouraged the Central Committee to continue to develop the five trajectories,
 And
 Reaffirmed the commitment of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa to the Covenant relationship with the other churches of the Commission."

5.4 ELCSA (N-T) Synod - October 2013

The Secretary-General attended the Synod of the ELCSA (N-T) and brought greetings to them stressing the Trajectories of Unity and the different aspects of the work of the CUC.

6. REGIONAL CO-OPERATION BETWEEN MEMBER CHURCHES

During the meeting with the Heads of Churches, there had been a suggestion that regional committees of the CUC be established. This was discussed further by the Central Committee. However, it was felt that such a move would not benefit the United Churches or the Central Committee. The really important relationships that needed to be encouraged were those between the Regional leaders of the Member and Observer Churches in the Regions. The Secretary General would then be able to arrange to be present at one such meeting in each region during the year to strengthen the ties between the CUC, the leaders of Member and Observer Churches and the individual United Churches in the Region.

7. TIES WITH THE SACC VISITS TO NATIONAL SYNODS, CONFERENCES AND ASSEMBLIES

The concern regarding the lack of representation from the SACC at Central Committee meetings continues. Efforts to arrange a meeting between the CUC EXCO and the leadership of SACC failed to materialise. It is urgent that the executives of these two bodies meet to clarify roles and responsibilities.

8. CUC WOMEN'S COMMITTEE

The Women's Committee has continued to meet on the day after the Central Committee Meeting. Attendance earlier in the year was sporadic, but the change of format for the November meeting attracted a good turnout for a workshop led by Revd Glynis Goyns on the way in which addressing environmental matters could help develop relationships as they serve the community. It is hoped that this focus on practical issues will encourage further growth in the year ahead.

9. OBSERVER CHURCHES AND WIDER MEMBERSHIP

The attendance and active participation of representatives of the Observer Churches was a significant feature of the Consultation in June, and it is hoped that this will provide a significant impetus to the work of the CUC in the future. The follow up process envisaged will be an ideal vehicle for these churches to play a more active role in the work of the CUC.

10. WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

The material for the Week of Prayer in 2013 was distributed electronically to Member and Observer Churches. This reduced the cost of this material markedly, and also provided the facility for Member Churches to distribute the material as presented or to copy those parts of the material that were seen as appropriate for regional use and insert that into local publications. The material was also published in English in Word and Worship, the liturgical and preaching material published by Ekklesia and supported by the CUC.

11. ROLE OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL

The role of the Secretary General continued to develop with a concerted effort to engage with the leadership of the Member and Observer Churches at national and regional level, and with the individual United Churches as and when the opportunity arose. This remains an important part of the development of the ecumenical endeavour.

12. ONGOING DISCUSSIONS ON FULL COMMUNION

Discussions on Full Communion continue and it is expected that this matter will be reported back to Central Committee in the year ahead. Revd Canon John Gibaut touched on this matter during his address to the Consultation in June, and referred to the changing nature of ecumenical relationships in other parts of the world. He also spoke of 'Visual Unity' as being important in the witness of the church in the world today.

13. 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 one or other of the Member Church have been present and it is hoped that there will be a concerted effort by Member and Observer Churches 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.

14. CONCLUSIONS

The role of the CUC has been strongly affirmed in a number of ways during 2013. At the same time, it is evident that there are several serious gaps in the way in which the witness of the ecumenical church is being projected. These challenges will need to be addressed in the year ahead. However, such challenges are also opportunities for the CUC to continue to make a positive contribution to the ongoing work of the wider church in a nation that needs to see the church at work together in every community.