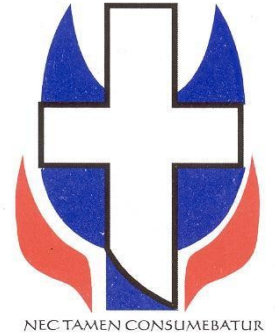


# THE UNITING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA



## An Introduction to the Work of the Presbyterian Church

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(Some details updated 2011)

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*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,  
baptising them in the name of the the Father and of  
the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to  
obey everything I have commanded you. And surely  
I am with you always, to the very end of the age.  
Matthew 28.19 and 20*

### **Where it all should begin**

The first paragraph of the Manual of Law and Procedure of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa reads as follows:

*The Church has been called into being by the will of God, who gathers all people into a fellowship in Christ, which is created and sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit. Its purpose and function is to bear witness to the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ to all who do not yet believe in him, to build up in faith, hope and love those who already believe, and to proclaim his sovereignty over the world so that his rule may be extended in it. The Church is holy because it is of God, and not of man's creation, It is catholic in that God of his love calls all people to share in its membership. It is apostolic in that it remains faithful to the apostolic teaching.*

*The Lord Jesus Christ is the King and Head of the Church. Under his authority, and with the Holy Scriptures as its supreme rule, its laws are framed and administered and its functions exercised with the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit.*

Whatever is written about the Presbyterian Church's history or beliefs in this little booklet, is written against the background of its foundation in the historical facts of Scripture.

### **The Parting of the Ways**

The Presbyterian family of churches, like all Christian churches, trace their roots back to the early church in Jerusalem, to Paul and the Church Fathers like Augustine. In 1517 Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. This public challenge to the practices of the church of his time led to the formation of a new family of churches known as the Protestant Churches. The two main streams of Protestant churches are the Reformed Churches and the Lutheran Churches. The Presbyterian Church belongs to the Reformed family.

John Calvin has been called the Father of Presbyterianism. He was born in France in 1509. He studied Latin, Logic and Philosophy at the University of Paris. Later he studied law and classical literature. In 1533 he became convinced of the truth of the Reformation ideas. He was forced to flee from Paris after publicly expressing his new ideas. He found a refuge in Switzerland. There he wrote the first edition of his theological masterpiece, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This book became the guidebook for many Protestants.

John Calvin visited Geneva in 1536 and became a leader of the Protestants in the city. From 1538 to 1541 he was exiled because of differences of opinion with the city fathers. He was invited to go back in 1541 and under his leadership the city became

the centre of the Reformation in Europe and its church a model of basic Presbyterian organisation.

Calvin's legacy to us is found in his teaching on the sovereignty of God, the priesthood of all believers, and the Presbyterian church structure. His ideals of morality, ethics and democracy helped shape Western thought.

From Geneva Presbyterians spread to Scotland and Ireland, mainly through John Knox who studied under John Calvin, and to England, the Netherlands and America. In the years 1643 to 1649 a group of Presbyterians in England worked out the doctrinal guide known as the "Westminster Confession". The influence of the Westminster Confession is clearly seen in the Articles of Faith adopted by the Presbyterian Church of England in 1890 and by the Presbyterian Church of South Africa in 1897.

Throughout the world there are some 50 million men, women and children who belong to the Christian family which goes by the name of "**Reformed and Presbyterian**". About 30 million call themselves Reformed and some 20 million answer to the name Presbyterian. The name Reformed refers to the fact that this group of Christians trace their heritage within the church universal to and through the 16th century reformers. The name Presbyterian came into use as a distinctive title in England in the 16th-17th centuries to distinguish one group within the Church of England from others who held different views on some issues. Reformed therefore is the wider title and Presbyterian that with the more particular reference and used generally in the English speaking world.

### **PRESBYTERIANISM IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

Early beginnings at the Cape. In the year 1806 Britain sent the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders Regiment to the Cape as an occupying force. These Scottish soldiers were an unusually devout group of Presbyterians. Although they had no chaplain or minister of their own, they formed themselves into "The Calvinist Society" which met every week for prayer, bible study and public worship. They continued their religious activities until 1814, always inviting passing missionaries to preach for them.

In 1812 the Rev George Thorn arrived at the Cape. He was a Presbyterian minister on his way to India as a missionary with the London Missionary Society (LMS). After meeting with the Calvinist Society he decided to stay at the Cape and the first Presbyterian Church was established there. In 1814 the Scottish regiment was withdrawn from the Cape and the Presbyterian congregation was almost totally depleted. In 1818 the Rev George Thorn resigned his charge and the first Presbyterian Church virtually came to an end.

