

# **A Cursory History of United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) Mission in Southern Africa**

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## **Ancestral Summary**

The Congregational family, like any extended human family, has an origin, a beginning, in word, “roots.” Congregational history in southern Africa, of course, begins with the Hebrew scriptures, the Christian testament, the early church as related by the Acts of the Apostles, the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformation, the Church of England, and finally primordial Congregationalism established in England and North America by the early Puritans and the Mayflower’s Pilgrims, respectively.<sup>1</sup> The mission arm of the Congregationalist church was the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission, commonly referred to as the American Board (AB), founded in 1810.<sup>2</sup> In 1836, the AB sent missionaries to southern Africa, specifically to its most southern and eastern coast known as Natal. A century later, the Congregational Church in the United States merged with other denominations with compatible polities to form in 1957 the UCC<sup>3</sup> and created as its mission arm the United Church Board for World Ministries (UCBWM).<sup>4</sup> In 1967, the AB churches, then known since 1964 as the Bantu Congregational Church (BCC), merged with the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Congregational Union of the Southern Africa (CUSA) to form the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA). What makes the UCCSA unique is that its membership comprises five southern African countries. The LMS established missions in the Northern Cape (RSA),

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<sup>1</sup> Selbie, D.D. *Congregationalism*, (Methuen & Co. LTD., London), 1927. pp. 1-199.

<sup>2</sup> Actually, the AMBFM was, like the London Missionary Society, ecumenical or interdenominational rather than exclusively Congregational, composing itself of Presbyterian, Congregational, and Reformed Dutch missionaries. However, both organizations became, for intents and purposes, developed as Congregational.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Daniel L. and Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements, and Polity in the United Church of Christ*, (United Church Press, Cleveland, OH), 1990. pp. 3-38.

<sup>4</sup> UCC Constitution.

Botswana, Zimbabwe, and the Witwatersrand (RSA). Robert Moffat and David Livingston were the preeminent missionaries serving as pioneer LMS evangelists into the interior of Africa.<sup>5</sup> The CUSA churches, composed primarily of European immigrants, were established in the Cape Province (RSA), Natal (RSA), Namibia, and the Witwatersrand (RSA). The AB that we focus upon in this study established missions in Natal (RSA), Mozambique, and the Witwatersrand (RSA).<sup>6</sup> The UCC's UCBWM (later in 1999 to become Wider Church Ministries) partnered with the Disciple of Christ (Christian Church)'s (DOC) Division of Overseas Ministries (DOM) in 1996, thus giving birth to a joint mission entity called Global Ministries (GM).

One of the unique aspects of the UCCSA and GM partnership is the union in each of two denominations (or religious movements): Congregational and DOC. However, this GM union of the North American Disciples and Congregational faith communities was preceded by southern African Disciples and Congregational faith communities by almost twenty-five years when the South Africa Association of Disciples merged with the UCCSA in 1972! This interesting historical fact only proves that missiological role models run south to north as well as north to south. From these complicated roots, the UCCSA and GM continue almost 200 years of Christian partnership and cooperation (see following page).

This paper focuses primarily on the Congregationalist connection *only at its inception*, since it is through that 'branch' that GM has a substantive relationship with the UCCSA. However, the Disciples connection *only at its inception* is also given briefly explored. Finally, it is emphasized that not only history, but more importantly, values are what bind the two partners in ministry today.

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<sup>5</sup> Comaroff, Jean and John. *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London), 1991. pp. 1-414.

<sup>6</sup> De Gruchy, Steve. "The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa: An Inventory of its Land Holdings," a joint report compiled by the Church Land Program and the School of Theology, University of kwaZulu-Natal, undated. p. 8.

## North America

**Congregational (1636)**

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Evangelical Synod (1840)  
Reformed (1863)  
Christian Church (1922)



United Church of Christ,  
UCC (1957) formed from the above

United Church Board for  
World Ministries, UCBWM (1957)

Wider Church Ministries, WCM (1999)



Disciples of Christ (Christian Church),  
DOC (1832 and 1968)

United Christian Missionary Society  
UCMS (1920)

Division of Overseas Ministries  
DOM (1973)



Joint Ministry in Africa, JMA (1989)

**Global Ministries, GM (1996)**

## Southern Africa

London Missionary Society, LMS (1795)  
Presby/Dutch Reformed/Congregational

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Congregational Union of South Africa, CUSA (1877)  
**American Board, AB (1810)**  
**Bantu Congregational Church, BCC (1964)**



United Congregational Church of Southern Africa,  
UCCSA (1967) formed from the above



