

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Southern Africa—Race Relations and Apartheid

The Truth and Reconciliation Committee hearings (held 1995-1998, following the end of Apartheid), confirmed that many South African “faith communities, contrary to their central teachings, were active or silent supporters of apartheid....in large measure churches...gave support, symbolic and practical, to the violent state machine.”¹ The Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa was one of these communities and broadly speaking it participated wholeheartedly in the South African government’s policy of apartheid. Such participation and support came easily, as there was already a great deal of racial separation and discrimination already present in the Seventh-day Adventist church.

On the 14th of January 1893, Philip Wessels wrote to Ellen White: “I do not want my children to associate with the lower classes of coloured people. I will labor for them and teach my children to do so. But I do not want my children to mix with them for such is detrimental to their moral welfare. Nor do I want my children to think there is no difference in society that they should finally associate and marry into coloured blood.” Wessels continued: “So there is the colour line drawn which is very distinctly drawn here in society. For my part I do not care. I can shake hands with the coloured people and so forth. But our association with them is going to spoil our influence with others who are accustomed to these things...to have any influence with the higher class of people, we must respect these differences.”²

Thus for Wessels, it was more important to retain the values of his surrounding culture than to take a moral stand on the issue of racial equality. Ironically, his aim in doing so was in order that members of society with racist attitudes could be reached with the gospel. It must be asked however—is a racist gospel really the gospel of Jesus Christ?

There is no doubt that the Wessels family donated large amounts of money to the work of the SDA church in South Africa, Australia, and America and their generosity should be remembered. However, the racist attitudes of these early Seventh-day Adventist members and the impact that such attitudes have had on the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa—which is still in one area structurally divided along racial lines—must also be noted.³

In 1948 the National Party, led by D. F. Malan was elected to power in South Africa on the basis of a policy of Afrikaner supremacy and Black exclusion—apartheid. Apartheid is an Afrikaans word meaning “apartness”. Many of the provisions regarding labour, land segregation, municipal segregation, social and educational separation, and an almost complete White franchise were in place however, even before Apartheid became a “complete political and social, and economic system” following the Nationalist victory in 1948. The policy was formally ended in 1994 following multi-racial elections.⁴ Apartheid laws introduced nationally attempted to “separate white and black living areas, educational provision and social intercourse. Jobs were also reserved according to race.”⁵

¹ In Alex Boraine, *A Country Unmasked* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 180-181.

² Phillip Wessels to Ellen G. White, January 14, 1893.

³ Recommended reading is Antonio Pantalone, “A Missiological Evaluation of the Afrikaanse Konferensie (1968-1974) and its significance for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa” (Dth, University of Durban-Westville, 1998), 177-187, 306-314.

⁴ “Apartheid,” in *Chambers Dictionary of World History*, ed. Bruce P. Lenmann and Katharine Boyd (Edinburgh: Larousse, 1994), 47-48.

⁵ “Apartheid Laws,” in *Chambers Dictionary of World History*, ed. Bruce P. Lenmann and Katharine Boyd (Edinburgh: Larousse, 1994), 48.

It is important to remind ourselves however, that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was structurally divided along racial lines well before the formal introduction of Apartheid in 1948.

Like the Seventh-day Adventist Church's work in many other parts of the world, the church's work in Southern Africa was highly institutionalized. Moreover—with few exceptions, these institutions were racially segregated from the beginning of the church's work in South Africa.

Medical Institutions:

In 1919, a special ward was built at the Seventh-day Adventist owned and operated Plumstead Sanitarium—opened in 1903—to accommodate Coloured patients—it not being appropriate that these patients reside in the main White's only wards. It is probable that no Black patients were ever treated at Plumstead.

Educational Institutions:

While at least one Black student and several Coloured students were admitted to Claremont Union College—the forerunner of Helderberg College, established in 1893—early in its history; the school's constituency remained almost entirely White until 1974 when—having been relocated and renamed Helderberg College—Coloured fourth-year Theology students were officially admitted.⁶

- Coloured students attended Good Hope College—established in 1930—which when compared with Claremont/Helderberg College, was grossly under-resourced, understaffed, and underfunded.
- From 1909, the Seventh-day Adventist church also operated a separate school for Black students. The institution operated under various names and in various locations—most recently as Bethel College. It was also grossly under-resourced, understaffed, and underfunded.

