

SACLA II – Pretoria – 7 to 11 July, 2003
Morning Plenary, Thursday, 10 July, 2003

“BRINGING CHRISTIANS TOGETHER IN RECONCILIATION AND UNITY – CROSSING THE DIVIDES”

Rev IsAK BURGER and Rev GEORGE MHLOBO

Rev Isak Burger

It is wonderful to be with my family in Christ Jesus. The basic theme of this day is Crossing the Divides. George and I were asked to speak on the theme, Bringing Christians Together in Unity, and to base it on what our own experience was, and still is, in the Apostolic Faith Mission. Let me just say that over the last five to 10 years, something remarkable has been happening in the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. I have been around for some time but over these last few years it is just supernatural the way in which God is bringing together those who belong together.

It is wonderful to see how different denominations focus more and more on the major truths we agree on and how we less and less major on the minors, the things that divided us in the past, and my experience is that, indeed over the last decade, already many divides have been bridged. Wonderful reconciliation took place and I believe this conference, among many other things, is intended to serve exactly this purpose – to bring forth a greater unity than ever before in the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, a greater love, respect and appreciation for one another.

What we want to share with you is basically a humble testimony of a miracle that took place in our church and is still being effected, is still in action.

On 3 April, 1996, after more than eight decades of segregated existence in the Apostolic Faith Mission, we became structurally one church, the first in South Africa of all churches that had been segregated in the past to become one. On 5 April, on Good Friday morning, the most remarkable event in our church's history of 95 years took place in the Centurion Park Cricket Stadium, with a Unity Celebration Service. Before I bring to you a short paper from my side, I would like you to watch a very special revelation of God's working and dealing on that day. It's just a few minutes on video, the whole event was broadcast for two hours live on national television that day, and directly after that, just two or three minutes of response from Archbishop Desmond Tutu at the TRC hearing in East London a short time afterwards, when we appeared there as one of the churches and when we also showed the same snippet that you will see this morning. So it will follow directly after the Unity Celebration.

“Pastor Frank, and I want to address especially my brothers and sisters from the previous composite division of the Apostolic Faith Mission. I have never before as in the last week or two really fully realised how much you suffered and how much pain and frustration and despair you experienced through decades of separation. I have listened to you, my brothers, praying this last week a number of times in discussions, not only about what you yourself have suffered, not only physically but spiritually and emotionally because of the division in our church. And I stand this morning humbled before my brothers and sisters and I acknowledge today the division and separation in the Apostolic Faith Mission for decades, although it probably was not an evil invention of some preacher. I acknowledge that we were children and prisoners of our time. I acknowledge that we for years did not question brothers and sisters being separated because their skins were not white. I acknowledge it this morning. Brother Frank, you were the previous leader of the composite division and I was the leader of the white section and as representative of the composite division, I do confess this morning before you the unbearable hardships that we caused our brothers and sisters. I confess that, without us knowing, we sinned for many years, we sinned against the Body of Jesus Christ by separating you and often times handled you and conducted our work as if you were inferior mission objects. And I ask this morning, Frank, on behalf of those gone before and even those today – and I know it has been done in isolated cases in the past; I do it publicly today – I ask you to forgive us for all the pain that we caused.”

Rev George Mhlobo (I think...) COULD THIS NOT BE FRANK WHOEVER, TO WHOM IZAK REFERS?

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking our brother, Pastor Burger, for what he has done today. There are many people who have been looking forward to this happening in our midst and this shows that the unity we have come to is true unity. And I would like to assure you this day that we have forgiven one another.

I must also say that the hurt that we have carried for many years in the former black church has given us an occasion as well to sin in our anger. And I want to thank our brothers and sisters who have now come together with us so that we do not ever sin against one another again. From now on we are going to walk together and learn to do it together and be ambassadors of the Lord in this world.

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I am not sure that we want to ask questions but I sometimes think that as has happened in our hearing we realise that we are in the presence of something that is special where we really ought to be taking off our shoes because we are walking or standing on Holy ground. God is good beyond our deserving. And we give thanks for what we have seen as having happened. We read about it but now we have participated a little bit in it in a way that we would not have come across in the reports that we may read or see on television. I don't know whether others of you may want to say something. I am being maybe hard on my colleagues. Began singing Father We Adore You

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??? (Izak Burger again?)

