

Whites and Blacks Unite in South Africa

The Adventist Church catches the spirit of reform and merges the black and white South African unions.

by Curt Dewees

ON DECEMBER 10, 1991, THE IMPOSSIBLE happened. Many had said it would never take place, but at the end of last year, the constituencies of the white and black unions in South Africa voted to dissolve their own organizations and merge into a single church structure. What remains to be accomplished is the merger of racially separated conferences.

The constituency of the South African Union Conference (white, Asian, and colored) needed to dissolve their union and accept the new constitution by a 75 percent majority. Exactly 75 percent voted to do so. If even one person had voted the other way, the merger would have failed. As one observer noted, "It was a very tense vote."

"I think the fact that the motion passed by only one vote tells us something," said one General Conference observer. "God was trying to tell us that *He* did it. It wasn't us."

The constituency of the black Southern Union Mission voted almost unanimously to merge. These actions at the end of 1991 mark the beginning of the end for the racially-defined Adventist Church that has existed in South Africa since the 19th century.

How Seventh-day Adventist Apartheid Began

From the beginning of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa, during the 1890s, church leaders tended to get blacks involved in work for blacks, coloreds for coloreds (coloreds are those of mixed race), and whites for whites. Language groups within the church also tended to stick together. This was true for whites (Dutch, Africans, English) as well as for black Africans (Xhosa, Sesotho, Tswana, and Zulu, et cetera). Church leaders believed separate organizations for ethnic groups would benefit "the work." Nevertheless, racial prejudice helped ease the way toward separate organizations based on racial lines.

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After 1948, the separation of racial groups became the South African law—apartheid—that legalized the existing distinctions within the Adventist Church. Over a period of years, many Adventists came to believe that this was the right way to organize the church in South Africa. Some even thought it was the only way.

In 1953 the blacks and whites split up into separate working committees for most of the day-to-day functioning of the South African Union. The union president at the time, W. Duncan Eva, an English-speaking white South African, opposed the separation, but was outnumbered. By 1956 the blacks left the union headquarters in Bloem-fontein and set up a separate black headquarters in Johannesburg, more than 200 miles away. In 1965 the blacks applied to become a separate union, and the measure passed virtually unopposed during the 1966 General Conference session in Detroit.

Over the years, more and more people became uneasy about the situation in South

Africa. For one thing, having two separate organizations made it hard for the Adventist Church to deal with the government. Also, the existence of two organizations in South Africa flew in the face of one of the church's fundamental beliefs—the equality and unity of all members in the body of Christ.

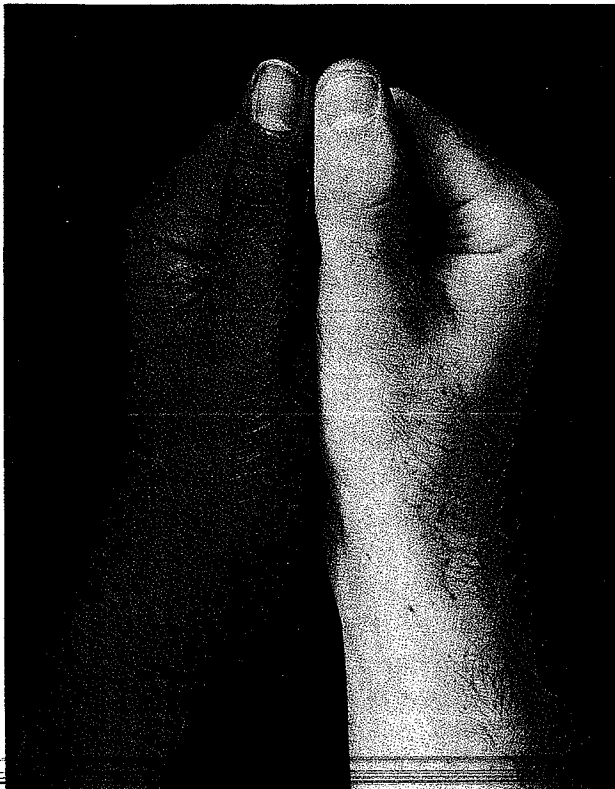
The 1981 Commission

In 1981 the General Conference appointed Eva—then a retired General Conference vice president—to chair a General Conference commission on church unity in South Africa. This commission traveled throughout the country from May 7-20, 1981, and met with many different groups representing Seventh-day Adventist blacks, whites, coloreds, church leaders, workers, students, and church professionals.

