

The history of Afrikaans speaking churches in South Africa and the option of ecumenism

Erna Oliver

Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology,
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

Throughout history, and especially after the Reformation, Christians increasingly divided into groups and denominations while all Christians confessed their continued belief in “one church”. Using South Africa in general and the ecumenical activities (both past and present) of the traditional Afrikaans speaking churches as source, an evaluation is made regarding the function of words like “ecumenism” and “unity” in the organisational structures and lives of members of these denominations. The firm belief of each denomination that it is the only true church is only one of several red lights flashing, all indicating that ecumenism is used to cover a vast array of malpractices and that unity is defined not in terms of what the Bible prescribes but according to what people want it to mean. Ecumenical relations are formed according to prescribed rules, providing the practice with a false air of legitimacy. Ecumenism provides a human detour around the Biblical commands to make disciples and practise love.

Introduction

New Testament authors provide evidence that one of the major problems facing the church was to keep people from different cultures, languages and nations together within the boundaries of the Christian faith. The demand for unity is explicit (cf. Burger 2009:166). The faith community of John was in chaotic circumstances, similar to the Afrikaner faith community of today (cf. Du Rand 1987:105), but unity was still a priority in order for the world to see (Jn 17:24), know (Jn 17:23), and believe in (Jn 17:21) Christ. There can be only one Church (Berkouwer 1970:34).

**Although Christians in general,
through the past two millennia, have**

Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae, May 2011, 37(1), 39-57

continued to confess their belief in “one church”, history shows that the church increasingly divided into groups and denominations. Today, there are about 38 000 Christian denominations in the world (cf. Barret, Kurian, Johnson 2001).

Christians in South Africa do not often witness unity, but most of them believe in unity (Van Genderen & Velema 1992:630). *Unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam* (Confession of Nicaea, AD 381) is still one of the founding statements of faith in the traditional Afrikaans speaking churches. However, there were more than 5793 Christian denominations, of which 185 were Protestant, at the turn of the century in South Africa (Johnstone, Johnstone & Mandryk 2001:577). Despite the fact that more than 30 languages are spoken in our culturally diverse country, these statistics still paint a dark picture. And in stark contrast to the large number of denominations, the latest figures released by the South African Council of Churches on their internet site in 2008 show that the organisation has only 26 members.

The term “ecumenism” could mean different things, from uniting all churches into one organisation, to unity among religions. The 1951 definition of the World Council of Churches sees ecumenism as “everything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the gospel to the whole world”. However, in this article, the focus will fall on one aspect of ecumenism: the purpose of ecumenism is to promote unity in the church (Karkkainen 2002:79). Christian boundaries are supposed to be set by the Bible and not by man-made traditions (Oliver 2007:32). However, when looking at the traditional Afrikaans speaking churches, there is no aspiration for this kind of unity. Afrikaners who see themselves as the “owners” of a certain church or tradition know that giving up the claim of being the only true church would leave church members red faced and church leaders without jobs. Instead, ecumenism provides a convenient escape route to evade the demands of faith in action, and also provides an opportunity for coexistence with a clear conscience for both the members and leaders of the Afrikaner “sister” churches.

Traditional Afrikaans speaking churches in South Africa

The Afrikaners, with no significant differences in language, culture and worldview, present a sad picture regarding unity and ecumenism (cf. Jacobs 2009:1). Traditionally, the Afrikaner population could be classified as con-

servative Calvinists. However, the words “Afrikaners” and “unity” cannot often be used together in the same sentence (Oliver 2005:121). As soon as the government restrictions on religion were lifted in 1804 by governor De Mist, the Afrikaners started to divide into sections and, within thirty years after settling in the northern republics, there were already three major denominations – all adhering to the same confessional tradition (Oliver 2005:41). I will refer to these three churches (the *Nederduitsch Hervormde*, *Nederduitse Gereformeerde* and *Gereformeerde* Churches) as the traditional Afrikaans speaking churches. During the second half of the twentieth century, the situation changed significantly and today Afrikaners can be found over the whole spectrum of Christian denominations, except maybe for the African Independent Churches (Census 2001).

Coetzee (2006:19) confirms the view of Calvin (Institution 4.1.2) that it is impossible to have two or three different churches or denominations without tearing apart the body of Christ. The black and white congregations of the *Gereformeerde* Churches are functioning as one, but when it comes to their relationship with other denominations and churches, it seems as if all three of the traditional Afrikaans speaking churches have the same underlying principle: we are the only true church and if there should be unity, all the others must convert to our church and our ways. The conclusion is clear: there is not a problem with race or culture or language for the *Gereformeerde* Churches; the problem lies with doctrine. On the other hand, the *Hervormde* and *Nederduitse Gereformeerde* Churches do have a problem with race, culture and language as well as with doctrine, and all three have a problem with the earthly consequences of unity.

