

RECONCILIATION BETWEEN BAPTISTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

*Paper presented to the Baptist World Alliance in Seoul, Korea. July 2004
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INTRODUCTION

This paper reflects my own personal perspective on the **process of reconciliation** that took place between the Baptist Union of South Africa (BU) and the Baptist Convention of South Africa (BC), which ultimately led to the formation of The South African Baptist Alliance. (SABA)

1. BACKGROUND

Baptists first came to South Africa from Europe with the German and English Settlers in the early 1800s and the first Baptist church was established at Salem near Grahamstown in 1819. The Baptist Union of South Africa was formed in 1877 and adopted a Missions Policy to reach the indigenous inhabitants of South Africa with the Gospel.

The Bantu Baptist Association was formed in 1927 and became the Baptist Convention of South Africa in 1965 and as an Association joined the Baptist Union in 1966 with representation on the National Executive Committee of the Baptist Union.

At that time the Baptist Union was a Union of Associations, both territorial and cultural. The Baptist Union then consisted of “White” Territorial Associations, an “Indian” Association, a “Black” Convention, a “Coloured” Association and an “Afrikaans” Association. This structure reflected the times in colonial Africa with its cultural and language diversity and the racial divisions endemic in society as well as the racial divisions imposed by the apartheid policies in South Africa.

In 1976 the Baptist Union changed its Constitution and became a Union of Local Churches. All local churches from territorial and cultural Associations were invited to make application to the Union of Churches. While there were some meetings between Baptist Union leaders and those who represented the cultural and racial Associations on the Executive of the BU, this decision was taken by the Assembly of the BU with little consultation with leaders and churches of the Cultural Associations.

From 1976 many meetings were held between the BU and the BC to discuss the merging of the two bodies. The Baptist Convention eventually regarded these talks as the Convention being called to “join” the Union rather than a “merger” of the two bodies. Entrenched clauses in the BU Constitution, and well as perceived attitudes especially in the BU became a major obstacle in the merger discussions. In addition the Baptist Union’s white leadership had not worked through the issues of being the ‘favoured’ culture in an Apartheid South Africa, nor had we begun to understand the effects of the Apartheid system on our Black brothers and sisters.

In 1987 the BC took a decision to withdraw from the BU and became an independent Baptist body in South Africa. Many individual Convention churches had by this time become members of the Baptist Union. Approximately one third of the Baptist Convention churches stayed with the Baptist Union, and withdrew from the Baptist Convention. This caused untold bitterness, hurt and anger between Baptists in South Africa.

2. A FEW IDENTIFIED REASONS FOR THE DIVISION

The roots of the division go back in history to the exploitation of the people of Africa. 14 million Africans were taken into slavery. More than a third died in transit on the slave routes. While slavery had a small direct impact in South Africa, the larger impact was felt through the Western and Eastern worlds' attitude that the people of Africa were inferior.

200 years of colonialism further oppressed the people of Africa. The apartheid system of South Africa however, went the furthest in oppressing and dehumanising the people of Africa. The whole legal system was based on the assumption that Europeans were superior to Africans and this belief was BRED into the lives and behaviour of the people of South Africa.

In Apartheid South Africa it was considered "normal" for Whites to make decisions for Blacks, often with little or no consultation and even though some of the decisions may have seemed the best for the time, they were done in the main without consultation. This also happened in the Christian community including Baptists.

The gospel influence upon the Christians in South Africa did change the attitudes and behaviour of many whites towards their black brothers and sisters. The BU for instance consistently spoke out through its Assemblies and Presidents against the apartheid system. But few really understood the suffering that apartheid inflicted upon the black population, and the INBRED racial attitudes and behaviour patterns required another spiritual conversion to overcome.

There was growing suspicion by the BC of BU decisions. For example the registration of church property. (During the Apartheid years no black person was allowed to own property in South Africa. As a result all church properties of the Baptist Convention had to be registered with the Baptist Union Mission Society of South Africa.) When the Baptist Convention became an independent body in 1987, no properties were transferred until the Apartheid laws were changed beginning in 1991.

3. SOME EFFECTS OF THE DIVISION

An old African proverb states: "When two elephants fight, it's the grass that gets hurt".