It was a remarkable experience for us to enjoy the grace and the favour of God. And I can only say that over the past seven years since this happened although we are far from perfect and we are still journeying we can testify about God's miraculous working when we obey His voice and listen to His word.

It is in great humility that I share with you from our own testimony experience in short the following: "My brothers and sisters, I believe that the most meaningful contribution that I can make towards greater unity and reconciliation in South Africa and in the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is exactly by sharing something of the road that we have travelled as a church. The problem is not only to know what the Bible is saying about unity especially in the family of God. That's not the only problem (for us to understand what the Bible says). The problem is to how to bring unity in reality. How to put theory into practice. I want to share with you just a few thoughts about where I come from. Where our church, our denomination comes from.

Personally I hail from a politically conservative home and background. Many whites of my generation even as Christians accepted social and racial inequalities without much questioning as normal. Afterwards those like myself were ashamed and embarrassed for having been mentally so blind and indoctrinated. In a church context, and I don't think it is only exclusive to the Apostolic Faith Mission, we were satisfied that we were doing our utmost best, and I'm speaking from a white perspective, for our black and coloured people. I have in mind here issues such as mission work and the building of churches. As praise worthy as missionaries and their work might have been in the past, they did that work oftentimes while entrapped in a paternalistic and segregated mind set. And oftentimes it took the longest time for the missionaries to free themselves from this specific mind set.

May I just share with you the basic understanding that I came to in scripture that really liberated my heart and my mind from my past. From the paradigm that I moved and lived in. I think it is very important to realise what our unity in Christ really means. We are all aware of many divisive factors in society. Here I have in mind issues such as ideologies, politics, social status, race and class. These different issues, and they are all present here, we are in different categories as far as these are concerned, and these factors include some people in my group, they exclude others. But the greatest inclusive and exclusive factor indeed is Christ Himself. In a certain sense Christ is the great divider. Luke 12:51-53 says the following: "Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you nay, but rather division. From hence forth there shall be five in one house divided three against two and two against three. The father shall be divided against his son and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter and the daughter against the mother; the mother-in-law against the daughter-in-law and the daughter-in-law

against the mother-in-law." According to these words of Christ Himself, he brings an obvious divide. Even within the closest knit and most exclusive entity, the family and home, Christ can bring division in those closest knit family.

On the other hand Christ is also the greatest unifier. He brings unity between the most exclusive and different groups of people. Paul could not use an example of greater diversity when in Galatians 3:28 he says: "There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave or free. There is neither male nor female. For ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

Do you understand what I mean by saying on the one hand Christ is the great divider, He divides even families whether they are in Him or not in Him. But he is also the great unifier. He brings the most diverse poles and entities together. Jesus Christ is simultaneously the most dividing and unifying factor in this world and therefore we can speak of those in Christ and we must determine who are those in Christ. And we can speak of those not in Christ. This divide spans time and eternity. It exists today in the world, those in Christ and those not in Christ, it will exist in the life hereafter.

While this divide spans time and eternity on the other hand it also bridges all other divides. And any divide that forcefully or intentionally separates a fellow believer from those who are in Christ is an abomination before God, it's against His will. And that was the discovery that I made, that if someone is in Christ, no matter in what other areas he may differ, other casts, other nation, other province, other ethic group, that becomes irrelevant, if someone is in Christ, we belong together, we are family and what should separate us is sin.

When this dawned on me I was struck by the sinfulness and wrongfulness of allowing racial and cultural differences to bring intentional separation between people in Christ.

May I shortly mention three or four major factors that helped us as a denomination to bring about our unity.

In the first place in our own case, years before we unified, by God's grace, we compiled what we called a Declaration of Intent. That was a few basic biblical principles that we believe the Bible says about unity in the Body. This became our guiding light for years. When things tended to fall apart we reminded ourselves we have made a Declaration of Intent, what we believe the Bible says about unity. We came to the conclusion that the Bible clearly says that apartheid was and is a sin and we confessed it.