The Afrikaans speaking churches are not examples of the alternative community where the unity in Christ is treasured above all other differences and disputes (Gaum 2009). Kasper (2004:72) suggests that the gap separating the churches and denominations from each other is widened by institutionalisation and official resolutions made by synods and councils. Buitendag (2008:129) agrees that the church, acting

as an institute, is acting and looking more like the world and less like the bride of Christ. Dreyer states that the canonising of the past by the denominations also contributes to their inability to change. The conclusion that Whitley (1969) drew more than 40 years ago about the Christian church in America is true of the Afrikaans speaking churches of today: the church is becoming a mirror of society. It is no longer a window of hope in a hurting and chaotic society. This has a negative impact upon unity and ecumenism.

The Afrikaner churches up to 1899

The first 150 years

In 1602 the Dutch parliament granted the Dutch East Indian Company (DEIC) a charter giving it a trading monopoly with countries east of the Cape of Good Hope in Africa and west of the Strait of Magellan in South America (The Netherlands 1998). By 1650 the DEIC was the world's largest trading enterprise, and two years later the first settlers were sent to build a halfway station at the Cape. The time when the Cape was under supervision of the DEIC coincided with the period of high influence by Calvinism in the Netherlands (Ruperti 1963:1). The ecclesiastical court at Batavia, which was in charge of the colonies, was instructed on matters of faith and policy by the classis of Amsterdam (Hattersley 1969:57).

In South Africa, the DEIC exercised authority over the church in an Erastian manner (Gerstner 1991:187). The church functioned as part of and in service of the government, and church officials were on the company's payroll. This linked politics, religion and education into a tight partnership, keeping the character and religion of the Afrikaners firmly rooted in that of the Netherlands of the 17th century (Ahlers 1954:36) until the British took over the Cape by the end of the 18th century. In practice, this meant that for

more than a century the Calvinistic Reformed Church represented the only official religion at the southern tip of Africa (Giliomee 2003:5). Other denominations were simply absorbed by the Reformed faith (Gerstner 1991:42).

Church schism

The first changes were brought about by the Church Ordinance (*Provisoneele Kerken-Ordre voor de Bataafsche Volksplanting aan de Kaap de Goede Hoop*) implemented by De Mist in 1804. It stayed operational until 1834 when it was replaced by Ordinance 7 (Oliver 2008:101). The Church Ordinance recognised other denominations and religions besides the Reformed Church (Jooste 1946:90, 91). The government was still in charge of church affairs, but people could choose or change their religion (Booyens 1963:118).

At the beginning of the 19th century, liberalism caused a split in the Church in the Netherlands (Pont 1970:151). The Separate Christian Reformed Church opposed the theological liberalism of the main Reformed Church, the weakening of the traditional confessional standards and the use of hymns during church services (Giliomee 2003:178). In 1814 the evangelical hymn book was imported to South Africa, following its introduction in the Netherlands in 1807 (Pont 1970:12). Some Afrikaners, mostly members of the congregations of Cradock and Colesberg, were not in favour of this and the first cracks in church unity appeared.

These cracks would widen with time. The huge influence of liberal theology in South Africa is seen in the struggle by the Cape Synod between 1862 and 1870. The result was that the Dutch Reformed Church remained territorially split for more than a century (Giliomee 2003:207). The orthodox side developed an evangelical strand during these troublesome years and the Great Revival swept the western part of the Cape in the early 1860s (Giliomee 2003:208). After the battle against liberal theology was won, the church retained its confessional character with a strong overlay of evangelism (Giliomee 2003:209). On this, Strauss (2000:139) comments that the confessional conservative trend and the evangelical (Methodist) or charismatic trend (as we know it today) worked side by side and hand in hand to combat liberalism. The fact that these trends did not develop consecutively, but simultaneously, kept them in balance and prevented both from becoming one-sided.

When the Great Trek started, both state and church tried to stop it and gave no support to the Voortrekkers (Grobelaar 1974:158). Fear that the strong grip that the government had on the church in the Cape would extend its political influence to their part of the country was the reason behind the decision of the Volksraad in Potchefstroom (Schutte 1943:31) to break all

formal ties with the church in the Cape in February of 1852 (Pont 1970:25). The church in the Transvaal was known as the Reformed church (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk). The church in the Cape recognised the Hervormde Church as its “sister” church in 1862 (Pont 1970:57).

Divisions between the different groups of Voortrekkers soon brought division in religious matters. Within one country and one nation, three different Churches, all based on Calvinist principles, were formed within less than three decades in the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR).

In 1854 the congregation of Lydenburg announced that they were no longer part of the church of the ZAR. They wanted to rebuild ties with the Cape synod (Schutte 1943:32). They also accused Van der Hoff, who was the preacher at Potchefstroom, of liberalism (Van der Watt 1989:178). In 1857 Lydenburg formed a republic with Utrecht which functioned independently until 1860 (Pont 1970:35).