The commission found a number of problems that needed to be addressed. Black workers were being paid less than their white counterparts. Not all church schools were open to all races. At Helderberg College, student housing was racially segregated, and the staff included no colored or black African teachers or administrators.

Many whites claimed they were only observing the laws of the land. Black and colored Adventists responded that other denominations, especially Anglicans and Roman Catholics, and to some extent the Methodists, had openly challenged apartheid by their practices, especially in the area of education. Although integration of their parochial schools conflicted with South African law at the time, the government did not interfere. Nonwhite Adventists frequently pointed to this as an example of what white Adventists could do but chose not to.

Some local Adventist congregations limited church membership and attendance to whites, even though South African law did not require racial discrimination of church congregations



or worship services. Some Adventist churches and conferences even had racially discriminating clauses written into their working policies.

Understandably, many nonwhite members were embarrassed, even outraged, at belonging to a racially segregated church, especially when a growing number of non-Adventists, even among whites, were openly opposed to apartheid.

The 1981 commission made several recommendations that, had they been implemented, would have put the Adventist Church in South Africa on the road to unity a decade ago. "Unfortunately," Eva says, "the General Conference just left the situation alone."

Ten Years Later

Nine years after the 1981 report came out, the 1990 Annual Council decided to try again. Once again, the General Conference appointed a commission to go to South Africa. Jan Paulsen, president of the Trans-European Division, chaired the 13-member commission, which also included M. T. Battle, associate secretary of the General Conference, serving as secretary; Matthew Bediako, General Conference vice president; Don Robinson, General Conference undertreasurer; Duncan Eva, chairman of the 1981 commission; and the presidents of the two South African unions.

During March 19-29, 1991, the commission surveyed representative groups in South Africa. "All the people felt that there should be one church," says commission member Douglas Chalale, then president of the Southern Union Mission. "There were some reservations, but church members knew we were already behind the times. We were viewed as being two separate churches. This was not really the best. At least we should have one administration."

After its work, the commission recommended the following:

1. That the two Southern Africa unions be merged into a new unified administrative

structure. This is to be achieved by December 31, 1991.

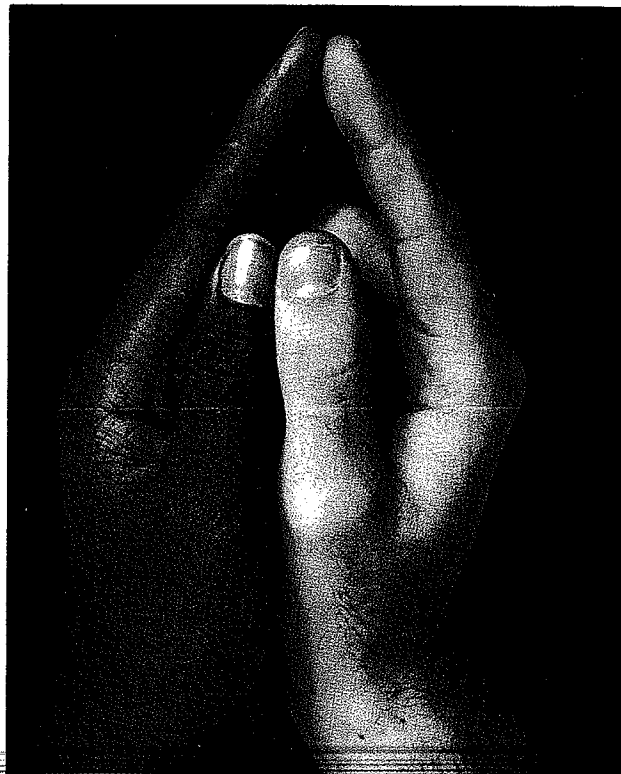
2. That the merged union be recognized as a union conference.

3. That local conferences and fields be merged into new unified structures with boundaries drawn geographically.

The commission recognized that some local conferences were more ready to merge than others, and therefore recommended that all church structures, including local conferences, become unified by December 31, 1993.

The commission also recommended that the new union administer Bethel College, Helderberg College, and Maluti Adventist Hospital, and that the newly merged union become a part of the Eastern Africa Division.