Secondly we also derived from the Bible that in our case unity for us means also structural unity. Many people for years tried to come away from this and say we are one in Christ, why should we be one structural unit if we are one in Christ? But we said if we are one in Christ and it is not reflected in our structural unity we are denying the truth thereof. In the third place we also said that unity does not mean, specially on local level, a forced unity. It must be a matter of spontaneous association on local level. I was elected President of our white section in 1998. By then this declaration had already been accepted. And I decided in my heart and mind that the principles contained in this declaration indeed was God's will for us and that those principles were well founded biblically. At that point I had to rid myself of personal sentiments and convictions and prevailing perceptions. Indeed those years before our actual unity were difficult years. What helped us and saved the day for us in many ways was the fact was that the highest council in our church accepted this declaration and accepted the fact that God's word does not provide an alternative. We did not have a Plan B. This was the only route.

The second important factor that helped us toward our unity was increased communication. You know brothers and sisters, lack of communication was a major reason for our divided past. This applies not only to racial separation but also to us as denominations in the Body of Christ. And I am so delighted that over these last years increasingly various denominations on various levels started to communicate. Whether it be Rustenberg I or II or SACLA1 or 2, whether it be on local level or whatever level there is an increasing communication between churches. Pastors Fraternal. And I want to encourage you with all my heart, that is the basic forum in which trust can be restored. We have to talk, we have to speak, we have to communicate with one another. It hurts to have to admit that it was and is a reality that children of the same God, even members of the same denomination, all living in the same country, were in reality living in two entirely different worlds.

In my own case with the Rustenberg II arrangements, I was on the Planning Committee and my colleague Frank Chikane as well, and we at that stage were almost I believe 17 or 18 years in ministry in the AFM, met one another for the first time on the forum of Rustenberg II. We did not communicate. We lived in

separate, different worlds. My contact and fellowship with believers of different races were for a great part of my life limited because of political, social and demographic reasons and because of distorted perceptions. But once we began communicating, our unity started becoming a reality. It began at leadership level. Then it moved into other areas. Limited contact in the past created a breathing ground for mistrust. But persistent, honest and straight talking in discussions brought us the goal of understanding, acceptance and trust.

The third factor towards our unity was the issue of leadership. Let me say in short that you know that leadership is influence. That is why we cannot expect those at grass root level to take the initiative that would lead to unity and reconciliation. Leaders have to pave the way and exercise their influence. If you do not show the way do not expect members to show unity. We have found that God empowers, strengthens and blesses those who have heard His voice, obeyed His will and submitted to His calling.

We declare in a spirit of humility that now we can rejoice in our unity yet confess that there is still a road to travel. For what we are blessed to experience we offer unto God all the honour and praise. It is all because of Him. Thank God for what He is busy doing in His Church in South Africa.

Amen.

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I would like to greet you in the wonderful name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and I am grateful for the opportunity afforded us to relate to you our experience in the Apostolic Faith Mission as we journey towards unity. But before I do so, let me start off by saying my political perspective was formulated when I was growing up. It was at some stage somehow confirmed certain methods that were put in place to reach us.

I was born in a little town called Volkrus in Mpumalanga. One day we had a missionary who came to do evangelism in a tent and I did not attend the services but one day he was going to show a film The Burning Hell, I think some of the older folks would remember that. We had determined in our minds that because of the suffering we had had no white person would actually go to heaven, by no means. So when we went to The Burning Hell and it started playing the guys with the motorbike and they died eventually and there was this scene of the burning hell we were so jubilant, I and the guys that were in the tent. We were saying: "We told everybody. No black person goes to hell, it is only whites. You have seen in The Burning Hell, it's only whites who will be in hell, there are no black people." So I come from that perspective. When I accepted the Lord I had that perspective.

Of course when I began in this journey of unity it was 1985, it was before Izak became a President and we were already involved in the unification. I would like to state that when the AFM was born on the 25th 1908 it was a church which was non-racist and it was a church which was non-sexist. It didn't have these divisions that it assumed later. It did not reflect a social class division in terms of poor and wealthy. In fact there is a history that points to the fact that it concentrated on the poor, but it was not long thereafter that the church became divided into four divisions on the basis of race and culture. The criteria used was similar to that of the South African government then during the era of apartheid in dividing South African society into four main groups. Added to this the church became susceptible to racial gender, generation class division etc. In the past there was a subtle tendency to marginalise the sick. This marginalisation was based on the theological view that if people had enough faith they should be healed when prayed for. We are grateful for the fact that there has been a theological shift at least in this regard. There was a high degree of complacency which made it difficult to challenge the status quo. It is against this background that we want to share with you our humble story.