The members of many former Convention churches were divided and splits took place in those churches. Some families became bitterly divided. Racial attitudes became further entrenched. Statements were made by both groups, which were often based on false perceptions. These caused great pain and harm to both groups. Both groups justified their actions and their positions without attempting to understand what the other group was thinking or feeling. Great disservice was done to the witness of Baptists in South Africa. The name of the Lord Jesus Christ was dishonoured.

4. EARLY ATTEMPTS AT RECONCILIATION

Meetings between the two bodies were held between 1991 and 1993 to resolve various issues, including property. We also committed ourselves to resolve our differences and to continue negotiations and discussions toward a meaningful unity.

In 1994 two meetings were held which centred upon resolving the tensions which arose when churches from one body wanted to affiliate with the other body.

In 1994 a Baptist World Alliance delegation led by Dr. Denton Lotz met with the BU and the BC. At the meetings, comments were made by members of the delegation such as “BU and BC are interpreting the historical facts very differently / communication lines are being distorted, you are not hearing each other / on unity the BU is looking at an evolutionary process while the BC wants a revolutionary process / reconciliation between the two Bodies must be preceded by confession, repentance and forgiveness”. These meetings were helpful in that they were the first objective evaluation of the situation from outsiders.

Between 1994 and 1995 further meetings were held between BC and BU in which both parties sought to justify their positions and little progress toward understanding was made. In retrospect we were continually misunderstanding each other, not really listening to each other and there was unwillingness for anyone to admit blame or fault. The build-up of bitterness, frustration, lack of understanding and lack of a repentant spirit, (the later mainly on the part of the BU) erupted at the 1995 BWA Congress in Argentina. The leaders of the BWA again acted mediators and counsellors.

5. TALKS BREAK DOWN

In March 1996 the BC withdrew from any further negotiations stating “It had become an exercise in futility because of the intransigent and contradictory actions of the BU that negate the spirit of reconciliation”. The BU was, quite frankly, relieved because the meetings had become painful and hurtful for both parties with very little progress being made.

6. BREAKTHROUGH

An old African Proverb: “When two elephants meet on a narrow bridge, they get nowhere until one of them backs down or lies down.”

In August 1996 ten leaders from BC and ten from BU were invited by SBC Missionaries in South Africa to attend a **Prayer Retreat** at the Wigwam Hotel near Rustenburg. Reluctantly both parties attended having had no contact over the previous six months. Little was expected and no formal discussion time was planned, instead we heard devotions from the Word of God each day, and times in the morning and afternoon were allotted for prayer.

In God’s Sovereign Way he brought together the General Secretaries of the two Bodies (Rev. Des Hoffmeister and Rev. Terry Rae). After a time of prayer together God met with us and our own personal differences and divisions were set aside and the spark of a new direction towards reconciliation began. The other leaders at the retreat also expressed repentance and began to find healing in forgiveness.

At the October 1996 BU Assembly held in Port Elizabeth the Assembly passed the following resolution: -

“We acknowledge as a Union that our relationship with the BC has caused much pain and heart searching. Negotiations have not been easy as we have sought to come to grips with attitudes and actions of the past, including our own sins of commission and omission.

We are deeply grateful to God for the new spirit, which has come out of our joint prayer retreat.

This Assembly welcomes and endorses the BU and BC Executives' commitment to continue discussions in order to address the differences of the past and to work in harmony within our country."

During 1996 and 1997 two important Reconciliation Conference were held between the leaders of the two bodies at Kempton Park /Tembisa. The Southern Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Churches sponsored these conferences. The following resolution was accepted with practical steps forward in the reconciliation process.

The following resolution was passed: -

"We, the BC and the BU of South Africa, meeting together at Kempton Park Tembisa from 21 – 23 November 1996 to continue the process of reconciliation have been conscious of God's presence and transforming power.

This prayer retreat has again reminded us that God is a God of miracles. We met in the context of years of protracted struggle and conflict. However, the commitment to reconciliation that has been apparent at this meeting has convinced us that this process is of God.