Disciples of Christ "Thomas Evangelistic Mission"  
(1926)

**South Africa Association of Disciples of Christ,  
SAADC (1946)**

Disciples of Christ in South Africa merge with the  
UCCSA (1972)



**United Congregational Church of Southern  
Africa, UCCSA (1967)**

## Congregationalists in Southern Africa

The AB was established in 1810. However, its first mission activities began in India in 1812.<sup>7</sup> For the next twenty years, the AB expanded its reach to Ceylon, Turkey, Greece, Hawaii, and to west and central Africa. Sadly, the first mission to Africa was a complete failure.<sup>8</sup> The failure, caused by the infiltration of traders and colonial powers prejudicing the indigenous population against the missionaries, likely haunted the AB thus seducing it to threaten and/or implement withdraw later when conditions became similarly unviable in what were to be known as the inland and maritime missions.<sup>9</sup>

This cursory history departs from 1836 when the first American missionaries sent by the AB arrived on the banks of what is now kwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The AB presence in Southern Africa was catalyzed by Rev. Dr. John Philip, the Superintendent of mission in southern Africa for the LMS. Philip, a strong advocate for indigenous human rights and a politically contentious character, ultimately recommended in 1833 to the AB that it send missionaries to two fields: to the Matabele (inland) and to the Zulus (maritime).<sup>10</sup>

In 1835, the Grout, Adams, and Champion families established the maritime mission in Natal while Lindley, Venable, and Wilson established the inland mission. The inland mission was abandoned in 1837 due to Mrs. Wilson's death and the fact that the Dutch settlers destroyed the mission in their attack of the Matabele. The inland mission joined forces later in the year with their maritime compatriots in Natal. During this time

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<sup>7</sup> Some would argue it began in 1806, during the famous "Haystack Meeting" when five seminarians, inspired by a terrifying thunderstorm, pledged themselves to propagate mission work.

<sup>8</sup> No author cited. "Historical Sketch of West Central African Mission," pamphlet published by the American Board of Commissioner for Foreign Mission, Boston, MA, USA, 1886, Pietermaritzburg Archives Depository, A 608 "American Board Mission" file, D/1/90/91.

<sup>9</sup> Booth, Ian. "Natal and Zululand: The Work of the American Board Mission," *Changing Frontiers: The Mission Story of the UCCSA*, ed. Steve de Gruchy, (Pula Press, Gaborone), 1999. pp. 80-82.

<sup>10</sup> Kotze, D.J. "Letters of the American Missionaries (1835-1838), (The Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town), 1950. pp. 9-11 and 28-45.

the AB was suffering financial difficulties. Contemporary circumstances regarding GM's financial difficulties are similar to the initial context of the AB's involvement in southern Africa. A 1837 circular to missionaries in the field issued from Boston read:

*You will doubtless have heard, before this reaches you, of the commercial distress which has come upon our country, and upon the whole mercantile world. It began to be felt here last summer, and has ever since been growing more severe. Owing to this in part and partly to the fact that a number of the missions had increased their expenditures with unexpected rapidity, - though not more rapidly than the state of the mission seemed to require - - the Board last fall was indebted nearly 39,000 dollars... Your expenses must therefore be reduced, at any sacrifice, to the prescribed limits, or greater evils - affecting the credit and stability of the Board, the sending forth of missionaries, and your own personal support - will ensue.<sup>11</sup>*

In 1838, the maritime mission was abandoned due to both Boer and Zulu invasions that destroyed the mission. Grout's wife died, thus necessitating his return to the States to obtain a new spouse who would accept the challenge of returning with him in 1841 to southern Africa. However, by 1842 the Zulu king, Mpande, launched a surprise attack on the mission with the Grouts barely escaping with their lives and Lindley began independently serving the Boers in Pietermaritzburg. Although, Lindley justified this decision to serve the white population with a surprising degree of prescience given the evils of the Apartheid regime that began some one hundred years later. Lindley wrote,

*I do sincerely believe that the cheapest, speediest, and easiest way to convert the heathen here is to convert the white ones first. More, the whites must be provided for, or we labor in vain to make Christians out of the Blacks. These two classes will come so fully and constantly in contact with each other, that the influence of the whites, if evil, will be tremendous - will be irresistible, without a miracle to prevent. To their own vices the aborigines will add those of the white man, and thus make themselves two-fold more the children of hell than they were before.<sup>12</sup>*

By 1843, the AB decided to close the mission in southern Africa until Philip pleaded not to. The mission work flourished, comparatively speaking, from this point on. Taking Grout and Adams as examples, a church was founded by Grout near the Umvoti River where he served for twenty-

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 182.