Izak has referred to the factors that helped to move us forward. I have decided to say to you that for us it became necessary to put in what I call a bridge. But it had to be a bridge which would be strong enough to carry the weight, which would be resilient enough to also go through the forces of nature and challenges that would be ahead of us and above all it had to be a bridge that would allow a dual communication that people could move from this entity to another entity and not just be a one-way bridge. By God's grace when we sat to deliberate on the future of the Apostolic Mission in 1985, we discovered that we had a confession of faith. None of us had a problem with any of the articles of our tenets of faith. Two of the articles in our own confession of faith as the Apostolic Faith Mission have to do with the Bible and the

human race.

One of our tenets read: "We believe that the Bible is the Word of God which was written by men as the Holy Spirit inspired them. We believe that it operatively proclaims the will of God, teaches us all that is necessary for salvation." All four divisions of the church at the consensus on the authority of the Bible in shaping our structural relationships and relationships beyond.

Furthermore our confession states when it comes to the creation of the human race: "We believe that all human beings are created in the image of God and that due to their sinful rebellion this image is marred and that all have sinned before God and it is the will of God that all people should receive salvation through faith in Jesus Christ."

This particular one..... (?) is based on the principle of equality of all human beings before God irrespective of race, gender, class or age. That is why we concur on this particular one with the principle of the sanctity of life. But we have this beautiful confession and we needed an implementation plan. And I believe that as we gather in this Assembly when we leave here we shall have a guiding action plan that will guide us further.

For the Apostolic Faith Mission this plan was encapsulated in what Izak has referred to as the Declaration of Intent. In our Declaration of Intent which we drew in 1985 this is what we stated: "The Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa confirms the acceptance of biblical principle of unity. The Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa rejects the system of apartheid based on racial discrimination as a principle in the Kingdom of God and within the structure of the church. The Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa accepts the principle that the church should operate as a single structural unit based on the above principle. And in the light of the above intent we had to put in place a process. Subsequent to the acceptance of this Declaration by all four participants or constituencies of the church, we had to move forward with the process. But there were challenges. The challenge had to do with a structural unit. We had people who exposed the view that we needed to change attitudes first before you change structure. But there was a debate that if we went that route then that would delay the realisation of unity. On the other hand there were those who viewed unity as something spiritual and spontaneous which did not need to be regulated. They were very sceptical of church unity based on structure. There were also voices that called for consideration and agreement on certain theological issues first, issues such as liberation theology and many, many other things, and then proceed with the unification. This is the journey that we had to take in faith knowing that the Lord who builds His church was ahead of us. Although these issues were important, by God's grace we managed to present a leadership that took us forward and presented the strategic importance of putting our structures first. We had to adjust our structures. We had to be one church.

And I believe that it is very important for us to look into what is happening inside as we face the Goliaths in this SACLA2, the difference between the Goliath that we read about in the Bible is that he was outside the camp. He was not inside. But the Goliaths that we are talking about in SACLA2 are not only on the outside it is also a Goliath that is inside. When we speak here about people who are HIV positive, the one who speaks to you has lost some family members besides burying other people and if I were to call upon you who have lost one member or another, the thing is inside. If we talk about poverty, yesterday when I was driving down the street, I saw so many kids and people sleeping on the floor, then I had to say to the Lord "Forgive me, Lord", because when I came here the bus station was so cold I wanted to go out. I said: "Lord, I didn't think about those people who are sleeping on the floor whilst we are assembling here." But some of those children that sleep there have got their prodigal fathers and prodigal mothers right inside the church.