This conference was preceded by a prayer retreat held at the Wigwam Hotel in August this year that was marked by a significant breakthrough as we met each other in prayer, worship, repentance, confession and forgiveness. By God's grace many of the hurts that we had inflicted upon each other in the past began to be healed. We resolved to resume the talks between the Union and the Convention, which had become deadlocked earlier in the year.

This Kempton Park Tembisa prayer retreat has been marked by a sense of God's presence and God's call to us as brothers and sisters to be reconciled and healed. A spirit of openness, affirmation, repentance and forgiveness has made this reconciliation process possible and it has been inspired by a common vision for the future. Therefore, we have resolved to commit ourselves to beginning a process that will lead to us becoming a united Baptist body. We share a common love for the Bible, a commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and a desire to preach and live out our Christian faith within the framework of our Baptist identity.

We are aware that this unity can only be achieved through a process in which we worship together, share our experiences of the past and create opportunities for mutual repentance, forgiveness and healing. This will enable us to have a credible witness, which will impact, positively upon our country.

We appeal to our members to pray for us, to support us and to commit themselves to this spiritual challenge. In the spirit of this resolution, we call upon our constituencies to join us in this process of mutual affirmation, and inclusion as we allow God to change our attitudes and behaviour in relation to each other. If we love God, we cannot but seek to accept and love each other, for love is of God.

We wish to express our heartfelt appreciation to our international partners who have accompanied us, shared the burden of the expression of our pain, and supported us during our times of conflict. We recognize that their ongoing support is invaluable as we strive to achieve unity. May God keep us faithful, honest and courageous as we seek to obey God's command to be one.

The following process has been suggested: -

- 1. 28 February 1997 - A Joint Worship Service during the visit of an International Baptist choir in Gauteng*
- 2. A Joint prayer retreat of both Executives in Durban during June 1997*

3. *A gathering of leaders and pastors of both bodies to 'provide an opportunity to share our experiences of the past and create opportunities for repentance, forgiveness and healing'.*
4. *An opportunity to publicly celebrate the progress made at the time of the General Council of the Baptist World Alliance in July 1998 in Durban.*
5. *In keeping with the resolution we will be inviting each other to events such as pastors conference, etc.*

In the words of the Resolution 'we call upon our members to pray for us, to support us and to commit themselves to this spiritual process''

7. THE MIRACLE AT COLESBURG

A very positive and open spirit of reconciliation had developed between the leaders of BC and BU as a result of the Kempton Park /Tembisa meetings.

It was decided to extend the process of reconciliation to pastors and leaders of our two bodies. One hundred and eighty delegates; ninety from each group were invited to attend a reconciliation forum at Colesburg, a town in the centre of South Africa. The meetings took place from the 14 to 15 May 1998.

The first day was spent in discussion groups of twenty delegates, ten from each group. The task of each group was to write down on a flipchart paper the grievances and hurts that had been caused by actions, statements and attitudes of the other group. Some groups kept coming back for more paper. At the end of the first day each group read out the list of items that represented the pain and hurt of our disunity. These papers were then stuck to the wall of the large hall in which we were meeting. They covered one wall from end to end and we were instructed to walk silently down this passage of grief.

Delegates from both groups who were entering the process of reconciliation for the first time wanted to leave the forum and go home. It was the first time some of them had expressed or heard the hurts of our division, and their experiences were still very painful. After prevailing on everyone to remain and see the process through to the end, no one left.

The next day, after a restless night, the devotion was centred upon the Cross of Jesus Christ and for a short while we looked away from our pain and focused upon HIS. The two groups were seated in the hall – BU on one side and BC on the other. The neutral facilitator got up and said to us “It is now over to you – who will begin the process of repentance and healing?” and he excused himself from the hall.

Twenty minutes of tense silence followed.

Then one of the Convention delegates rose to his feet and looked across at a Union delegate and confessed that he had criticised and spoken evil of his fellow Baptist. He asked for forgiveness. The two men met each other in the aisle and embraced. This started a floodgate of confession and repentance with scores of people from both sides standing to confess and asking for forgiveness. There was much weeping; there were little prayer groups all over the hall; there were black and white delegates hugging each other repenting for behaviour and attitudes of the past.

This went on for five hours without stopping.