<sup>12</sup> Correspondence to Boston, U.S.A. from Reverend Daniel Lindley in 1839.

five years until his retirement 1870. In 1846, Adams confirmed the first Zulu convert, Mbulasi Makanya, to the Christian faith. Today, both missions are large and strong, flagship churches of the UCCSA. The early beginnings were difficult to say the least. Today, as one surveys the gravesites at historic mission churches, one can see many American missionaries and their children laid to rest. Yet the work they began continues to grow and thrive.

Although only three of many missionaries, Daniel Lindley, Newton Adams, and Aldin Grout are quintessential examples of the massive influence the AB presence had on the southern continent. Their influence comes not necessarily from their own contributions, but rather from the descendants of those nurtured within the Christian environments that they engendered. Like their American Congregationalists before them who established Harvard and Yale, American missionaries in South Africa founded educational institutions that have produced some of South Africa's most distinguished leaders.<sup>13</sup> It must be remembered however, that education was seen primarily as a means by which to bring people into the Christian faith rather than an end unto itself. The object of education of females in the nineteenth century was, for right or for wrong, to educate suitable companions for indigenous pastors and to by familial example, propagate the faith.

*The Female Boarding School is vitally connected with the success of the missionary enterprises. Its object is to educate suitable companions for the native pastors and teachers, and for other educated Christian young men; that in every native community there may be at least one household illustrative of the fruits of Christian culture. The example of such families will act as leaven to promote the social and moral regeneration of the people, and will especially tend to the elevation of the female sex. The basis of a true Christian civilization must be laid in the homes as well as the hearts of the people.*<sup>14</sup>

Lucy Lindley initiated the Inanda Seminary in 1869 and since then it has produced most of South Africa's black female doctors, teachers, and lawyers, including cabinet and deputy minister

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<sup>13</sup> Briggs, Roy D. and Joseph Wing. *The Harvest and the Hope: The Story of Congregationalism in Southern Africa*, (The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, Johannesburg), 1970. pp. 76-101.

<sup>14</sup> No author cited. "The Female Boarding School in Foreign Missions," The American Board for Foreign Missions, Boston, MA, 1866. p. 1.  
Found at the Pietermaritzburg Archive Depository, D/1/90/97.

positions in the current South African government.<sup>15</sup> Its first principal, Mary Kelly Norton Edwards (more affectionately known as Ma Edwards), sent by the AB arrived in November, 1868 after a three month journey and served at the school for an astounding sixty years! Inanda continues to serve as the UCCSA's only affiliated school having survived the ravages of the Apartheid regime's Bantu Education policy that led to the closing of other mission schools across the country (Adams and Tiger Kloof, to name just two). Today, Inanda Seminary is served by a Global Ministries missionary, Rev. Susan Valiquette. Adams, sent initially as a medical doctor from the United States and only later became ordained in South Africa by the LMS, inspired the creation of the Amanzimtoti Institute (later named Adams College) in 1853 that produced for the African continent many of the most illustrious members of the black *intelligentsia*.<sup>16</sup> Thousands of students, dozens of schools, hundreds of Sunday Schools throughout kwaZulu and Natal fed capable and bright indigenous talent to these and other prominent institutions. Producing outstanding political leaders is the other enduring contribution of congregational mission schools. For example, the founder of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912, Pixley Isaka ka Seme, was a product of the Inanda mission and Adams College whose namesake, Pixley, was an American missionary who mentored him. John L. Dube, also a product of Inanda mission, was elected as the first President of the ANC and himself founded the Ohlange Institute, an industrial school modeled from Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute.<sup>17</sup> From *Grootville*, the most prominent *amaKholwa* hails: Chief Albert Luthuli. Luthuli attended school and taught at Adams, toured the United States in the 1940s, and became

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<sup>15</sup> Wood, Agnes. *Shine Where You Are: A History of Inanda Seminary (1869-1969)*, (The Lovedale Press, Pietermaritzburg), 1972. pp. 1-190.

<sup>16</sup> LeRoy, Albert E. "Amanzimtote Seminary," *The Higher Educational Institutions of the American Board*, (American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Boston, MA), 1910s. pp. 81-84. Found at the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, D/1/90/100.

