

MWA Home and Overseas Paper- April 2023

South Africa: A Church United

I've recently returned from a trip to South Africa where I attended the Unity Executive Committee. We had our meetings in Cape Town as we were beginning to plan Unity Synod which will take place there in September 2023. Unity Synod takes place every seven years, and all Provinces are represented. It develops the general principles of the Moravian Church, and controls funds and branches of the work assigned to the worldwide Unity. This is a wonderful opportunity to grow together and is sure to be an interesting experience as we navigate many cultures and ideas but remain one Church with Jesus Christ as our Chief Elder.

The idea of being one Church or 'communion' is fundamental to the Moravian structure and one I'm sure we are all familiar with. However, this wasn't always the case for the Moravian Church in South Africa.

The Origins of Division in the Moravian Church in South Africa

The mission work in South Africa dates to 1737 with the arrival of Br Georg Schmidt who established the Genadendal Mission Station among the Khoi-khoi, in the Western Cape. Unfortunately, the Dutch Reformed Church were not pleased with his work and five years later Br Schmidt was forced to leave. Fifty years later, in 1792, three missionaries returned and found that the work had been continued primarily by a Khoi woman, Vehettge Magdalena Tikkuie (Mother Magdalena), with the Dutch New Testament that she had received from Br Schmidt.

In 1793 the mission was officially recognised, and work began to grow rapidly and extended into the Eastern Cape to other indigenous groups including the Xhosa. At a general synod in Herrnhut in 1868 it was decided to divide the work into two provinces, South Africa West & South Africa East. This was for reasons of language, distance, and administration. While it may have been well intentioned, unfortunately, due to wider developments in society this decision would have far reaching consequences.

Apartheid and the Moravian Church

Apartheid as a policy was introduced in 1948 which upheld legislation and rules that institutionalised racial segregation where all non- white South Africans (the majority of the population it must be noted) were forced to live in separate areas from whites and use separate public facilities. An area that has become symbolic during this time was District Six of Cape Town.

Once populated mainly by the native Khoi people, District Six became famous for the inhumane uprooting of the Khoi by the apartheid regime, for taking down their houses and businesses and also for closing the Moravian Church. Over 60,000 of its inhabitants were forcibly removed by the 1970s. The Dutch Reformed Church which had once before opposed the Moravian Church, stood on the side of the apartheid government, even providing theological justifications for the policy.

Uniting the Moravian Church

It was during this very difficult period that the Moravian Church in South Africa, which had been split along racial lines (predominantly Khoi and Xhosa) was incompatible with the heritage of the Moravian Church and biblical teachings. In 1969 the two boards began to create a plan for a single Unity Province. Unfortunately, the original divide had caused long term suspicion and problems, compounded by the real problems faced by both Provinces in apartheid. However, apartheid also highlighted the necessity in coming together against such injustices and the plan persisted over many years. In 1986 a commission was appointed and in 1991 both Synods accepted the resolution for "one Moravian Church in South Africa", one province of the Unitas Fratrum, the new constitution was finally ratified in 1998.

Moravian Hill, District Six: A place of hope and reconciliation.

Apartheid finally came to an end in the 1990s but thirty years on, the country continues to heal and reconcile. Moravian Hill, the Church in District Six was returned to Moravian ownership and now stands as a symbol of hope and reconciliation.

On 24 September 2022, the Dutch Reformed Church apologised to the Moravian Church for the role they played in supporting apartheid and the hurt they caused to so many Moravian members. After more than 300 years of tensions, the two denominations are beginning to heal together.

I think it is poignant and fitting that in a time where the Moravian Church has never been so diverse, that we meet in South Africa for Unity Synod where they continue to meet and overcome challenges that were caused by division, holding on to the hope provided by Christ and a Church United.

I hope this paper gives you much to think on, please pray for the upcoming meeting in September!

Roberta Hoey

Resources for your MWA Circle:

<https://youtu.be/ci4QABYR4D4> - A documentary detailing the journey of the reconciliation of the Moravian Church and the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa.