

CHURCH UNITY COMMISSION
REPORT TO MEMBER CHURCHES - APRIL 2018

1. Introduction

The Annual Report of the Commission is an opportunity to look back to the past year and also give direction for the year ahead. The primary aim is to have the report ready to be included in the papers for the meetings of national bodies of Churches which take place during July and August as well as those who meet later in the year.

This past year has seen elections for the Executive of the Commission and changes in the administrative officers through illness and retirement. There have also been significant changes in the representation of the Member and Observer Churches. Member and Observer Churches are reminded of the importance of ensuring a smooth transition in their membership so that the flow of information from both sides is maintained.

2. Quest for Unity

The quest for unity across the wide range of denominations and individual expressions of our faith remains as important and urgent as always. The celebrations of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation that have been part of the life of the wider Church recently should have been a reminder of the prayer of our Lord in the Upper Room. Every year a lot of trouble goes into the adaptation of the liturgical and scriptural material received from the World Council of Churches to celebrate this important aspect of Church life. The period from the Feast of the Ascension through to Pentecost should be a time of full engagement by churches in every community. It is hoped that local churches will adapt the material provided so that it can be used to help to develop a united impact on their community. Ascension Day is no longer a public holiday, but combined services on that Thursday evening could mark the start of the Week of Prayer, for those who follow the Revised Common Lectionary the Sunday before Pentecost in each year takes the gospel reading from John 15. Jesus is praying for unity in the Church, are we?

3. Developments in Ecumenical Engagement

The Week of Prayer is not the only time for developing ecumenical relationships, but it is the core of message that Jesus left that small band of disciples. Other ways in which we can strengthen those connections have been discussed during the past year, some with success and others without much traction being evident.

3.1. Inclusion of Organisations and Associations within Member Churches

Most Churches have a wide range of organisations, fellowships and guilds. While some of these focus on the immediate needs of the local church or denomination, it would seem important that they look beyond their local boundaries as well. This is an important means of outreach, building a network of programmes that can serve those we all want to reach in a much more effective way.

3.2. The ongoing development of United Churches

United Churches have been part of the movement towards organic unity that was envisaged in the early years of Commission. Several were established and a number of them have flourished in different parts of South Africa. However, the slow movement towards the early goals have often impacted on the life and practices of the individual churches thus established.

In cases where the local leadership of a United Church found it quite a complex balance to maintain connections with the Member Churches from which they were developed. At the same time the Regional structures of the Member Churches that have oversight over the individual United Churches were often approached with suggested changes to the original Trust Deeds and the later generations were not au fait with the intentions that were enshrined first used.

These matters were then passed to the Central Committee who had no jurisdiction over the situations and no means really of dealing with them as if they were a national body. It is important that the leadership of the Member Churches in any region are aware of their responsibilities with regard to United Churches in their region of jurisdiction, whether they are directly involved in the establishment of the particular United Church or not.

3.3. Legislation by Member Churches of the Agreements already reached

Little has been heard from Member Churches in terms of the formal legislation within the denomination and the ways in which these agreements are presented to the clergy and lay leaders within the churches. Sadly, there would appear to be little focus on this in training programmes for the ordained clergy or the lay leadership of the Churches.

4. Communication with Leadership of Member Churches

The leaders of the Churches at present are overloaded with administrative responsibilities and it is difficult to be able to engage with them individually and almost impossible to gather them together at national and regional level. Attempts have often fallen foul of the dread diaries that we all have to carry.

For this reason it is really hoped that the Conference to mark of the 50th Anniversary of the establishment of the Church Unity Commission will be seen as an opportunity for the Heads of Member and Observer Churches to meet together and share hopes, uncertainties and fellowship with others who carry the same load of responsibility.

5. 2018 - 50th Anniversary Celebration

This important Conference will be co-hosted with Pretoria University and will be presented in Pretoria but not on the University campus.

Dates: Tuesday 11th to Thursday 13th September 2018.

Suggested Programme:

Tuesday 11 th	10h00	Papers on Ecumenism in S A today
Wednesday 12 th		Discussion on Ecumenical Theological Education Challenges and Opportunities
		Church Leaders to meet over lunch
Evening		Gala Dinner
Thursday 13 th		Action Programme rooted in the Trajectories of Unity Closure and Departure after lunch

Conference Publication: A joint publication be produced by UP and CUC together

The Conference will have a clear focus on the next generation of CUC and Churches will be encouraged to select young theologians to attend and participate fully in the Conference.

6. Personnel Changes on the Commission

After the elections in March 2017, the Executive of the Commission was made up of:

Chair	Revd. Dr. Peter Langerman	UPCSA
Vice Chair	Revd. Thulani Ndlazi	UCCSA
Members	Rt. Revd. Charles May	ACSA
	Revd. Mike Vorster	MCSA
Additional	Revd. Paul Verryn	MCSA

During the past year, Revd. Musi Losaba was moved to a different responsibility within the MCSA and has been replaced by Bishop

During the year under review, the Treasurer, Mr Howard Thomas, was forced to relinquish his office for health reasons. He has rendered yeoman service to the Commission over a long period, and this was marked by his election to Honorary Membership of the Commission.

The incoming Treasurer is Mrs Liz Barnes, an Anglican who has served on the Central Committee for a number of years. She is busy with the reconciliation of the financials for 2016 and 2017 and full statements are expected at the July meeting.