The unease among a large group of people regarding the singing of hymns led to another division in 1859. At first, there were no hard feelings between the members of the Hervormde and Gereformeerde Churches (Kruger 1957:209). Van der Hoff and Postma, the two church leaders, gave each other a handshake and a few months later, Van der Hoff acted as the marriage officer when Postma got married (Engelbrecht 1953:166). However, in order to be recognised by the church in the Netherlands, the Gereformeerde church declared the Hervormde church a false and corrupted institution in 1869 (Pont 1970:43). The Hervormde church, in turn, responded by refusing to recognise the membership of the Gereformeerde churches until 1882 (Engelbrecht 1953:165).

The declaration that the Hervormde church was a false church was printed as part of the Gereformeerde church’s ordinance up to 1931 (Engelbrecht 1953:166). At the synod meeting of 1942 it was recommended that the church should express its willingness to work together and wholeheartedly with both the Hervormde and Nederduitse Gereformeerde churches. However, this could not be done without cancelling the 1859 declaration and the reason for their own existence. It was decided instead to reach out to the other churches “despite their differences” (Engelbrecht 1953:217).

Disunity and strife among the preachers in the ZAR led to the forming of the ZAR branch of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church in 1866. Cachet (1866:31) proclaimed that the Hervormde Church was a false church, and article 104 of the Church Regulations forbade members of the other churches to act as witnesses at baptism ceremonies in the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church (Engelbrecht 1953:236). In 1871 the synod of the Free State declined recognition of baptism that was done in the Hervormde Church and the synod of Natal declared that they would not have any “sister” relationship with the Hervormde Church. The Synod of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church held at Utrecht in 1873 prohibited their preachers to

conduct worship services in the Hervormde Church (Van der Watt 1989:308).

The Reformed Church (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk) sang hymns and was accused of being liberal (Schutte 1943:32). Due to the English influence on the church in the Cape, the church in Lydenburg (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk) was accused of Methodism. The members of the third church (Gereformeerde Kerk) were accused of being fundamentalists or Doppers and very orthodox (Tingay & Johnson 1978:75). This disunity caused many problems in all aspects of life and divided the people into fanatical splinter groups willing to take up arms to prove the correctness of their interpretation of religion (cf. Pont 1968:197).

After the success of the First Anglo-Boer War, the Afrikaner nation felt a sense of unity and nationhood. The political leaders wanted to extend this into their religious lives. By 1885 some of the church leaders tried to end the ecclesiastical disputes by uniting the two Dutch Reformed (Hervormde and Nederduitse Gereformeerde) churches. However, the divisions and strife gave birth to very confusing and contradictory accounts of the South African church history. The beliefs, traditions and doctrine of the church to which they belonged coloured South African church historians' and writers' accounts of history (Oliver 2005:85). This in turn influenced the perceptions of church members, so that each group was absolutely convinced that they were the only "true" church and that the others were telling lies (for examples about the "correct" name of the church, see Bosman 1923:11 and Engelbrecht 1953:13).

Afrikaners use history to explain both the past and the present in moral terms and to guide them in their planning for the future (Bavinck 1965:2; Akenson 1992:63). Therefore, their focus on the past formed insurmountable stumbling blocks. Attempts at reconciliation did not succeed and another split took place, ending in a court case, and the three different churches still co-exist to this day (Scholtz [sa]:80).

"In the Transvaal, the remaining decades of the century were occupied by inter-Church bickering and abortive reconciliation" (Patterson 1957:187). "The three Reformed Churches in the ZAR watched each other with suspicion" (Giliomee 2003:179).

Afrikaans speaking churches and missionary work by 1899

The history of missionary work in South Africa is too complex to fit into a few sentences. However, a few main lines need to be drawn in order to evaluate the current situation regarding ecumenism between the Afrikaner churches and the missionary based churches.

The South African Missionary Society was founded in 1799 (Gerdener 1959:55), nearly one hundred and fifty years after the first settlers

came to South Africa. And on top of this, missionaries from outside South Africa did most of the early missionary work. In the northern part of the country, the situation was even worse. None of the three churches in the ZAR had missionaries in the field before 1899 (Van Jaarsveld 1962:245). The prejudice against members of other churches was extended in the ZAR to people of other races. The constitution (cf NHKA 1862:97) prohibited non-white people from attending services in the church buildings of the Hervormde Church.

The Hervormde Kerk ... firmly opposed all missionary work. The Dopper majority accepted missionary work as long as it avoided common worship ... The pro-British DRC [Dutch Reformed Church or Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk] tended to be much more liberal in their attitudes towards blacks but, while in principle in favour of missionary work, did very little in practice (Giliomee 2003:179).

