

A VIEW FROM THE SIDELINES

The Rev Prof Calvin Cook

1. Visible changes.

As I had not been to an Assembly for ten years, the Assembly that met from the 20th to the 26th September 2008 at Camp Jonathan presented some striking differences from its preunion predecessors. For the first time, a Zambian, the Revd Chris Mkandawire was inducted as Moderator. It has been 50 years since Harold Munro announced triumphantly to the PCSA Assembly: 'We are in Lusaka'. The Moderator's two chaplains, the Revd. David de Kock and the Revd. Jane Nyirongo also reflected the new format of the much increased proportion of women commissioners.

No longer had the Moderator to excuse himself from the Assembly to address a parallel AGM of the Women's Association. There were procedural changes: instead of the more formal 'Westminster' model, conveners presented their reports for discussion and debate, their reports were briefly introduced, then were sent for discussion, amendment or additions in 'insaka' sessions (small groups of about a dozen) Proposed changes were reported to a drafting committee that formulated them for the third part of the process: the decision session. It was hoped that this informal session would enable commissioners to discuss substance unshackled by procedural constraints.

Two other innovations were that the Moderator had called for a room set aside for continuous prayer throughout the Assembly staffed by volunteers and for two 'prophetic listeners' to be associated who would listen to the Assembly's proceedings and during the closing devotions each day report briefly on what, if anything they had heard from God. Graham Beggs, who for 30 years has exercised a continental ministry of hearing and heeding the Holy Spirit in the maelstrom of African spirituality was one of these, Calvin Cook the other.

2. The venue.

Camp Jonathan, which Charles Gordon pioneered as a youth camp site in the 1960s has matured into a conference centre that has been used for renewal conferences and other meetings which have blessed not only our denomination but other Christian groups as well. (Charles died a fortnight before the Assembly met.) The conference staff managed to feed and house the Assembly with courteous efficiency despite weather that began with 50 mm of rain and snow, high wind and then produced a day of 37 degrees.

The meetings were held in a large marquee fitted with amplifiers and screens for the projection of text. Mike Taylor and his colleagues did an outstanding job of keeping commissioners abreast of textual changes as these occurred. That we were at all times within earshot of the electronic shofar was an immense time saver: The Assembly finished its business with half an hour to spare. The trio of Moderator, who used his privilege of timely calls for prayer, the Business Convener (Revd. John McKane) and Clerk of Assembly (Tom Coulter) along with judicious whip cracks from ex-Moderators Bax, Botsis, Pool, Pillay and the former General Secretary, Alistair Rodger kept the trek on track.

That we were meeting in a tent (dismantled before the last commissioners left) instead of some imposing metropolitan temple underlined our being on a journey together. Whether it would be from bondage to the freedom for which Christ had set us free would depend on our willingness to learn together the new disciplines of faith and grace. Would we grouse or give thanks, worship some golden calf or learn to adore; were the new treble sounds traditional ululation or Miriam's song?

3. The Agenda.

The union between the two churches has now existed for ten years. In 1897, the missionaries of the Free Church, centred in the Eastern Cape decided to remain separate from the new union because they felt their converts would not develop as fully within a predominantly 'white' church as they would on their own with missionary mentors. Yet in making this choice, Dr. Stewart of Lovedale suffered the bitter experience of one of his most promising students breaking away to form the Presbyterian Church of Africa.

Similar divisions occurred within the Methodist and Anglican Churches. Anglican polity stretched to consecrating a bishop whose 'diocese' was not territorial, but comprised of members of the Order of Ethiopia wherever these might be.

In South Africa's experience as elsewhere, mission credibility depended on unity. What began in 1904 as a series of General Missionary Conferences evolved into the Christian Council of South Africa and only in 1968, after the merger of the International Missionary Council with the World Council of Churches in 1961 was the Christian Council remodelled into the South African Council of Churches. While Apartheid severed the links of Dutch Reformed Churches with the WCC (though they had been founding members) it also provided a degree of cohesion within the SACC. The history of the relationships between the WCC and the SACC mirrors the internal divisions in each: a common body nominally committed to Christian unity, yet comprised of dissenting spirits seeking to protect and conserve what they considered their own interests.

The Rt. Revd. Chris Makandawiri took as the theme of his address 'Arise, shine for your light has come...' (Isa.60.1). The Assembly was meeting when the political situation in each of three countries in which the UPCS bears its witness, was going through a period of uncertainty that deeply affected the wellbeing of its citizens. While analysts and spokespeople argued whether these 'troubles' amounted to a 'crisis', those exposed to the effects of poverty, xenophobia, deportation, service non-delivery and the distant rumble of financial melt-down were deeply worried. Where was any credible word of hope? Was 'the glory that had arisen upon us' turn out to be just another sophisticated show of smoke and mirrors compeered by spin-doctors? Before the Assembly were some patiently crafted documents intended to provide structures for worship, faith and church procedures. Some of these were orders for new services: baptism and communion, and communion for children.