In 1968 Alwyn du Preez became the first non-white to graduate from Helderberg College, completing the third and fourth years of the theology course there after graduating from the two-year Good Hope course in 1957. His presence was a “special concession” by the college; du Preez was required to live off-campus and was barred from using college facilities other than the classrooms and library. He was not permitted to attend the Helderberg College graduation ceremony in 1968.

In 1971, Robert Hall—a black student from Zimbabwe who had completed three years of the Theology course at Good Hope College was grudgingly permitted to enrol at Helderberg College. Similar restrictions to those placed on du Preez were placed upon Hall. He was not permitted to board in the dormitory, nor to eat in the cafeteria; nor was he allowed to graduate with his class in 1971.⁷ That same year, the administration of Helderberg College asked the South African Government “to rule on the acceptance of a foreign non-white at an all-white South African educational institution.” They were told that “it was not, and never had been, government policy to interfere in the training of ministers by any denomination.” As has been pointed out, “this meant that Adventists of colour had been barred from Helderberg College all these years because of naked racist attitudes, not by government laws!”⁸

From 1972 onwards there were tentative moves to integrate Helderberg College. It was proposed that students from Good Hope College who had completed the second year of theological studies would transfer to Helderberg College to complete their third and fourth years. Despite strong

⁶ I. F. du Preez and Roy H. du Pre, *A Century of Good Hope: A History of the Good Hope Conference, its Educational Institutions and Early Workers, 1893-1993*. (East London: Western Research Group/Southern History Association, 1994), 181-182. Pantalone points out that even if some non-White students were enrolled, “the college's graduation records show that during its 25 year existence, not a single non-white student ever graduated at [Claremont] Union College. Pantalone, “The Afrikaanse Konferensie”, 177.

⁷ du Preez and du Pre, *A Century of Good Hope*, 104-105.

⁸ du Preez and du Pre, *A Century of Good Hope*, 109-113.

opposition from the Helderberg College principal A. O. Coetzee, “academic integration” proceeded, with the first officially sanctioned Coloured students attending Helderberg College in 1974. These Coloured students attended with a number of restrictions—they were unable to board on campus, they could not participate in any off-campus college activities, and were restricted to the library and classrooms. They were however permitted to graduate with their white classmates.

- At the end of 1975, the Theology department at Good Hope College was closed and from 1976 both Coloured and White theology students attended Helderberg College.⁹
- In 1991 the Department of Theology at Bethel College was closed and all theological students transferred to Helderberg College.

Administrative Structures:

Pre-apartheid:

From its beginnings in the 1890s, the Seventh-day Adventist church grew rapidly in southern Africa—though racial discrimination was the accepted practice. For example, in 1920, church policy stated that ordained Black ministers could baptise—but only with the approval of the Mission Field executive committee. They could also administer communion—however they were in no case to take precedence over a White church elder—even if he was not ordained to the ministry.¹⁰

In 1920 the church’s administrative structure at union conference level was divided along racial lines: the original South African Union Conference continued to care for the White population while the newly formed Southern Union Mission cared for non-Whites. In 1922, this decision was reversed and the unions were reunited. That decision was reversed in 1927 and separate racially based mission fields and conferences were formed under a united South African Union Conference.

By 1931—though no official church policy on the issue appears to have existed—the Cape Conference was also separating its churches and members along racial lines for statistical purposes; the Secretary-treasurer’s report presented at the 1932 Cape Conference session presented data for both Coloured and European: Tithe, Offerings, Churches, Baptisms, and Membership. The Conference was also operating a “Coloured Department”¹¹ though it was not until 1936 that a new mission field was established: the Cape Field for Coloureds of South Africa.

Post-apartheid:

In 1951, at the South African Union Conference (SAUC) Session, it was proposed that as the Black membership was increasing in the SAUC, there was a need to increase the number of Black delegates to future SAUC sessions. This proposal however, was rejected by White delegates who demanded that a special session to revise the SAUC constitution be held in order to “limit the participation and voting rights of Africans and Coloureds; then to eventually create separate sessions for them.”¹²

As a result, in 1953 a special SAUC session was held and a new racially based constitution was adopted and from 1953, the SAUC “functioned in two parts—Group I and Group II—meeting separately in general, but jointly for the transaction of certain business.”¹³

⁹ du Preez and du Pre, *A Century of Good Hope*, 109-113. In 1980 Good Hope College ceased to offer college courses and became Good Hope High school.

