

**DOCUMENT SUBMITTED TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN
TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION
BY THE SOUTHERN AFRICA UNION CONFERENCE
OF SEVENTH- DAY ADVENTISTS**
submitted to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in January 1998

“STATEMENT OF CONFESSION”

As Seventh-day Adventists we confess our faith in the Coming God (the One “who is and who was and who is to come” Rev 1:4, 8; 4:8) who as such calls for “the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus.” (Rev 14:12; cf. 12:17; 13:10. All quotes from NRSV)

In the face of the heresy of apartheid, we confess that we have failed by our sins of omission and commission to properly evidence the endurance of the saints, keep the commandments of God, or hold fast to the faith of Jesus, thereby misrepresenting the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ (Rev 14:6,7). This has been hurtful to our society, to the identity and mission of our corporate church, and to the lives of its individual members. Therefore, in deep repentance we seek for forgiveness from God and our fellow citizens, and commit ourselves to reformation, justice and reconciliation.

As members of the church we are continually called upon to confess our faith in Christ. However, we recognize that we cannot confess faith in Christ without also concretely confessing our failures in reflecting the form of Christ in the world.

Since as Seventh-day Adventists we frequently use eschatological formulations like the one quoted above from Revelation 14:12 (cf. also 12:17; 13:10 & 19:10) as summary statements of the identity and mission of the church, it is appropriate that we put these “identifying marks” of the church to the test in regard to our own attitudes and actions during the apartheid era.

The Enduring Patience of the Saints

Just as the church in the time of the Roman Empire was called upon to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt 22:21; cf. both Rom 13 & Rev 13) so the church in our day is called to insightful discernment of the spirit of the times and to responsible action in light of the present but not yet consummated Kingdom of God. Both then and now this calls for the patient endurance of suffering for the cause of Christ. We confess that we were altogether too caught up with maintaining our traditional a-political stance with regard to the separation of church and state to effectively combat the viciousness of apartheid. Under the pressure of the times we allowed the structures of the church to gradually become patterned along the lines of apartheid, by providing separate church regional organizations for different racial groups within the church. We failed to realize that the state demanded of its citizens things to which it had no claim and that, as Christians, we should have resisted this usurpation of God’s authority to the uttermost.

All this happened *despite* the fact that officially the church claimed to be opposed to racial discrimination, and that at the highest levels it remained organizationally one body. This demonstrates how easy it is for us to basically conform to the pattern of the world in spite of our intentions to do otherwise. In attempting, rightly, to stay out of party politics we ended up getting involved more than we knew in the national politics of the status quo. Without any means of properly critiquing what we were doing because of our socio-political ignorance, we tragically misread the “signs of the times”. This must not happen again.

Although it is true that as a church body we never officially ascribed to the ideology and doctrines of apartheid, we now recognise that we failed to fully acknowledge that apartheid, in any of its forms, flies in the face of the gospel of “God with us” and must therefore be reckoned a heresy. As a church we failed to truly *be* the *church* (the “called-out ones”) by both our tendency to avoid the suffering that accompanies true discipleship, and our silence in the face of the suffering of others.

Keeping the Commandments of God

Seventh-day Adventists believe that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone. But such grace is not cheap, and it leads to a life of loving obedience to God. We confess that despite our zeal for the commandments of God we failed to adequately contextualize just what the righteousness of God meant in practice in South Africa. Can we honestly say that we obeyed the injunction to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10:27)?:

- Did we not all too often put the god of expediency before the Lord God the righteous judge (Exodus 20:2-3; Deut 5:6-7)?
- Can we be sure that we did not make for ourselves “an idol” (Exodus 20:4; Deut 5:8) of this or that doctrinal tenant or our own self-interest as a minority religious community at the expense of the poor, oppressed and needy of our land (Isaiah 58)?
- Did the proscription against “making wrongful use of the name of the Lord” (Exodus 20:7; Deut. 5:11) not compel us to resist those who would attempt to misuse that Holy name for an evil purpose?
- But, perhaps most poignantly of all, we have to ask how we could claim to properly keep the Sabbath holy without heeding its explicit demand for practical justice, co-humanity, deliverance and healing (Isaiah 1:10-18; 56:1-7; 58; Matt 11:28-12:8)? Do we not have to explicitly confess that precisely as *Seventh-day* Adventists we should have done more to exemplify the meaning of the biblical Sabbath both within our own community and in our external dealings with society? Furthermore, in the light of the biblical extension of the humanitarian implications of the Sabbath to the jubilee year, should we not have realized that we are not at liberty to treat the land itself as an inalienable possession, but rather as a trust for responsible stewardship (Lev 25)? For surely true Sabbath-keeping and keeping silence in the face of oppression are mutually exclusive (Exodus 20:8-11; Deut 5:12-15).