There were also new orders for the ordination of deacons and elders serving in united congregations. The Confession of Faith was to be sent down to Presbyteries for not only for final approval, but with the hope that it would also be studied and appropriated as well. Then in one of the most moving moments of the Assembly, Professor Alistair Kerr SC, son of Alexander Kerr, the first Principal of the South African Native College, that became the University of Fort Hare, and who was also the first lay Moderator of the PCSA Assembly, was presented with a leather bound copy of the new Book of Faith and Order that will replace the 'Interim Manual' that has done duty so far. Not only had he worked tirelessly on its production, but he had served with distinction for many years in various courts of the church and on the Divinity Faculty of Rhodes University.

A place in the Manual seems a thing to be grasped. One for the United Presbyterian Women's Association that includes a dress code had been approved. The Youth Fellowship had submitted its constitution for approval, as had the Men's Christian Guild (MCG) The MCG was hoping these proposals would also be added to the growing number of Appendices in the Manual. The Youth Fellowship was asked to think again about the 'autonomy' it was seeking for itself: how could a subordinate part of a body be autonomous? What was the relationship between these special associations and ordinary membership? One was also reminded of how in the quest for identity and significance, working garments eventually became 'regalia'.

The Insaka groups showed their mettle in tackling some of the disputed proposals. Not surprisingly, the fiercest debate came over the Life Issues report. This took an uncompromising stand on some issues of human sexuality. Could there be homosexual 'orientation' without practice; what circumstances might 'justify' abortion; how precise were the terms in scripture relating to sexual practices that were an 'abomination' to the Lord; was there injustice in how the church treated different sins; where were the boundaries between prejudice against, and tolerance of others' behaviour, love for the sinner and hatred for the sin? The secular constitution has settled for 'tolerance'; but Christians are pledged to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and their neighbours as themselves. Is there a difference between the two in church practice?

Douglas Bax gave notice of motion that he would submit a multi-pronged critique of the political turbulence generated by the government's inability to deal honestly with a number of issues: Zimbabwe, service delivery, lack of transparency and political interference with the judiciary. While this was under consideration, Assembly also had to deal with its own internal appointments: the General Secretary, nominations for the Council, the Nominations Committee and the Moderator Designate.

The announcement that the Revd. Dr. Jerry Pillay was to be the new General Secretary was greeted with acclamation. When the Assembly moved to the election of the Moderator Designate, balloting proceeded without incident until the final ballot between two candidates, neither of whom had achieved the required majority (50%+1) in the preliminary ballots.

It was discovered that a discrepancy had occurred in the run-off: more ballots had been cast than the number entitled to vote. Could the church not run an honest poll? After another ballot conducted under unique scrutiny, the Revd. George Marchinkowski was elected.

Later, the Assembly bade farewell to Revd. Dr. Vuyani Vellem, who since he resigned in May had been appointed Deputy General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. He will need our prayers: as the fraternal delegates reminded us, we face common problems, God grant us the will to transcend our self imposed boundaries?

Meanwhile as a result of these events, the tenor of Douglas Bax's notice of motion changed. He produced a revised version which while remaining critical of governmental shortcomings, called the church to prayer and repentance, so that it would be properly equipped to carry out its unique mandate through repentance and faith in the Risen Lord. There were disturbing parallels between the performance of the church and its criticism of the shortcomings of the state. Was the salt losing its savour, or the light on the hill city dimming?

During the Assembly a number of issues surfaced in reports that indicated that congregations were not taking seriously enough their membership of a body beyond congregational bounds.

Committees entrusted with denominational responsibilities like the Finance Committee, the General Secretariat, the Ministry Committee were hampered by non-compliance with regulations; reports were either not submitted timeously or not made at all. Some Presbyteries either did not deal with remits or did not report their decisions. Can anyone really blame the Zambians for wanting only to deal with their own affairs? The Assembly decided not to disband the Congregational Integration committee: was this to avoid embarrassment over the poor record confessed in the report or evidence of a new attitude towards integration at every level of church life? Such newness can only come from a much deeper rooting in the True Vine. Did the formation of a single pension fund portend a new spring? Only after proper audits are done first.

Elegant skeletons were displayed at Camp Jonathan. Will they be buried there, or will a mighty army descend on Tswane in September 2010 to deal at God's beck and call with nations needing detoxification? 'You know, Lord God' (Ezek. 37.3) The Head's loving nourishment of the joints and ligaments may well be where our resurrection starts. (Col. 2.19)

20 October 2008