¹⁰ R. C. L. Thompson, “A History of the Growth and Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Southern Africa 1920-1960” (PhD, Rhodes University, 1977), 31-32.

¹¹ P. E. Willmore, “Summary of the Secretary-Treasurer’s Report,” *Southern African Division Outlook*, February 1, 1932, 7-8.

¹² Alven Makapela, *The Problem with Africanity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, African Studies, vol. 42 (Lewiston: Mellen, 1996), 286.

¹³ G. S. Stevenson, “The Work in South Africa Reorganized,” *Southern African Division Outlook*, March

In 1956 a separate mission field was established to coordinate work amongst the Indian population. Thus in 1956 there existed two White conferences: the Cape Colony and the Natal-Transvaal Conferences, one White mission field: the North-West Africa Mission Field; two Black mission fields: the North Bantu and South Bantu Mission fields; one Coloured mission field: the Cape Field; and one Indian mission field: the Indian Field.

In 1960 the SAUC was formally re-organized into two parts, Group I and Group II. Group I consisted of “the four conferences for the European and Coloured membership, The Indian Mission and the South West Africa Field.”¹⁴ Group II comprised “the mission fields and institutions serving the African population.”¹⁵ Notably, all the major officers of the Group II unit were white and in reality these fields had little autonomy in reality—Group II was really administered by an SAUC vice-president and associate secretary-treasurer—both of whom were White.

At SAUC sessions, there was bias in favour of the mostly White local conferences in Group I elected one SAUC session delegate for every 150 church members. The Group II fields—predominately Black—were however only permitted one delegate for their first 150 church members and thereafter one delegate for every 500 members.¹⁶ These nine new fields were also inadequately resourced and funded.

Interestingly, the Seventh-day Adventist church was more willing to elect Black leaders in other areas of Africa—in 1959 the Southern African Division elected Jonas Mbyirukira as president of the Central Kivu Mission in the Congo Union Mission.¹⁷ Thus the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa appears to have practised racial discrimination to a greater extent and for longer, than the church in other parts of Africa.

In 1959, G. S. Stevenson, South African Union president, reported to the Southern African Divisional Council that “there has been a marked intensification of restrictive legislation and administrative measures which hamper our activities. Racial tensions are becoming more acute, and suspicion and distrust meet our missionary workers in a degree never before encountered in South Africa.”¹⁸ Specifically he pointed out that, “In our Bantu missions, control of the movement of Africans into and out of the urban areas has become so rigid that it has become virtually impossible to transfer workers from place to place in our missions.”¹⁹ In fact, it is this difficulty that seemed to provide the sole motivation for the development of Black leadership within the South African Union—“Developments on the political and national fronts underline the necessity of an accelerated programme of training our African ministers to assume the leadership of the church as quickly as possible.”²⁰ Despite this recognition of the “difficulties” that apartheid caused the Seventh-day Adventist church in South Africa, condemnation of apartheid itself is entirely absent from the South African Seventh-day Adventist Church’s literature of the time.

As some authors have pointed out, “the Adventist church was always far ahead of the government of the day in applying racial segregation in the church, and far behind when it comes to scrapping racially discriminatory measures. By the time apartheid was introduced in law after 1948, Adventists had been practicing it for twenty or more years.”²¹

15, 1961, 8.

¹⁴ Stevenson, "The Work in South Africa Reorganized," 8.

¹⁵ Stevenson, "The Work in South Africa Reorganized," 8.

¹⁶ Makapela, *The Problem with Africanity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, 308.

¹⁷ Robert H. Pierson, "Administrative Changes in the Southern African Union Mission," *Southern African Division Outlook*, March 15, 1960, 1.

¹⁸ G. S. Stevenson, "South African Union," *Southern African Division Outlook*, January-March, 1959, 33.

¹⁹ Stevenson, "South African Union," 34.

²⁰ Stevenson, "South African Union," 34.

²¹ du Preez and du Pre, *A Century of Good Hope*, 116.