Finally, exhausted, we took a brief break. During this time the Communion Table was prepared. When we returned to the hall we sat at the Lord's Table together for the first time since 1987. It was an emotional and deeply spiritual event.

The General Secretary of the BU served the bread to the BC delegates, and the General Secretary of the BC served the bread to the BU delegates as we remembered the death of Jesus Christ for us.

The facilitator then asked us to take two Communion cups and to go to someone in the hall who had been the object of their pain and bitterness and to use the moment to reconcile sharing the cup together remembering that Jesus shed His blood for our sins.

At the close of an exhausting day, we all sat in silence for a while. Then one of the BC delegates, a Xhosa woman from the Transkei, got up and went to the wall. She removed one of the pages containing the script of our grievances and came and placed it under the Communion Table. Then another and another got up and removed the papers from the wall, until they were all placed under the Communion Table. Another woman got on her hands and knees under the Table and packed the papers into a neat pile.

The BU and the BC leaders rose and declared that we would not resurrect the issues that were under the Table again. They were covered by the Blood of Jesus.

To this day the issues that caused us such pain have not arisen again to damage the continued process of our reconciliation journey towards unity. Other issues have arisen that still need time and concerted commitment to resolve.

We resolved to work towards unity.

8. THE FORMATION OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN BAPTIST ALLIANCE

In 1999 leaders and theologians from both groups met to discuss perceived differences in our theological viewpoints. After two lengthy meetings and an intense discussion and investigation of our doctrinal positions, it was concluded that while there were individuals in both groups whose views were not endorsed by the majority, our Statements of Faith, our stand on the Word of God and understanding of Baptist Principles were almost identical. We acknowledged that the BU emphasised Evangelism and Missions in its fulfilment of the Great Commission and the BC emphasised Social Action and Justice in its fulfilment of the Great Commission. It was further acknowledged that each group could and should learn from the emphasis of the other towards a more biblical and holistic expression of our Faith and Witness.

During this time three other Baptist Bodies in South Africa, namely the Baptist Association of South Africa; the Baptist Mission of South Africa (both based in Natal) and the Afrikaanse Baptiste Kerk requested that they be included in the unity talks that were going on between the BU and the BC.

The whole process of reconciliation was repeated, this time with five Baptist Bodies in South Africa. After numerous meetings and prayer retreats together, it was unanimously agreed by all five Baptist Bodies at their Assemblies, that the South African Baptist Alliance (SABA) be formed with the express purpose of: -

- i. Facilitating unity between Baptists in South Africa.

- ii. Speaking to the nation on issues involving both Biblical and Social justice as one Baptist Body.
- iii. Cooperation together in ministry.

SABA was formed on the 4th August 2001 when the President of the Baptist World Alliance, Dr Billy Kim, spoke at three united Baptist Rallies in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town.

9. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion I would like to make the following comments with regard to the reconciliation process between Baptists in South Africa.

- a. Reconciliation is a process, which cannot be rushed.
- b. The process of reconciliation runs hot and cold from time to time and perseverance and patience is needed.
- c. Our reconciliation process got nowhere through discussions that tried to justify and defend our own positions as we dealt with the issues and attitudes that divided us. The process really started when we met for prayer and focused upon the Lord Jesus Christ. We then came to the issues in the spirit of love and our ears were opened to hear each other and to begin to understand each other.
- d. Someone needs to begin the process by humbling themselves and repenting.
- e. Outside neutral facilitators who simply open the doors for people to meet each other on neutral ground, is extremely important. For us these facilitators were the leaders of the Baptist World Alliance; the missionaries of SBC in South Africa; the leaders and missionaries of the American Baptist Churches and some individuals and missionaries of the EBM.

An old African proverb states, "When a bird builds its nest it uses the feathers of other birds"

- f. Many other Baptist groups from around the world worked with one or other body in South Africa and some "took sides". These Baptist Bodies were less effective in facilitating the reconciliation process and some even hindered it.
- g. The reconciliation process in South Africa is not over. New leaders have emerged; new members have joined churches; some have not yet dealt with the racism of the past; some still have racist attitudes and some still need to be committed to the ongoing process that SABA is seeking to foster.

Therefore, constant prayer and constant working at the process is essential, as we trust God for ongoing unity between Baptists in South Africa.