It was therefore important and it is important today that we also deal with the Goliaths, recognising that some of them are right inside the church. As far as AFM is concerned, some of these Goliaths are still around the table eating and enjoying a meal. Some of them are hospitalised. Others are in the ICU but we must still work very hard to make sure that we proceed to be what God wants us to be. The leadership had to move forward taking certain bold steps. One of the things we had to do was to acknowledge our participation and involvement in the sin of apartheid. You have just seen Izak on the 5th April 1996. But when we went to the TRC after we had made our submission among other things we stated that what we would like to state unequivocally today is that the AFM failed in its duty to question the system of apartheid more especially in the light of its continual preaching from the pulpit, the message of love, charity, hope, justice and peace. We miss the boat in the sense that we are blinded to so many evils. For that we need to sincerely apologise to all out there who suffered. We can never get to each one of them. We are

thankful for a forum like the TRC through which we can express our sorrow. We also owe it to them to plead with each member of the AFM to search himself or herself and to put right personally anything that has to be put right.

In conclusion we said we would like to reach out to those whom we can assist to overcome the hurt of the past. The AFM doors will never be closed to them. But I think it was also quite an extraordinary thing that when we had to make this confession, it had to be a collective confession. We had to have an Izak Burger and a Frank Chikane saying we were in the thing together and we have experienced the healing results of this confession. But I would also like to state that beyond what you have seen here, we have had to go beyond the euphoria of that event and begin to put in place our action plan. We needed to have a strategic plan as a church to guide us until today and our action plan is captured in what we call in the AFM the AFM's Master Plan. It is the kind of plan that gives us guidance into what it really means to be Christian in the real South Africa. In our plan we identified six pillars:

1. Empowerment
2. Evangelism
3. The position of the church on theological article issues
4. Social responsibility
5. Ecumenical relations
6. Administration

Empowerment and social responsibility are for us important in addressing social evils and social challenges of the day. Under the social responsibility we identified the following issues: Poverty, HIV/Aids, Education, Skills Development, Job Creation, Crime Prevention and Reconciliation.

We did address the question of poverty at our February 2000 Bloemfontein Poverty Convention. Two important issues came out at this convention. The first was that we as a church needed to broaden our theological perspective in such a way that it would restore theological balance between the spiritual and social action. It became important for us as a church.

The second issue was the need to maximally utilise the church's infrastructure for the purposes of coordinating communication and capacity building. Our view is that these are necessary to achieve goals of poverty. We have not been able to implement this but it is the cry of our heart that our church buildings and facilities and other resources that remained closed for most of the week will be opened so that people who are hungry will be able to share from their tables. That we can also be able to augment from our own infrastructure the health infrastructure that is so lacking in our country.

As far as HIV/Aids is concerned we conducted research last year to find out where we are as far as this issue is concerned and at last year's national leadership conference 525 leaders which was about 54.8% of those attending completed the questionnaire on HIV/Aids. Most of the people left. The group was well represented in terms of race, age, educational qualifications, rural, urban? This is what our research has indicated as far as we are concerned. It showed great ignorance amongst leaders on the issues surrounding the stigma that people living with Aids live with. Although black and coloured leaders generally had a more positive attitude than white leaders, it was also found that accurate knowledge of the disease was poor and that attitudes towards people living with Aids were not conducive in our own people. Of course this becomes a challenge to us.

I would like to latch onto what the Archbishop has said that maybe one needs to look inside and see what is it that we need to do. But beyond our Master Plan we continue to struggle to implement some of these good ideas because right in the church we continue to have those perceptions, those stereotypes that we must work on and of course we would like to come to this Assembly and say: "As AFM we are thankful to God for what He has done and we ask you to journey together with us. The journey is not complete. There are still entreties within our own church, the AFM, that continue to exist in the expression of the past. But we have come here because we believe that we can cross this divide and that together we can take hands and move forward.

I would like to request that we make a special prayer in this regard. I am asking our Vice President,? to pray.

"Gracious and Eternal Father, we come to you in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. We thank you for the opportunity we have had to share our stories of pain. But we know from the stories that these stories are able to end in hope. And in this regard we want to encourage and pray that you will give us the necessary courage and the willingness to challenge the giants before us and to defeat them so that we

in togetherness as a church of Jesus Christ can move from strength to strength in making this country of ours a place where everybody who lives in it will be free and at peace with themselves and with one another. We ask it all in Jesus Name."