



THE UNITING
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
IN SOUTHERN
AFRICA

Thursday, July 11, 2019

From the Moderator's Desk

Dear Friends

A long and sad chapter in the life of our denomination ended yesterday as the matter of the UPCSA vs the Rev Prof JLP Wolmarans was resolved through a mediated settlement. While the parties agreed to keep the agreement confidential, they agreed that the following should be publicly released:

"You are informed that the UPCSA and Prof JLP Wolmarans have settled the disciplinary matter that began after 2014 General Assembly. We acknowledge that the procedures as set out in the Manual of Faith and Order in relation to discipline were not applied correctly nor consistently by the various courts, committees and commissions of the UPCSA that dealt with this matter. The effect thereof was the prolonging of the matter and was the cause of unnecessary and substantial hurt to Prof Wolmarans and his family. Special apology is made to Mrs Wolmarans in this matter for the embarrassment and hurt caused. For this hurt the UPCSA apologizes and undertakes to review the current disciplinary dispensations. Prof JLP Wolmarans and the UPCSA acknowledge that the views expressed in his academic article En Route to an alternative secular Christianity are not per se the views of the UPCSA and are part of an exploratory academic discussion."

We must record our thanks to the retired Rt Rev Peter Lee who mediated the settlement and to our Church Representatives, Brent Russel and Jeremy Smith who were prepared to explore this alternate form of dispute resolution that led to this historic agreement being finalized in one day. Please do consider mediation as a route of resolving issues rather than running to the formal processes in the Manual via the ARP or the Courts. As has been demonstrated, mediation has the capacity to resolve complex disputes constructively and positively in a much shorter time.

This month, I want to focus on the work done by the General Assembly staff at Tiyo Soga House. I was at a meeting of the Church Office Committee and, together with the Convenor of that Committee and the Moderator-Designate, conducted the mid-year performance review of our General Secretary. I came away from that interaction, and the meeting of the Committee, deeply grateful for the caliber of the people who serve us at Tiyo Soga house. These are not perfect people by any means, but they are committed to the Lord Jesus and they love the Church. They serve with passion and dedication and really good humour. I thought it worthy to remind us all that when we changed the profile of the General Secretary, we adopted an approach that saw the General Secretary as the "face of the denomination". The idea at the time was that the GS should not be an administrative official seated behind a desk in our Central Office. To fulfill this function we created the position of the Clerk of General Assembly. The GS was to be a person who, when he / she was in the office would be the most senior staff person, but who would intentionally not be office bound. The GS is an ambassador of the Church, both internally – by being present at UPCSA events representing the broader denomination – and externally – by being our main ecumenical representative. Lungile has fulfilled these roles with distinction over the years that he has been in office. As a tribute to his leadership and style, the mood at Tiyo Soga House, once somber and somewhat glum, has been transformed. The new offices are light and airy, and the atmosphere also feels that way. All our staff are pleasant to deal with, helpful to a fault and eager to assist, whether during office hours or long after their working day has ended. We need to give thanks to God for these dedicated people who serve us so well, often without thanks or acknowledgement.

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Last month, I was accused of writing a letter that was predominantly about death. Unfortunately, we have to mark yet another death in the course of the month gone by. The Rev Zolani Agrippa Stuurman passed away and was laid to rest at the end of June. I had two thoughts about this tragic event. The first was something that I tell the students who come to Durbanville from time-to-time, which is that the ministry will kill you. It probably won't kill you quickly or dramatically, but it will kill you over time and the only one who can do anything about it is you. I am completely unimpressed when ministers brag to me about never taking a day off, about not taking annual leave and about having the maximum amount of long leave owed to them. All that tells me is that, at some point, a crisis is coming – a crisis in their overall health and well-being, or a crisis in their person or a crisis in their significant relationships. We have seen a dramatic and concerning increase in the number of ministerial divorces over the last years and this is also a testament to ministers not taking time to work on their marriages and to spend time with their families. The second thought I had was about the work of ministry. In the old days, the work of ministry was presented as a means of preparing people for a good death. Our commitment to prayer, spiritual direction and Scripture was meant to prepare people to die well. In a culture where talk about death is taboo, we seldom think about death and when we do it is almost always negative. In doing so, we fail to acknowledge the reality and truth of resurrection and what that means for those who fall asleep in Christ. As you go about ministry in the coming days, please remember that part of what you do is to prepare people to face death with certainty and confidence because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

On the 6th July 2019, a very significant meeting took place between representatives of the Finance Committee and representatives from most of the Presbyteries around the funding of our 20th anniversary celebrations in September. The GS has written to you about the outcome of this meeting, and I will not repeat what he has said here. What I do want to do is extend a heartfelt appeal to all of us to find something to celebrate in September 2019. If you are able to come to PE, please make the effort to be there. If you can't come, please do something to mark the anniversary of our Church. There have been some serious missteps and there have been moments in which we have not acted in line with the demands of the gospel, but there are many things for which we can and should give thanks to God. Please use the opportunity to offer to God your thanks for God's goodness to us.

Finally, I want to thank those of you who wrote to me or spoke to me after my letter of a few months ago about my wife Sally and my mom, Claire. Sally, because of a traumatic event some years ago, suffered a PTSD response in January where she completely lost the ability to speak. In July, while we were on holiday in the Drakensberg, she went for a walk and had a discussion with God in which she demanded her voice back. Having left the house voiceless, she returned with her voice functioning perfectly and for that we give thanks and praise to God who continues to work healing miracles. My mom, having spent almost nine weeks in hospital and having had her right kidney removed, has begun dialysis and is doing really well. She and my dad have moved into a lovely flat in an old-age facility in Durbanville and are very happy in their new home.

Thank you for those who have prayed for me and my family. The 7th July marked one year in office for me as Moderator of the General Assembly and I am so humbled and excited by the signs of life that I see in the denomination. I am loving the opportunity to serve Christ and his people in this position.

Your partner in the gospel



Peter