While Eva has consistently supported integration throughout his long career, he says, "I shuddered at the speed at which the General Conference commission wanted to achieve the union merger. I still shudder when I think of how fast they want the conferences to unite."



The World Church Supports the Merger

In Perth, 1991, these recommendations needed the approval of the world church meeting in the Annual Council of the General Conference committee. Calvin Rock, general vice president of the General Conference, was chairing the meeting when the commission's recommendations came to the floor.

Because Rock opposed certain points in the recommendations and wanted to speak out against them, he gave up the chair to General Conference President Robert Folkenberg. Rock opposed the report's introductory statement because he said it suggested that all structural systems set up along racial lines are against the will of God. Rock argued that this premise was shaky theology, and that in some cases, specific structures organized along racial lines are helpful. He cited the experience of the church in the United States, including Oakwood College, a historically black Adventist college; *Message* magazine, which is aimed at blacks; and black conferences.

Folkenberg responded by successfully recommending the removal of the introductory statement from the commission's recommendations. Rock still opposed the measure because it set specific timetables for the unification of South African unions and conferences.

Despite Rock's objections, the 1991 Annual Council overwhelmingly approved the commission's recommendations. Many people have questioned Rock about his opposition to the measure. He says he was and is concerned about protecting minority rights, regardless of the minority's race. "You can be very unfair to a minority by overwhelming it politically," he said. He also thinks the merger of black and white unions in South Africa will not stop black leaders from urging the creation of black unions in the United States.

To demonstrate its tangible support of the unification process, the Perth Annual Council

voted a special provision to help the church in South Africa. This action caps the 1992 Annual Sacrifice Offering at \$2.4 million. Anything over that amount will go to "help with the major financial needs of a unified church structure in South Africa." In 1991, the Annual Sacrifice Offering brought in slightly more than \$3.05 million. If church members give the same amount this year as they did last year, South Africa will receive \$650,000.

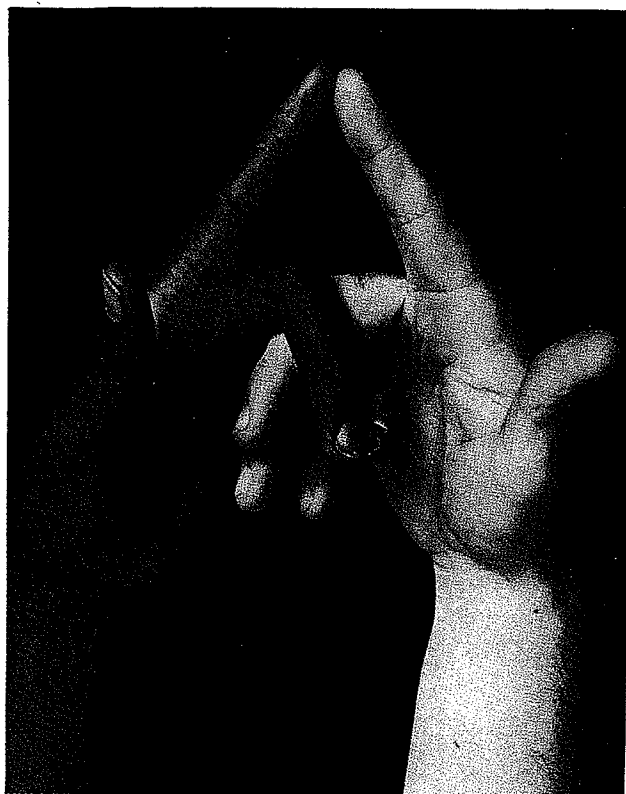
In addition to the offering overflow voted at Annual Council, the General Conference has approved \$400,000 in special appropriations to help the new South African Union Conference: \$50,000 for office relocation; \$50,000 for ongoing transition expenses, including expenses incurred by special committees, et cetera; \$260,000 for general "church unification" expenses; and \$40,000 for education of workers. (Some black pastors don't have bachelor's degrees, and the \$40,000 provision will pay tuition for those who want to take courses from Griggs University, which is part of Home Study International.)

Judgment Day in South Africa

Even before the Annual Council had approved the General Conference commission's recommendations, the General Conference had sent a transition team to South Africa to start clearing the way for unification. Chaired by Duncan Eva, this team met in Africa in July and August of 1991, and then again in October, November, and December.