The Hervormde church and missionary work

After the failed reconciliation process, the Hervormde church circulated a memo (*Broederlijke Schrijve*) in 1888 to its members, explaining that the church belongs to the people who constituted and lived in the ZAR (*Handelinge van die Algemene Kerkvergadering 1888:91*). Of course, Dreyer (2006:1342) is correct when he says that no church can make such a claim, but due to the interwoven relationship between church and state, this view did not only survive the ZAR; it became one of the main roots of apartheid.

In 1928, a debate about missionary work resulted in the following resolutions (NHKA 1928):

- **The Hervormde Church does not do missionary work (directed at non-whites).**
- **Members of the Hervormde Church who, despite this resolution, still want to do missionary work, can do so by their own initiative and through the missionary society (which was formed in 1929).**

The 47th general assembly of the Hervormde Church, for the first time, acknowledged the fact that missionary work is indeed part of the work of the church and a committee was formed in this regard (NHKA 1945:61–62). By 1975 there were 48 black congregations and the Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika was formed in 1977. In 2006 the name was changed to the Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ (HKSA 2006:5–10).

The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church and missionary work

The first synod in the Cape was held in 1824. In the same year, separate coloured congregations were formed in parts of the Cape. Synods of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde church formed in 1864 in the Free State and 1865 in Natal (NGK). By 1905 a first attempt to unite the synods into one church structure was made. This only succeeded in 1963.

The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sending (Mission) church, which started with the segregated service to the coloured community, was officially formed in 1881. The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika, the black branch of the church, was formed in 1910. In 1996 these two churches united to form the Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika or the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (although not all congregations joined in). The Asian branch of the church, the Reformed Church in Africa, was founded in 1988.

The Gereformeerde churches and missionary work

In the minutes of the synod held in 1897, missionary work is mentioned for the first time. The synod of 1913 constructed a commission of pre-advice to put missionary work on a formal basis, and by 1958 there were 11 black congregations. The number of congregations grew when a theological school opened in the 1950s at Hammanskraal. Currently, the theological school is located at Mukanje and there are congregations in numerous African countries (Van Helden 2009).

Twentieth century developments regarding ecumenism and unity

Relations between the “sister” churches

In 1944 the Evangelies-Gereformeerde Church separated from the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church. The first congregation was founded in Durban and was known as the Nuwe Protestantse Kerk in Afrika. The name changed in 1986. One year later, in 1987, the Afrikaanse Protestantse church, with a significant membership, split from the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church due to the church's revised political views.

Related to the Gereformeerde churches is the Vrye Gereformeerde church that came to South Africa after the Second World War. This church was the result of a splitting in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands in 1944. Because of the relationship between the Gereformeerde Churches in South Afrika and the church in the Netherlands, the Vrye Gereformeerde church was formed in Pretoria in 1950. By 1976 the Gereformeerde churches broke with the Reformed churches in the Netherlands and the two South African churches drew nearer to each other but still did not unite.

Talks of unity started between the three Afrikaans speaking “sister” churches in 1958 with the founding of the Tussen Kerklike Komitee (inter-church committee). The name of this committee changed in 2004 to the Tussen Kerklike Raad (Inter-church council). Although talks were held, unity could not be established, due to, according to Engelbrecht (1970) as quoted by Van Wyk and Buitendag (2006:1467), different viewpoints regarding unity: the Gereformeerde churches want unity without national and racial borders. The Nederduitsch Hervormde church thinks unity between the denominations is pushing it too far – a spiritual unity will do (NHKA 1991:74). The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church says that the division by the different denominations is sinful and wrong because there are no major language and cultural differences within the Afrikaner community. Engelbrecht (1978, as quoted by Van Wyk & Buitendag 2006:1467) contradicts this by claiming that different denominations can only be sinful when a group separates from one of the existing denominations.

During the last decade of the previous century, the Tussen Kerklike Raad came to the conclusion that it was “not realistic” to keep pushing for unity between the churches, and the focus shifted from unity to cooperation. Unity between churches that share the same confession now means taking notice of existing acts of cooperation and to identify new opportunities for cooperation (Gereformeerde Kerk 2009:154).

The membership of the council was broadened when the Afrikaanse Protestantse Church was invited, first as observer, and in 2009 as member (although the Afrikaanse Protestantse church is not formally recognised as a “sister” church). The Nederduitse Gereformeerde and Gereformeerde

churches also requested that their missionary churches should be made members of the council (NHKA 2006).

Ecumenical relations

- Nederduitse Gereformeerde church

Although the general synod declared the lack of unity a sin and church leaders in general speak about the urgent need for unity (Gaum 2009; Buitendag 2008:133), the official policy of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde church accommodates variety, and the ecumenical relations with other churches and denominations are categorised into four different groups (NGK).

It is interesting to note that the Nederduitse Gereformeerde church has full ecumenical ties with churches in North America, Australia and Japan, and is in the process of forming full ecumenical ties with a list of other churches, but it has only partial (although “special”) ecumenical relations with the churches that share the same language and culture and country. There are no ties with the Afrikaanse Protestantse church or the Evangelies Gereformeerde church which split from the Nederduitse Gereformeerde church, but the Gereformeerde churches have a cooperation agreement with the Afrikaanse Protestantse church.

And within the Nederduitse Gereformeerde family of churches, the attempted unification came to a halt as a result of the demands by the Uniting Reformed Church about the Belhar confession. Last year it was reported that the remaining parties would gather for talks (Jackson 2010), but this was frowned upon by the Uniting Reformed church and no reports on the talks could be found.

- Gereformeerde churches

Not all synods of the church participate fully in the ecumenical relations of the church (Gereformeerde Kerk 2009:148). In this church, the black congregations are now part of the structure and organisation of the church and its governing bodies.

Interesting to note is the fact that one meeting took place with the Hervormde church in 2008 and a meeting with the Nederduitse Gereformeerde church was planned for 2009 while, after a conversation with the Afrikaanse Protestantse church in 2008, it was decided that these two churches would work together on liturgical sources (translations of spiritual songs) (Gereformeerde Kerk 2009:155). Three meetings were held with the Vrye Gereformeerde Churches (Gereformeerde Kerk 2009:157).

12 *The history of Afrikaans speaking churches in South Africa and ...*

After meeting the Rynse Kerk in Suid-Afrika and the Calvin Protestantse Kerk van Suid-Afrika at the Konvent vir Reformatoriese Kerke, one of the national ecumenical bodies, new relationships formed and conversations with these churches started.

- Nederduitsch Hervormde church

There are major changes taking place within this church. We first noticed this during the 2004–2007 period when the General Council got involved in ecumenical dialogue with the WARC. After 2007 it came to a halt when a new General Council was elected, but up to June 2010 the church had membership of the REC and observer membership of SACC. Structural unity with the black missionary church (MRCC) is not a priority. Although the agenda of 2010 suggested that this issue would be decided during the meeting (NHK 2006:116), there were no final decisions on this matter.

- Membership of ecumenical bodies

The table shows ecumenical membership of the three traditional Afrikaans speaking churches on national and international level before June 2010, when REC and WARC became the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC).

National	Nederduitse Gereformeerde church	Hervormde church	Gereformeerde churches
Inter-church council	✓	✓	✓
Convent for Reformed churches	✓	✓	✓
NRLF	✓		
SACC	✓	observer	observer
TEASA	✓		
International			
REC	✓	✓	
WARC	✓		

It is interesting to note that the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika was also a member of the REC. Other family members of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church were not, but at this international body, the Hervormde Church sat next to the black delegate of their sister church, although they did not have the same interaction with their own black denomination. The MRCC has membership of the SACC and the Hervormde church has observer status. Although all three traditional Afrikaans speaking

churches are members or observers at the SACC, only one other member of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde church family, the Uniting Reformed church, is part of the SACC (SACC 2008).

Currently the Hervormde Church has observer status at the WCRC. It would be interesting to see if this church gains membership in the light of its recent statement regarding apartheid at the General Church Meeting of 2010, but since the next general meeting of WCRC will only take place in seven years time, we will have to wait a while to see further developments. South African churches that have membership of this body include:

- The Evangelical Presbyterian church in South Africa
 - The Dutch Reformed church (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church)
 - The Uniting Reformed church in Southern Africa
 - The Presbyterian church of Africa
 - The Reformed church in Africa
 - The United Congregational church of Southern Africa
 - Volkskerk van Afrika (WCRC 2010).
-
- Unity versus ecumenism

The closest that the rainbow nation can come to unity is when a part of the nation supports a national sports team in international competitions. In politics, social affairs and religion there is usually no unity and few instances of wholehearted cooperation.

The following warning signs show that ecumenism is implemented not to promote unity but to replace it:

Owners of the truth

Modern-day Afrikaners use the label of Christianity, but have lost the practical side of their faith (Oliver 2006:1483). Afrikaners see themselves as the “owners” of a certain church or tradition (Oliver 2007:34). They also tend to label and disregard others who do not belong to the same tradition and denomination.

Ancient controversies and the canonisation of history still act as stumbling blocks in the path to unity (Den Boer 1966:33). History has the ability to keep our ankles in chains despite our aspirations to run (Oliver 2010). Church structures are frozen, not to be changed and frantically maintained to effectively keep off the need for change and development.

Lack of eschatological focus

Currently, Afrikaners are experiencing a crisis regarding their reformed identity (Van Wyk 2009). A lack of competent leadership to carry the Afrikaner community through this crisis can be seen in their incompetence to face the current issues that were supposed to have been sorted out years ago but are still threatening the functionality of the churches. Two issues that developed into major crises because of a lack of eschatological vision are an inward focus and a never ending power struggle.