Respect for family, life, marriage, property, truth and limits make up the second table of the law of God (Exodus 20:12-17; Deut. 5:16-21). Once again we have to ask whether we did enough to

honour the law, and uphold the righteousness of God in the face of the rampant lawlessness and disregard for every one of these principles in our country:

- How could we not see that the Group Areas Act and Pass Laws attacked the very fabric of family life, destroying parental and marital relationships?
- Should we not have recognized in the institutionalization of systemic violence, and the brutalization of the innocent, a direct transgression of the commandment not to kill?
- How could we not have appealed to the prohibition against stealing in the face of forced removals, expropriation of land, and the exploitation of labour?
- Surely the command not to bear false witness demanded that the church speak out against the lies, deceit and distortion that became endemic in our society? For Jesus said “you will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).
- Do we not have to admit that we coveted security, peace and quiet for ourselves, with public respect and acceptance, rather than risk raising the wrath of a state running amuck with the exploitation of the poor, and the enrichment and corruption of the strong?

We now recognize that to restrict our attention merely to the so-called “spiritual realm” belies the physical, social and very practical intent of the commandments. We resolve to be more biblical in relation to the balance between the spiritual and the social in the future.

In the light of all this, we cast ourselves on the mercy of God and appeal to the grace of Jesus Christ for forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration.

Holding Fast to the Faith of Jesus

At the heart of our faith is the reconciliation accomplished in the person and by the work of Jesus Christ. We, together with all Christians, confess that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female;” for all of us are “one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28; cf. Eph 1-3; John 17). As adopted children of God, unity with God and each other is not an optional extra—it is what salvation means. As our official statement of fundamental beliefs declares:

“The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope, and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children.”
— Fundamental Belief #13 [SDA Church Manual, 1980]

We have to confess that, in appearance and reality, our practice in South Africa gave lie to the very intent of this tenant of our own fundamental beliefs. We were out of step with the stated principles of our worldwide church.

In Revelation 12:17 the saints are identified as “those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.” According to Revelation 19:10 “the testimony of Jesus is the *spirit of prophecy*.” For a church that has made much of the “Spirit of Prophecy” as an important spiritual gift within the body of Christ, we have to confess that we have been singularly at fault in failing to address the tragic distortion of human rights, and the systemic misrepresentation of

Christianity in our country—*prophetically*. The prophetic task of the church demands that we not hesitate to “speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute,” to “speak out, judge righteously, [and] defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8,9). For one cannot separate the evangelistic imperative to proclaim the testimony of Jesus, from the critical task inherent in the spirit of prophecy. The church needs to proclaim both the good news of God’s saving “Yes” contained in the gospel of Christ *and* the prophetic warning of God’s righteous “No” which will be uttered finally and decisively on the day of judgment. But the prophetic No must always be articulated and understood for the sake of the gospel Yes—the good news of God’s lavish, astonishing and reconciling grace!

We commit ourselves, therefore, once again and all the more earnestly to the proclamation of the “eternal gospel” of the universality of God’s love; the denouncement of the “Babylonian captivity” of the church in which it sells its soul to the state; and the articulation of a more effective and clear warning against the worship of the “beast”—that civil-religious concoction of blasphemy, coercion, human arrogance and injustice that seems to find root all too easily in our midst (Rev. 14:6-11).

In Answer to the Questions of the TRC, we Reply:

1. To what extent has your denomination/community suffered from apartheid in the past?

Apartheid hurt *both* oppressed and oppressors, albeit in different ways. As a denomination we have been affected by both forms of hurt. However, the vast majority of the members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in South Africa, by virtue of the simple fact that they belonged to disadvantaged communities, were victims of a governmental system that rode roughshod over normal human rights in many areas of everyday living. Legislation enacted during these years has been well documented. Laws were fashioned to govern practically every aspect of life from the cradle to the grave. The effects of these societal manipulations impacted on all sectors of our membership. We list a few of them, but by so doing we do not and indeed cannot quantify the human emotion, pain and sorrow involved.

A. Group Areas Act

Hundreds of Seventh-day Adventist families were forced to leave their homes. The overall impact of such actions on the lives of those involved might never be fully calculated. However, the cascading effect on society was devastating. Congregations were forced to sell their churches to the Community Boards set up by the state. No profit was allowed. Therefore new church buildings could not be afforded and the world Seventh-day Adventist Church was called upon to subsidize the funding of replacement church buildings. This process by itself took many years and during the interim period members were forced to worship in classrooms and inadequate community halls. Demographics led to increasing segregation in local churches. Nokuphila hospital in Alexandria township was forced to close. Schools were closed or relocated. A widening gulf separated the “haves” and the “have nots”. Unequal distribution of resources, unequal pay, and unequal opportunities hammered home the hard reality of injustice. Even before the apartheid era, black church members had experienced the stereotypes, cultural biases, paternalism and patterns of discrimination so characteristic of the colonial period. Now they had

to face its explicit and systematic extension and proliferation. A further unfortunate feature of this process was that scores and scores of our better educated and talented members left the country to settle in less threatening environments.