In 1965, the Seventh-day Adventist church in South Africa was completely separated along racial lines when the Southern Union Conference was created to administer the Black missions. For the first ten years of its existence the administration of the Southern Union was White. This did not change until 1975 when Paul M. Mabena was elected president of the Southern Union.

In 1958 the principle of “equal pay for equal qualifications” was implemented for Coloured church workers—though not for Black workers.²² That same year, the Transvaal African Lyman’s Federation drafted a memorandum of African concerns that was sent to Reuben R. Figuhr, the GC president. The memorandum observed that no Black members held “responsible positions in the denomination, not even at Bethel [College]...that Africans were not included in Union or Division committees nor held administrative jobs in those bodies; that whites directed African work even at mission level; [and] that Africans were poorly paid as denominational workers.”²³ The GC response was vague, and though a GC official visited South Africa that year, nothing changed as a result of this visit.²⁴

A similar memorandum was sent to the GC in 1972 by a group of Black Seventh-day Adventists known as the Memoranda Group. The group was later banned by the church administration—members could not “call or convene meetings in church facilities. They could not hold positions in the church and were not permitted to preach.”²⁵ This document was received and discussed at the GC and as a result a meeting was organized between the Memoranda Group and the leadership of the Southern Union Conference. The meeting however, again resulted in little change in the attitudes and practices of the White Seventh-day Adventist leaders and members in South Africa.

In 1981, a General Conference “Commission on Church Unity was formed to investigate the state of race relations in South Africa. The commission spent 13 days in South Africa conducting interviews and meetings. Makapela points out however, that the commission spent “only four hours of its entire time in South Africa with the victims of apartheid, the Africans.”²⁶ As a result the commission’s report was superficial and avoided any recognition of the church’s active participation in, and support for, apartheid.

In 1983, the Trans-Africa Division was dissolved and both the South African Union Conference and the Southern Union were administered directly by the General Conference.

Two years later, on June 27, 1985, the General Conference released a statement on racism that specifically mentioned apartheid: “The Seventh-day Adventist church deplores all forms of racism, including the political policy of apartheid with its forced segregation and legalized discrimination.” This was followed by an article on racism published in the *Adventist Review* on November 14, 1985. Unfortunately neither of these articles seem to have made any impression on the White members and administrators of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa.

In 1990—one year after taking office, the South African Prime Minister released Nelson Mandela from prison after 27 years, and unbanned the African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress. In 1994 Apartheid officially ended with the holding of the first fully democratic elections.

In 1991, the South Africa Union Conference & the Southern Union Conference merged to form the Southern African Union Conference. Douglas Chalele was elected as the union president—the first non-White elected to head the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s work in South Africa.²⁷ In 1994, the first merger at local conference level occurred between the Oranje-Natal Conference

²² du Preez and du Pre, *A Century of Good Hope*, 87.

²³ Makapela, *The Problem with Africanity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, 298.

²⁴ Makapela, *The Problem with Africanity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, 298.

²⁵ Makapela, *The Problem with Africanity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, 342.

²⁶ Makapela, *The Problem with Africanity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, 360.

²⁷ Pantalone, “The Afrikaanse Konferensie”, 180.

(predominately White) and the Natal Field (predominately Black) to form the Kwazulu Natal-Free State Conference.²⁸

Three years after the formal end of Apartheid in 1994, the South African Union Conference Executive Committee met to formulate a statement to be presented to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. In some ways the statement produced was a positive step forward:

We are constrained therefore by the love of God that has grown more keenly in our hearts to confess that we have misrepresented the gospel of Christ in our sins of omission and commission regarding apartheid. We realize that this has had a hurtful effect on our society, on our corporate church and its individual members. We are deeply sorry and plead for the forgiveness of God and our fellow citizens.²⁹

However, as Antonio Pantalone has pointed out, there was a foundational problem in the statement issued. He highlights a number of other paragraphs that show that the Seventh-day Adventist church leadership at the time was seemingly unable and unwilling to accept appropriate responsibility for its participation in and facilitation of apartheid: “The Seventh-day Adventist church community was a victim of the governmental system...” “Because the governmental system in vogue in South Africa in which an ideology was systematized and given Biblical and theological support, *the effects of the system rubbed off on to the thinking of our church leadership...*” “Because *the church patterned itself after the thinking of the politicians*, dreadful inequalities became apparent...”³⁰ In short, as Pantalone states, such statements were an “attempt at SHIFTING THE BLAME from the Seventh-day Adventist Church onto the previous South African government.”³¹