The Hervormde church confessed that it is a church that is focused on itself (NHKA 1985:85). This leads to the church structure overshadowing Christ. Unwritten traditions, laws and red tape dominate and restrain congregations and church members (Oliver 2007:35). Attention is more and more directed to maintain the organisation and less concerned about the body of Christ and the kingdom of God (Dreyer). The Geneva hierarchical model is implemented without any revision as if it had been taken directly from the Bible.

Schism and internal power struggles between individuals, as well as political and dogmatic differences, severely handicapped the official Afrikaner church and its message (Schutte 1943:30). Steyn (2006:661-676) identifies at least 5 major movements within the Nederduitse Gereformeerde church. Christian boundaries are those that are set by the Bible and not the man-made traditional walls which we tend to build around ourselves (Oliver 2007:32), but this lesson has not yet been learnt by the Afrikaners. Difference of opinion leads to personal vendettas, and the intolerance within church structures is named as one of the major reasons why people are leaving the church in such large numbers (Nel 2003:66-67).

If ever the church leaders of the Afrikaans speaking churches should admit that theirs is not the only true church and really start to move towards unity, the immediate effect of the fear of losing their jobs (including housing and funding and status and control over people) would cause havoc and panic.

Middle of the road

The issues mentioned under point 2 brought theology in South Africa to the middle of the road. The church has lost its uniqueness and is looking more and more like the secular world surrounding it (Buitendag 2008:129). The churches tend to sanction the values and norms emphasised in the community (Whitley 1969:14). Things like tolerance and human rights overwrite the Biblical principles of one real faith and only one right – the right to be called children of God.

As a social and personal force, the Christian religion of the Afrikaners has become a dependant variable: it does not originate; it reacts. It does not denounce; it adapts. It does not set forth new modes of conduct and sensibility; it imitates (cf. Mills 1958:166).

This middle of the road strategy can also be seen in the tendency to speak about visible and invisible unity. Karl Barth (1949:142) says that this idea of invisible unity should not be used in the church because it will lead to a *Civitas platonica*. No visible unity – no church. Van Wyk and Buitendag (2006:1470) provide reasons why the visible unity of the Afrikaans speaking churches should be high on the agenda of the churches and why the churches should do thorough self-evaluation on their practices.

The churches should not be afraid to tackle controversial and sensitive issues, and above all, not allow themselves to be influenced by world trends and fashion or politics.

Lack of basic knowledge

Although Afrikaners were traditionally known for their excellent and thorough knowledge of the Bible (Oliver 2010), this is no longer true. Since the second half of the previous century, Bible knowledge has been on the skids and currently even basic knowledge is lacking, particularly in the younger generation. This lack of knowledge is one of the reasons why Afrikaners are content to allow the church leaders to lead them astray by accepting ecumenism as a substitute for unity.

Only faith, not institutions, can transform people. But people need to have sufficient knowledge about the contents and prerequisites of faith in order for them to be changed. Only then, the institutions and structures can also be transformed and changed.

Conclusion

Looking from an historical point of view at the traditional Afrikaans speaking churches there is not much hope for a united Christendom among Afrikaners in the near or not so near future.

The organisational unity that existed between government and church under the DEIC held the Afrikaners together but as soon as the Church Ordinance was changed in 1804, splintering began. Liberalism, Methodism, and fundamentalism are all part of the theological history of the Afrikaner churches, and these labels are still used by Afrikaners to label and distance themselves from each other. It is used to create a safe niche area for each denomination and its members. It is tragic that labels and personal struggles and unsolved historical issues are used to divide Christians.

Each person is an individual and we worship in unique ways. This can be experienced when different preachers are in the pulpit, or when one attends services in different congregations (like Moreletapark and Waverley Nederduitse Gereformeerde congregations), but the unity in Christ should still be detectable.

Church members must be aware of the fact that their religion is and should be different from politics and culture (Gaum 2009). The church should be an alternative organisation where unity in Christ should rise above all other differences and issues (Gaum 2009). Therefore, it is unacceptable to comply with the existence of four to five (or even more) Afrikaans speaking churches that are all claiming the same dogmatic and confessional foundation. This "variety" is based on prejudice, fear, comfort zones and sin, but unfortunately not on faith.

The Christian church is obliged to act as an instrument of healing in every sphere of a sick society. Individuals must learn that choices are not based on church ordinances or personal preferences, but on biblical mandates and faith (Oliver 2008:93). Only the Bible – and neither Calvinism nor any other temporary theological phenomenon – can serve as the ultimate source for the church and believers to make sense of the current problems and opportunities.

Ecumenism is used by the Afrikaans speaking churches as a detour or escape route to avoid the demand for unity and to camouflage heresy and schism. God demands unity. The traditional Afrikaans speaking churches answer with ecumenism.