B. So-Called “Immorality Act”

Not a few church members were forced to leave the country in order to marry the one they loved, just because the draconian and unbiblical “immorality act” declared it an offense to marry or even to fraternize across the “colour line.” Many others were forced to give up important friendships; families were split; and others had to endure dehumanizing racial classification and reclassification ordeals.

C. Job Reservation

Thousands of church members were adversely affected by discriminatory practices such as segregated amenities, restricted access to education, training and health care, and job reservation.

D. The Draft System And Compulsory National Service

The draft system of military conscription and later the compulsory national service system set up by the state to maintain the establishment, created much anguish amongst a sizable proportion of our membership. Young men struggled with conflicting calls to duty.¹ Not only the traditional dilemmas of whether to take up arms or not, or whether to request special privileges for the purpose of Sabbath-keeping or some other activity considered by the system to be a minority religious practice—but for many whether they could have *any* part in the “unjust war” being waged against their disenfranchised fellow citizens in apartheid South Africa. Some of those who did participate voluntarily or otherwise in the security apparatus of the times (particularly during the “total onslaught” period), were schooled in thought patterns that affected their ideas, ideology and value system. Several church members on both sides of the divide were physically and emotionally scarred by the terrible effects of war. Some lost life itself.

2. What have you done to struggle against apartheid—or to support apartheid—in the past?

We did not do enough to struggle against apartheid. Due to the intricate political system in force in South Africa, in which ideology was systematized and given Biblical and theological support, effects of the system rubbed off on the thinking of some, even among our church leadership. Many in the church imbibed, wittingly and unwittingly, the political philosophy in vogue at the time.

¹ From its inception the Seventh-day Adventist church has been radically opposed to violence and war (based on its understanding that NT principles commit the Christian to peace, not to mention the sixth commandment itself). But the church also accepts that the Christian has a duty as a loyal citizen to serve his or her country even to the point of giving life itself in defense of freedom and justice if called upon to do so. In all the wars and low intensity conflicts to wreak our country from the South African War, through the two World Wars, to the liberation struggles of recent times, the vast majority of Seventh-day Adventist conscripts solved this dilemma by agreeing to serve their country, but only in a non-combatant role. More often than not this was accomplished by serving in the medical corps. To save life rather than take it was the point to be made. During the apartheid era this became more difficult because of the very unjust nature of the state itself. Even the problematic concept of a “just war” became untenable. Several Seventh-day Adventists chose “conscientious objector” status and refused to do National Service at all. Some were jailed and forced to do community service. Many more chose exile from South Africa rather than serve an unjust system which labelled as “enemy”, not some external aggressor, but one’s own brother.

This undoubtedly had an effect on the creation of structures which mirrored the political structures of the times. The church was divided into two Union Conferences with separate administrations, one to cater for the Blacks and the other for Indians, Coloureds and Whites. Indeed the two structures did not communicate with each other all that much except for certain essential times such as when formulating certain broad church policies. Secondary and tertiary educational institutions (such as Union College and Spion Kop College) which had served all races in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, soon became segregated along racial lines. Separate Welfare structures were created. To the degree that the church patterned itself after the thinking of the politicians, significant inequalities soon became apparent. The level of theological training, the preparation of teachers, the quality of educational standards at every level, salary structures, and pension provisions, all reflected the inequality of the structural arrangements and impacted on the level of service offered our members.

We are ashamed to admit that by and large the church acquiesced, through its silence and often times by its example inside and outside South Africa, to the injustice suffered by some and the injury done to our church community as a whole. The emotional and spiritual damage to our membership can only be estimated. Our sincere hope is that all persons in this fair land both within and without the ambiance of our influence will grow in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who understands our mortal frames and the frailties of our beings and offers compassion to all of his children. (Matthew 9:36)

However, this is not the total picture. There were also a significant number of those in the church at all levels that did what they could to resist the injustice and totalitarianism of apartheid. There were church administrators who opposed and spoke out against the creation of separate Unions in the 1950's. The church opposed the strong attempt in the 1960's to create a separate conference for Afrikaans speaking members because of the perception of an underlying political and racial motivation. After such a breakaway conference was formed, the church held its ground and eventually most of the members and ministers who had left recognized their mistake and returned to the church. During the 1970's the separate administrative structures for coloured and Indian members in the then Transvaal and OFS/Natal regions were disbanded and these members and churches merged with the "white" Transvaal and Oranje-Natal conferences. Individual ministers here and there spoke out more or less forcefully against the mirroring of apartheid within the church. From the 1980's on, we have academic papers, articles and books from both white and black Seventh-day Adventist's incisively critiquing the apartheid system. As already mentioned, a significant number of Adventist conscripts chose jail, community service or exile rather than serve to defend a system they believed to be unjust. Many SDA families and young people left the country because of their opposition to apartheid. Many thousands of white church members opposed the Nationalist government of the time. Thousands more, in their own personal contact with members of other races, demonstrated Christian care and charity.

Although it is hard to determine the figures, a significant number of Adventists, or those with an Adventist background or exposure to the church through Adventist schools, played an active part in the struggle itself. Special mention should be made of the role of the extensive network of church-run schools (from primary to tertiary level) which, regardless of their limited racial inclusiveness, provided a rare alternative to the ideology promoted in state-run schools. With a distinctive philosophy of education, Seventh-day Adventist schools followed a curriculum

somewhat different to that of the public school system, and were able to maintain some degree of financial independence from the state. Together with the Catholic parochial school system, Adventist schools provided a real alternative to the “National Christian Education” of the government of the time. From 1990 on the church has been in the process of dismantling its discriminatory structures and policies. The world Seventh-day Adventist church set the direction with the “Perth Declaration” of 1990, followed by the merging of the two Unions in 1991. Seventh-day Adventist church members have also played important roles in the process of peace and reconciliation, together with reconstruction and development, particularly in the build up to the 1994 elections and since.

Of course, looking back we have to acknowledge that none of this was particularly significant or sufficient. We could and should have done so much more. But it is both proper and important that we give recognition to those who had the insight, foresight and courage to swim against the stream during the stormy days that are now behind us.

3. What is your denomination's/community's commitment toward the future? How do you see yourself working for reconciliation? What expertise and experience are you able to bring to the process of reconciliation and nation building?

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has now begun a process of unification. Following on from the merger of the two Unions in 1991, the church now has a fully representative conference structure in Kwazulu-Natal, and partially merged structures in the Free State, Northern, Eastern and Western Cape. While challenges still remain, we are committed to a complete removal of any vestige of racially motivated segregation at all levels.

Officially all our churches are open to full membership and participation rights. All educational institutions admit students without regard to race, salaries are being equalized irrespective of race and gender over a phase-in period. Our Community Service programme is working under a revised constitution approved by the Department of Welfare. This service is under constant review by our national body and our stated aim is to provide a more efficient service to the poorest of the poor.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

As a church we commit ourselves in our proclamation and practice of the gospel in the context of South Africa:

- to endeavour to never again be silent in the face of injustice to any of our fellow citizens.
- to ensure that our structures, policies and personal lives evidence an acceptance of all persons (regardless of race, gender or any other such distinction) as neighbours with a right to be treated with full equality.
- to work toward the completion of the process of internal church unification by loving persuasion and by example. To urge that, where appropriate, sub-organizations and entities of the church follow the pattern set by Helderberg College in 1996 and consider making a direct statement of apology to those hurt in some way by specific actions or lack of them during the apartheid era. When we have hurt another it is our Christian responsibility to ask forgiveness and make matters right.

- to become re-incorporated into the normal world structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
- to speak out on public issues effecting the broad society when moral, religious and other matters of conscience are at stake.
- to use our resources and expertise in the Welfare programme, Meals on Wheels Services and the Adventist Relief Agency (ADRA SA and International) to assist in the reconstruction and development of South Africa. We will encourage all our churches and members to become directly involved in demonstrating real compassion to people in need, and active in answering the needs of the community around them.
- to continue to serve the health-care needs of our citizens through our Adventist Health System, church-owned medical practises, and public health programmes.
- to continue to ensure that our educational institutions are multi-cultural and multi-racial environments where diversity is valued, and respect, tolerance and understanding promoted. Our tertiary institutions should play a leading role in the reconciliation and development process, by graduating leaders in business, arts and sciences, and theology with the integrity, courage and wisdom to make a positive difference in the new South Africa. Through our educational system we will also continue to train health educators, teachers, child-care givers, and pre-primary teachers to serve in areas where help is needed most. Our long-standing commitment to a philosophy of service must be maintained and concretized in the life of every student.
- to extend our Literacy program me to help with the backlog that currently exists.
- to strive to better reflect the love of God for every man, woman and child so that the healing of mind, body and soul will continue in our beloved land, and the hope of the establishment of God's Kingdom might become a reality in our time.

As members of Christ's body, we can do no other than love unconditionally, care compassionately, and live prophetically in joyful expectation of the Coming God.