The setback was only temporary. In 1824 the once more growing number of Presbyterians re-established the congregation and built a church. Completed in 1827, it stands to this day in Cape Town and is known as "the Mother Church" of the Presbyterians in Southern Africa. The Rev John Adamson arrived from Scotland in 1827 to be the first minister of St Andrew's as the congregation was called. He served as their minister until 1841.

**Mission work In the Eastern Cape.** In 1821 the Glasgow Missionary Society sent its first missionaries to work on the Eastern Frontier. The first two were the Rev John Bennie and the Rev William Thomson. They were soon followed by others. In 1824 they established at Incehra a mission station which they named Lovedale after the Rev Dr. Love. In later years under the leadership of the Rev Dr James Stewart, Lovedale was to become the most famous of Presbyterian institutions in South Africa and the African springboard for the equally famous Presbyterian Mission and Institution in the north, namely, Livingstonia on the shores of Lake Nyasa (now Lake Malawi).

As early as 1823 a Presbytery was formed and churches spread rapidly throughout the whole Eastern Frontier. In due course the work was divided into three Presbyteries: Kaffraria, Mankazana and Transkei. The first church was built at Glen Lynden in 1828.

**Work In Natal and In the Interior.** The beginnings of Presbyterianism in Natal go back to missionary work. Organized Presbyterianism began on the evening of 28 October 1850 when a gathering of Presbyterians held in the Congregational Chapel resolved to form themselves into a congregation with the name "The Presbyterian Church of Natal". Their first minister, the Rev William Campbell, minister of the Free Church of Alexandria in the Presbytery of Dumbarton, Scotland accepted a call to the young congregation on March 16 1851. The growth of the Presbyterian Church in other parts of South Africa followed in the wake of the Great Trek beginning in 1830, the discovery of diamonds in the Northern Cape in 1870 and gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886.

It is interesting to note that the first work to be undertaken was often the work of missionaries, and in place after place congregations were established both for those speaking Black vernacular languages and for the English speaking Whites, at first mostly of Scottish origin.

**Presbyterians In Zimbabwe and Zambia.** In 1896 the first Presbyterian congregation in Zimbabwe was formed at Bulawayo and in 1903 another at Harare. Others soon followed. Several educational institutions such as David Livingstone Secondary School, Gloag Ranch and Mondoro Secondary School were also started. The first Presbyterian congregation in Zambia was established in 1926 at Livingstone and named "The David Livingstone Memorial Presbyterian Church". The Livingstone congregation remained the only congregation of the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa in Zambia until 1956.

**Formation of South African Presbyterian Churches.** Largely through the initiative of the Rev John Smith of Pietermaritzburg the first General Assembly of a Presbyterian Church met in Durban in 1897 with him as its Moderator. This General Assembly brought together the Presbyteries of Cape Town, Natal and the Transvaal, the white congregations of the Synod of Kaffraria (Free Church of Scotland) and the Presbytery of Adelaide (United Presbyterian Church of Scotland) and two independent congregations at Port Elizabeth and Kimberley. As this church expanded and included work in the countries north of South Africa, its name was also expanded to the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (PCSA).

Parallel to this, the majority of Free Church of Scotland mission congregations did not join the PCSA, in particular those of the Eastern Cape and other rural areas, the Scottish missionaries of the Free Church concluding that this would not be in the interest of the African Missions. These then formed into the Bantu Presbyterian Church (BPC) in 1923. The relationship between the two groups remained harmonious and reached informal agreement that when members of the BPC moved into urban areas, where the PCSA was already established, they would be taken care of by the PCSA, and when they returned to rural areas, they would go back to the BPC. 1979, as a result of Apartheid making the term 'bantu' derogatory of Africans exclusively and not just simply meaning 'people' of any background, the BPC became the Reformed Presbyterian Church of South Africa (RPCSA).

### **THE UNITING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

After 1948 both churches were increasingly drawn into the long struggle against the Apartheid policy of the then government of South Africa, the PCSA in particular having to face the fact that there were racist attitudes and discriminatory practices within the church to deal with. After the inauguration of a democratically elected government in 1994 discussions between the two churches were re-opened at the initiative of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. In 1997 both Assemblies referred a draft Basis of Union to their Presbyteries with a view that a new United Church could be established. The Basis of Union was voted into being by the Presbyteries of both churches, and the uniting General Assembly held 26-28 September 1999 established the UNITING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA to fully express God's unity in the new South Africa.

### **WHAT WE BELIEVE**

Like other Christians, Presbyterians believe in

- God** : Father and Creator of the universe
- Jesus Christ** : the incarnation of God and Saviour of the world
- Holy Spirit** : the presence of God in the world and in the believer
- The Church** : a universal fellowship of Christ's followers
- Forgiveness of sin** : made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus
- Life everlasting** : promised by Jesus to all who believe in him
- Bible** : the inspired Word of God
- Sacraments** : God's means of grace. Presbyterians accept two sacraments only, baptism and holy communion.

## **SPECIAL PRESBYTERIAN EMPHASES**

**Justification by grace through faith.** With other churches of the Reformation we stress that man is saved from aimlessness and self-centredness to the life which is God's will for him. In Biblical terms this is spoken of as eternal life, salvation, or life in God's Kingdom. We find it, not by our own efforts, but by God's acceptance of us. This is spoken of as *justification by grace through faith*. God does not judge us on our perfection. If he did, none of us would stand a chance. He accepts us not because of our worth, but because of his love shown in his Son Jesus Christ.

**The place of the Bible.** The Presbyterian Church accepts the Scriptures as the *supreme standard* - its rule for faith and life. Some people may select parts to suit themselves and so distort its central teaching. We do believe that the Holy Spirit working in the church through years of struggle, debate, and discussion, gives guidance and leads the church as it endeavours to discover and to proclaim the truth.

**The priesthood of all believers.** The division between priests and people as two different grades of Christians led to the Reformed assertion that Jesus Christ calls all his followers to serve him in his church. Whatever their daily work, all of God's people are ministers, or priests. By showing other men the sort of life God has given them, they invite them to share in this new relationship with God. We speak, then, of the *priesthood of all believers*, not just of a priestly class. No one Christian has more access to God than another.

**Sovereignty of God.** In a world where there is so much doubt and speculation, we affirm that God is in control, our only hope is in him, and he has so made men that they find full meaning in life only as they acknowledge his rule. The God we worship is powerful and just, but he is also merciful and loving. Thus we strongly assert the *sovereignty of God*.

**God's covenant.** The Bible speaks of God's covenant. This is a solemn agreement in which God takes the initiative. In this, God makes both an offer to men and a demand upon them. He calls, or elects, those who respond to his gift of life in Jesus Christ into his family and church.

**Statements of belief.** The Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa accepts the doctrine of the Christian Faith contained in the creeds commonly called the *Apostles' Creed* and the *Nicene Creed*, "as witnessing to and safeguarding the faith which was first committed to the disciples of our Lord, and which is continually confirmed by the Holy Spirit in the experience of the Church". Its basis of Union also accepts the *Westminster Confession*, and the *Twenty-four Articles of the Faith (with attached Appendices)*, and the *Declaration of Faith for the Church in Southern Africa* as witnessing to and safeguarding that faith. The "New Confession" gives current doctrinal understanding.

**Membership.** Admission to membership of the Church is by baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. For Presbyterians baptism is an initiation into the church community as ordered by Christ. It is a public confession, not a private one, and therefore normally takes place during a service of public worship.

Baptism does not guarantee salvation. To be saved you need to confess your trust in Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord and follow him. To follow him implies commitment to attend church and share in its work and life.

Presbyterians bring some emphases, which have been very important in our own history, to the continuing discussions with other churches, through which Christians of many traditions seek to find God's will.

### **CHURCH ORGANISATION.**

The word Presbyterian comes from the Greek word *presbuteros* which means elder and refers to the custom of choosing leaders and advisors from among the wisest members of the church

The Presbyterian Church is a representative democracy governed by elders elected from and by the congregation. Authority resides with the duly elected representatives of the congregation in the appointed church councils.

The local church council is called a **Session** and consists of the minister or ministers (called teaching elders) and the elected elders (called ruling elders).

Local congregations and their Sessions are under the oversight of a **Presbytery**. The members of Presbytery are all the ministers of congregations in that geographical area together with the elders elected from each Session.

**The General Assembly** is the highest council of the church. It is made up of commissioners elected by Presbyteries and always has an equal number of teaching elders (ministers) and ruling elders. All the councils of the church are presided over by a Moderator. The secretary of a council of the church is called a Clerk.

The Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa has more than 470 constituted and transitional congregations in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe, under oversight of 19 Presbyteries. There is a total membership of approximately 150 000 **confirmed** members, of whom about 139 000 are in South Africa, 5000 in Zimbabwe and 6000 in Zambia (2002 figures).

### **OTHER PRESBYTERIAN/REFORMED CHURCHES**

Other churches with a similar background to us are the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa and the Presbyterian Church in Africa. The three Dutch Reformed Churches (Afrikaans speaking) and the three mission origin churches linked to them (Black, Indian and Coloured) also belong to the Presbyterian family of churches. The Malawian rooted CCAP (Church of Central Africa – Presbyterian) is a similar background church more widely known in Zambia and Zimbabwe.

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