Works consulted

- Ahlers, GH 1954. *Getuïenisse oor die Afrikaanse volkskarakter tot by die aanvang van die Groot Trek*. Ongepubliseerde verhandeling. Universiteit van Pretoria.
- Akenson, DH 1992. *God's peoples: covenant and land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Barth, K 1949. *Dogmatics in outline*. Translated by GT Thomson. London: SCM.
- Barret, DB, Kurian, GT & Johnson, TM (eds.) 2001. *World Christian encyclopaedia: a comparative survey of churches and religions in the modern world*, Volume 1. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bavinck, JH 1965. Die Gereformeerde Kerk van Suid-Afrika en sending. *Pro Veritate* 3(12), 1-16.
- Berkhouwer, GC 1970. *De Kerk. 1. Eenheid en katholiciteit*. Kampen: Kok.
- Booyens, B 1963. *Kerk en staat 1795-1843*. Ongepubliseerde verhandeling. Universiteit van Stellenbosch.

- Bosman, DB 1923. Oor die afkoms van die Boere. *Tydskrif vir Wetenskap en Kuns* 1, 206-214.
- Buitendag, J 2008. Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda – die ongemaklike eis. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 64(1), 123-138.
- Burger, C 2009. Is kerklike eenheid moontlik?, in Burger, Van der Watt, Stander et al, *Die 50 grootste geloofsvrae*, 165-169. Vanderbijlpark: Carpe Diem.
- Cachet, FL 1866. *Aan de leden der Nederduitsch Gereformeerde kerk in de Z.A.* Pietermaritzburg: Republiek.
- Census 2001. Primary tables South Africa. Census returns for 1996 and 2001 compared.
- Coetzee, CFC 2006. Calvyn en die eenheid van die kerk. *Acta Theologica* (1), 16–35
- Den Boer, W 1966. Terminologie en waardeoordeel in de geschiedwetenschap. *Standpunte* 19(4), 23-35.
- Dreyer, WA. Die effek van institusionalisering op die Hervormde Kerk. www.gemeentes.co.za/dokumente/kruisgewys/kleingemeentes/NHKA/%20Institusionalisering.doc. Datum opgeroep: 11 Januarie 2010.
- Dreyer, WA 2006. Die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika as volkskerk: Oorsig en herbesinning. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 62(4), 1337-1368.
- Du Rand, JA 1987. Johannes 17: Jesus se gebed om eenheid te midde van krisis en konflik, in Breytenbach, JC (red.). *Eenheid en konflik: eerste beslissinge in die geskiedenis van die Christendom*, 105-133. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel.
- Engelbrecht, SP 1953. *Geskiedenis van die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika*. Kaapstad, Pretoria: HAUM, De Bussy.
- Gaum, F 2009. Kerkeenheid is nie nonsens nie maar 'n dringende vereiste. *Rapport*. 12 Julie 2009. www.rapport.co.za Datum opgeroep: 13 Januarie 2010.
- Gerdener, GBA 1959. *Die Afrikaner en die sending*. Cape Town: NG Kerkboekhandel.
- Gereformeerde Kerke 2009. Algemene sinode 2009. Notule. Rapport deputate ekumenisiteit.
- Gerstner, JN 1991. *The thousand generation covenant. Dutch Reformed covenant theology and group identity in colonial South Africa, 1652-1814*. Leiden: Brill.
- Giliomee, H 2003. *The Afrikaners. Biography of a people*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- Grobbelaar, PW 1974. *Die Afrikaner en sy kultuur. Deel 1. Mens en land*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- Handelinge van die Algemene Kerkvergadering 1888. Pretoria: Kerkargief.

- Hattersley, AF 1969. *An illustrated social history of South Africa*. Cape Town: Balkema.
- HKSA 2006. *Agenda of the 10th General Church Assembly*. Pretoria: Kerkargief.
- Jackson, N 2010. Drie kerke gaan weer praat oor eenheid. *Beeld*. 20 Januarie.
- Jacobs, L 2009. Gedagtes rondom kerkeenheid na aanleiding van Johannes 17.
<http://teo.co.za/artikel/articles/183/1/Gedagtes-rondom-kerkeenheid-na-aanleiding-van-Johannes> Date accessed: 12 January 2010.
- Johnstone, PJStG, Johnstone RJ, Mandryk, J 2001. *Operation world*. Virginia: Donnelley.
- Jooste, JP 1946. *Die verhouding tussen kerk en staat aan die Kaap tot die helfte van die 19de eeu*. Bloemfontein: SACUM.
- Karkkainen, V-M 2002. *An introduction to ecclesiology: ecumenical, historical & global perspectives*. Illinois: InterVarsity.
- Kasper, W 2004. *That they may all be one: the call to unity today*. London: Burns & Oats.
- Kruger, BR 1957. *Die ontstaan van die Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika*. Pretoria: V & R Drukkery.
- Mills, CW 1958. *The causes of World War Three*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1976 reprint: Westport: Greenwood press.
- Nel, AF 2003. *Op soek na God ... buite die kerk? Wen weer ontnugterde gelowiges se vertrou*. Wellington: Lux Verbi.
- NGK Algemene sinode Ekumeniese verbande.
www.ngkerk.org.za/ekumenise.asp Date accessed 13 April 2010.
- NHKA 1862. *Kommissie van die AKV. Notulen*. Pretoria: Kerkargief.
- NHKA 1928. *Algemene Kerkvergadering. Notulen*. Pretoria: Kerkargief.
- NHKA 1945. *Algemene Kerkvergadering. Notules*. Pretoria: Kerkargief.
- NHKA 1985. *Kerk en Wêreld 2000*. Pretoria: KITAL.
- NHKA 1991. *Kommissie van die Algemene Kerkvergadering 1991. Resultate van die TKK. Handeling van die afvaardiging van die NG Kerk, die NH kerk en die Gereformeerde kerke in Suid-Afrika Januarie 1991-Desember 1993*. Pretoria: Kerkargief.
- NHKA 2006. *68ste Algemene Kerkvergadering: Besluitbundel: Verband met ander kerke*.
- Oliver, E 2005. The impact of Christian education on the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek. Unpublished dissertation. University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Oliver, E 2006. Afrikaner spirituality: a complex mixture. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 62(4):1469-1487.
- Oliver, E 2007. Die rol en taak van die kerk ten opsigte van begrafnisgebruike. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 28(2), 558-579.

- Oliver, E 2008. Die invloed van die Christendom op die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing. *In die Skriflig* 42(2), 305-326.
- Oliver, E 2010. South Africa: the arduous task of facing our religious past. Unpublished paper read at the 21st International Congress of Historical sciences, Amsterdam, August 2010.
- Patterson, S 1957. *The last trek: a study of the Boer people and the Afrikaner nation*. London: Routledge.
- Pont, AD 1968. *'n Oorsig van die algemene kerkgeskiedenis en die geskiedenis van die Nederduitsch Hervormde kerk van Afrika*. Pretoria: HAUM.
- Pont, AD 1970. *'n Oorsig van die geskiedenis van die Nederduitsch Hervormde kerk van Afrika*. Pretoria: HAUM
- Ruperti, RM 1963. *Die Suid-Afrikaanse skoleindeksamens in die algemeen-vormende sekondêre onderwys, 1850-1952*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- SACC 2008. South African Council of Churches. Members list. www.sacc.org.za Date accessed: 19 April 2010.
- Scholtz, GD [sa]. *Die geskiedenis van die Nederduitse Hervormde of Gereformeerde kerk in Suid-Afrika. 1885-1910*. Pretoria: NGK Uitgewers.
- Schutte, JHT 1943. Die kulturele eenwording van die Boere in die Republiek, 1854-1877. Unpublished dissertation, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.
- Spoelstra, B 1963. *Die Doppers in Suid-Afrika 1760-1899*. Kaapstad, Bloemfontein, Johannesburg: Nasionale Boekhandel.
- Steyn, GJ 2006. Die NG Kerk se identiteitskrisis. Deel 2: Huidige bewegings, tendense of mutasies. *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 47(3 & 4), 661-676.
- Strauss, SA 2000. Die dogmatiese lyn in die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, in Tolmie, DF (red), *Kaleidoskoop 2000. Artikels oor teologie: gedenkuitgawe Fakulteit teologie UOVS 1980-2000. Acta Theologica 2000. Supplementum 1*, 117-146.
- The Netherlands 1998. Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia.
- Tingay, P & Johnson, J 1978. *Transvaal epic*. Cape Town: Khenty.
- Van der Watt, PB 1989. *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk. 1652-1905. Deel 1 tot 3*. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel.
- Van Genderen, J & Velema, WH 1992. *Beknopte gereformeerde dogmatiek*. Kampen: Kok.
- Van Helden, M 2009. Ons Kerk se geskiedenis. www.gkcenturion.org.za/artikels.html Date accessed: 19 May 2010.
- Van Jaarsveld, FA 1962. *Die tydgenootlike beoordeling van die Groot Trek 1836-1842*. Pretoria: Unisa Uitgewers.
- Van Wyk, A 2009. Drie debatte, baie vrae. *Beeld*. By, 19 Junie.

20 *The history of Afrikaans speaking churches in South Africa and ...*

Van Wyk, T & Buitendag, J 2006. Die dimensies "eenheid" en "katolisiteit" in die ekklesiologie van die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk sedert Ottawa 1982. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 64(3), 1447-1473.

WCRC 2010. Members. www.wcrc.ch/node/164 Date accessed: 1 November 2010.

Whitley, OR 1969. *The church: mirror or window? Images of the church in American Society*. St Louis: The Bethany Press.