Thus the Seventh-day Adventist Church did not accept responsibility for its actions during the Apartheid era. Nor did the authors of this document attempt any apology or amends for inflicting a racially divided structure on the church well before Apartheid became policy; stating only, “The Church imbibed wittingly and unwittingly the political philosophy in vogue and created structures which mirrored the political structures. In this way the church was divided into two Union Conferences with separate administrations, one to cater for the Blacks and the other for Indians, Coloured and Whites.”³² To my knowledge, no further action has been taken by the corporate church in South Africa to change this situation.

Post-Apartheid Organization Restructuring:

- In 1996 the Southern Conference (Black), the Good Hope Conference (Coloured), and the Cape Conference (White) met to discuss merging, but the proposal failed to receive the required 75 percent vote required from the White Cape Conference delegates.³³
- In 1997 the Good Hope & Southern Conferences merged to form the Southern Hope Conference.
- Placed under GC pressure, the Cape Conference & the Southern Hope Conference were “realigned” in 2006 to form the Western Cape Conference. Currently a court-case to determine the legality of such a process is in progress—financed and driven by disgruntled White Seventh-day Adventist church members.

²⁸ Pantalone, “The Afrikaanse Konferensie”, 180.

²⁹ Quoted in Pantalone, “The Afrikaanse Konferensie”, 307.

³⁰ Pantalone, “The Afrikaanse Konferensie”, 309. Original emphasis.

³¹ Pantalone, “The Afrikaanse Konferensie”, 309. Original emphasis.

³² Quoted in Pantalone, “The Afrikaanse Konferensie”, 307.

³³ Noel Bruyns, “South African Church Fails to Bridge Racial Divide,” in *Presbyterian News Service* (1996). Available from <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/oldnews/1996/96471.htm>

- Again under GC pressure, the attempted “realignment” of the Oranje-Transvaal Field and the Transvaal Conference in 2006 did not occur when delegates at the proposed meeting refused to participate in the process and the meeting was called off.

Some Conclusions:

As Alex Boraine—deputy commissioner of the TRC—points out “It was confirmed at the [TRC] hearing that many faith communities, contrary to their central teachings, were active or silent supporters of apartheid.”³⁴

The TRC itself pointed out that many communities of faith were “lukewarm in their criticism of the [Apartheid] policy and very often reflected intolerance and racism.”³⁵ Furthermore, faith communities, “enjoy a unique and privileged position in South African society and are widely respected and have far-reaching moral influence. As such they have a special role in healing and reconciliation initiatives.”³⁶ To date, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa has yet to undertake appropriate initiatives of healing and reconciliation.

In 1947, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers—in reference to post-Nazi Germany—identified four types of guilt: criminal guilt, political guilt, moral guilt, and metaphysical guilt. Criminal guilt refers to anyone who commits a crime. Political guilt is attached to all citizens who accept/tolerate what is done in the name of the state. Moral guilt involves an individual’s awareness of serious transgressions or participation in unethical choices that resulted in specific wrongdoing. Finally, there is metaphysical guilt, which arises when an individual transgresses the general moral order and violates the moral bonds that connect us to each other as human beings.³⁷ In reference to Jaspers’ classifications, John de Gruchy points out that:

Jasper’s typology of guilt enables us to recognize the criminality of some actions, and the rights of the victims for just recompense. It enables those who honestly and rightly do not see themselves as criminally guilty, to acknowledge, nonetheless, political complicity and moral failure. It helps others, who were faithful in their resistance to Nazism and apartheid, to discern possible moral guilt. And it enables us all to discern our common humanity before God, and therefore our shared need for transformation.³⁸

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³⁴ Boraine, *A Country Unmasked*.

³⁵ Boraine, *A Country Unmasked*.

³⁶ Boraine, *A Country Unmasked*.

³⁷ Gerhard Rempel, “The Question of German Guilt,” 2000, http://mars.acnet.wnec.edu/~grempe/courses/hitler/lectures/german_guilt.html

Quoted by Manuel Garcia, “‘Rebellion is a Protest Against Death’ The Question of American Guilt,” 2005, <http://www.counterpunch.org/garcia03122005.html>

³⁸ John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 196.

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