The committee did a lot of groundwork with church administrators, pastors, and lay people. It also attended joint meetings of the two union committees. During this time, South African church leaders in both unions sent out waves of articles and information to pastors and churches. The materials informed members about the reasoning for unification and the process to achieve it.

After the Annual Council's resounding vote of approval at Perth to recommend the merger,



the two South African unions held separate constituency meetings in Bloemfontein to consider the proposed merger. The whites met on November 3 and 4 and the blacks held their constituency meeting on November 6.

The merger was not a problem among the blacks. It was to their financial advantage to join with the whites. However, the whites wanted to see the new constitution before voting. "That's understandable," reports Eva. "They were saying, 'Why should we join a new organization if we don't even know what the new organization is going to look like?'"

So the constituencies of the two unions came to Helderberg College on the same days, December 8-11, to hammer out a proposed constitution for the new union. This brought together about 400 delegates from all parts of South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia, and Swaziland to Helderberg College. Of these, 151 represented the South African Union Conference (white, Asian, colored), and the rest represented the Southern Union Mission (black). At

that time, according to the General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics, the South African Union Conference had just over 22,000 white, Asian, and colored members, while the Southern Union Mission had 41,000 black members.

The two delegations met separately, and there was a lot of "shuttle diplomacy" between them. But no agreement was reached. Finally, Matthew Bediako, vice president of the General Conference, assembled a group of 15 representatives from both sides to hammer out a constitution. They met in a joint subcommittee until late in the night. At last, they reached a compromise that both sides could accept. The next day the two constituencies met separately and voted to dissolve their respective unions and to accept the new constitution.

After forming the new union, the constituencies for the new union came together to set up procedures for the nominating committee, and for electing the leadership of the new union. Douglas Chalale was elected president. A black South African, Chalale had been president of the Southern Union Mission. For vice president, they elected James Bradfield, who had been president of the South African Union Conference. For treasurer, they elected Bertram Parkerson, a colored, and Hennie van der Ness, a white, as secretary.

Some were amazed at the ease and unity of the nomination and election process. When van der Ness was nominated for secretary, the blacks refused to nominate another name. Even though secret balloting was part of the new constitution, blacks wanted to waive the use of the secret ballot for elections. The waiver was approved, and the election proceeded by voice vote.

In his acceptance speech, Chalale said, "In these momentous times in the world, and particularly in South Africa, we must be willing to face the challenge of newness. With a new-born church structure come new hopes and new expectations.

"As in marriage, we must be prepared to

give and take. We will have to learn to be tolerant toward each other, to be forgiving, and to exercise patience.

"Left to ourselves, the task would be impossible, but inspired by the spirit of prayer and the faith of Jesus, we discover that our sufficiency is of God."

Now the real next step in integrating the two unions has begun. The headquarters of the new Southern Africa Union Conference has been put in Bloemfontein, in the office of the former South African Union Conference. As in 1955, there is not enough space for everyone. But the leaders are confident they can solve these logistical problems.

"So far the situation has worked out very nicely," said Bradfield. "We are very pleased."

What Comes Next?

Duncan Eva, head of the transition team, returned to South Africa in early March of 1992 to help the local conference unite. The deadline is December 31, 1993. "That's not going to be so easy," Eva said.

One of the major problems in this effort is resolving pay differences. The black pastors and conference workers were being paid a lot less than their white, Asian, and colored counterparts. They were also getting paid less in benefits and retirement. An intense stewardship program will be implemented among the

black conferences to help raise the money needed to pay everyone the same.

These financial difficulties may take months, even years to work through. This raises some difficult questions: Do you merge the conferences anyway, and continue to pay blacks less than whites, or do you delay the unification process until all the financial problems have been worked out? How about lowering the salaries for whites?

There are other problems, such as moving the union office to a more suitable location. Bloemfontein is basically a lily-white Afrikaaner community, where Afrikaans, rather than English, is generally spoken. There are probably better places in South Africa to locate the headquarters of a

unified black-white organization.

Another obstacle to complete unification is the continuing resistance on the part of some white Afrikaaners. In some parts of the country, white Seventh-day Adventists support the right-wing South African Conservative Party, which opposes the country's move toward a new democratic constitution recognizing civil rights for people of all races. "There are strong feelings against it in some parts of the country," says Eva. "We must be patient with them while they adjust."

"The Lord helped us merge the unions, the Lord will help us with the conferences, too," says Bradfield, the new vice president. "We're optimistic."

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