Appointment of new Honorary Life Members

At the March meeting of the Central Committee, the following members of the Committee were nominated as Honorary Members of the Commission:

Mr Howard Thomas	Honorary Treasurer retiring now
Revd Paul Verryn	Retiring from parochial ministry in December
Bishop Peter Lee	Retired Vice-Chair of Central Committee
Revd Keith Griffiths	Retiring Secretary General.

7. Three major projects under the auspices of the Church Unity Commission

Three major projects across South Africa are being managed and run through the Central Committee of the Church Unity Commission. These projects engage communities across all nine Provinces of South Africa and the Commission is rightly proud of the work being done across the country.

7.1. Hearings for Healing

The establishment of chapters in each of the Provinces to assist in the work that gives safe spaces where South African citizens as well as with groups of people from other countries of Africa seeking safety in South Africa.

Working with a number of NGO's and legal bodies, the aim is to confront substantial trauma arising from the abuse of vulnerable people in both the present and the past.

The NGO's include local groups who work in specific fields within narrow boundaries as well as well-established group with specific legal skills.

The work itself encompasses a wide range of interventions that often call for very specific skills and connections. These include:

- Economic development with sustainable job opportunities;
- Safe spaces for farmers and labourers to engage with one another;
- Evictions, land title, documentation and legitimacy;
- Land occupations;
- The Victim/Offender dialogues;
- Unemployment and Youth issues;
- Hearings with residents of the Glebelands Hostel. A wide range of concerns including their daily struggle to survive:
 - the appalling condition of the Hostel buildings,
 - the ongoing violence and killings which take place within the complex,
 - the collusion and corruption of many leaders in protecting the criminal activities at the hostel,
 - people's own personal pain and trauma.
- Issues of poverty, unemployment, youth, past trauma and land;
- Providing access to legal assistance to communities who cannot afford them.
- unemployment;
- the impact of forced removals in many areas;

International work includes

- Regular hearings convened with members of the Congolese (DRC), Rwandan and Burundian communities in Durban, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Swaziland.

A concept paper guiding the process for a Commission for Truth and Social Justice for members of the Zimbabwean Diaspora in South Africa is being developed.

7.2. Ecumenical Theological Education

The importance of bringing together those who are training and teaching at Seminaries and other tertiary educational establishments has been recognised for some time. Most churches are facing difficulties with regard to recruiting and training staff with adequate background that will enable them to equip lay and ordained ministers with the skills that are vital to the work such ministers are called to do in this century. This will impact on syllabi, on individual development and an understanding of the current needs of the church across all levels of society.

A major part of the work of this group has been to draw up a list of specific questions that will need to be addressed if the Church of the future is to make any impact at all on the society it serves.

The group has drawn together a committee from a very wide range of denominations and institutions and it is hoped that these will be a core part of the work to be done at the September Conference marking the 50th anniversary of the Church Unity Commission reported elsewhere in this report.

7.3. JDDJ Discussions

The focus of the Working Group has been discussions on Ministry, Apostolicity, Power and Authority. These four are viewed differently by the representatives from the participating Churches and steps are being taken to find the common ground on which all can build as well as the specific issues that might need bilateral discussions.

8 Appointment of Secretary General

The Revd. Keith Griffiths came to the end of his term of office as Secretary General in December 2017 after six years in that position. The position was advertised through the Member Churches and a number of applications were received. A Search Committee was appointed from members of the Central Committee and interviews were conducted in January 2018. The Search Committee submitted the name of the leading candidate to the EXCO who approved his appointment and Revd. Sikawu Makubalo of the Methodist Church was inducted at a service in Randburg Methodist Church on 8 March 2018.

Khawulezile Makubalo is an ordained minister of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Throughout his ministry he has served in cross cultural congregations and is currently serving the Randburg Methodist Church in Johannesburg. He has passion for integration and mission that saw him appointed as the Central District Mission Secretary as well as a member of the MCSA's Ecumenical Affairs Advisory Board. His involvement with ecumenism began before his ordination. He was part of the Eastern Cape Provincial Council of Churches at a time when he was still in the youth of the MCSA from 2001-2003. He served as a member of the CUC Central Committee since 2010. Sikawu, as he is affectionately known is married to Nathi and they are blessed with 2 boys, Khoza and Ulelethu.

Sikawu has been a stalwart of the Central Committee for a number of years and this will ensure a smooth handover as he settles into these new responsibilities.

8. Applications for additional Member Churches

Following on from the decision in 2017 to open discussions with some of the Observer Churches of the Commission, the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk applied for full membership of the Commission. This application was supported by the Central Committee and forwarded to the Member Churches for their approval. A response from ACSA is still awaited before finalising this application.

9. Concluding Reflections

It has been my great joy to have served as Secretary General of the Commission for the past six years. It has been so good to be welcomed at Synods and other Assemblies across the country during this time. I have been welcomed warmly at all of the meetings, and found it good to be able to listen to the issues that are discussed which are usually variations of the same themes, theological education, finance, succession of leadership, vocations and the pressure on the individuals who look to the Church for comfort, celebration, and guidance.

Some steps have been taken together, and fully enjoyed and appreciated, and a model of what I think our Lord meant when he prayed as recorded in John 17. But then the pressure of life increases and something has to give in the lives of leaders and members of Churches. Too often it is the ecumenical connections, and yet over the years I have always been able to find a small community who were able to encourage one to get up again, take up the Word and the Cross, and then to step out again in faith. Thank you all for the occasions when your welcome gave me new life for this vital aspect of our faith.