<sup>17</sup> Dube attended university at Oberlin College in Ohio and was ordained in a a Brooklyn Congregational Church.

the President of the ANC during the height of the Apartheid regime. Under his leadership the Defiance Campaign (1952) and the Freedom Charter (1955) galvanized the quest for South African liberation from white supremacy.<sup>18</sup> In 1961, he became the first African Nobel Peace Prize winner, and the only Congregationalist (that I am aware of) to have won the Prize.<sup>19</sup> GM missionary, Rev. Scott Couper, maintained the historic relationship with Groutville by serving the church as minister from 2000 to 2004. From the inspiration of Dr. Adams, the first medical missionary, others such as Dr. James McCord and Dr. Alan Taylor enabled McCord Hospital to be the first medical facility to cater for the medical needs of the indigenous people.<sup>20</sup> McCord Hospital also went on to become the first institution in South Africa to train indigenous nurses, most of its early students coming from Inanda Seminary. The North American links to southern Africa continue to astound. Perhaps the most extraordinary example being the Bridgman family, that later evolved into the Bridgman-Cowles family, having collectively served the amaZulu and the AB for an impressive 279 years.

### **Disciples of Christ in Southern Africa**

The mission arm of the North American Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) was, for all intents and purposes, the United Christian Missionary Society (UCMS) formed in 1920.<sup>21</sup> According to one Disciples' text, Disciples were planted in southern Africa, like their Congregational counterparts, first by British Disciples who established small congregations in Johannesburg and Cape Town during "the opening years of the twentieth century." American

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<sup>18</sup> Luthuli, Albert. *Let My People Go: The Autobiography of Albert Luthuli Nobel Peace Prize Winner*, (Tafelberg Publishers and Mafube Publishers, Cape Town and Houghton, respectively), 2006. pp. 1-253.

<sup>19</sup> Couper, Scott. "My People Let Go: A Historical Examination of Chief Albert Luthuli and his Position on the Use of Violence as a Means by which to Achieve South Africa's Liberation from Apartheid," *International Congregational Journal: Mission*, Volume 5.1, Fall, 2005, pp. 101-123.

<sup>20</sup> McCord, James. *My Patients Were Zulus*, (Frederick Muller, London), 1946. pp. 1-256.

<sup>21</sup> Nottingham, William J. "Origin and Legacy of the Common Global Ministries Board," (Global Ministries home web page, Indianapolis, IN), September 23, 2005. p. 1 and 15. Accessed on January 20, 2007. [http://www.globalministries.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=139&Itemid=350](http://www.globalministries.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=139&Itemid=350)



Disciples then began work with the “Coloured” community in Kimberly in 1924. These early efforts however were short-lived. Disciples were firmly planted in southern Africa with the arrival of the “Thomas Evangelistic Mission” in 1926, so named after its primary patron, Mr. “Mike” H. Thomas.<sup>22</sup> Many churches were constituted, however expatriate support dwindled and local leadership was forced to take the reigns. American cooperation resumed in 1945 when the UCMS further contributed to the organization of the Disciples. In 1946, the South African Association of Churches of Christ (SAACC) was formed.<sup>23</sup> In comparison to its future Congregational partner, the small Disciples association, only seven churches (most of which were in the Transvaal), composed of 333 members in 1947.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the Disciples’ significance stems not from the small numbers it added to the union with Congregationalists, but rather in the implemented prescience that would be an example to its North American counterparts. In 1972 the SAACC were incorporated into the UCCSA, thus enlarging the family and fulfilling in part Christ’s prayer that “they may all be one” (John 17:21-22).

### **Shared Values**

More important than a common history are shared values. The UCCSA and GM are partners not as a matter of historical coincidence or convenience, but rather because their vision for the realm of God on Earth and how the church, with God’s grace, may participate in its enablement, are similar. A prominent southern African Congregational historian, Rev. Dr. Steve de Gruchy, identifies five principals that those who follow the congregational way emphasize:

1. a strong commitment against state interference in the church;
2. a democratic church order that locates property ownership and decision making in the hands of the ‘gathered congregation’ at local level;

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<sup>22</sup> Garrison, Winfred Earnest and Alfred T. Degroot. *The Disciples of Christ: A History*, (Christian Board Publication, St. Louis MO), 1948. pp. 466-467.

<sup>23</sup> No author cited. *Pilgrimage of Faith: Confirmation Training Handbook*, (United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, Johannesburg), no date provided. p. 61.

<sup>24</sup> One church was in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) while the rest were located in South Africa.

3. a commitment to unity and ecumenism;
4. a valuing of human dignity, justice and freedom as key elements in its praxis in the world;
5. and a desire to share its message abroad.<sup>25</sup>

I would add education and the fostering of wisdom as a seminal congregational tenet.

The UCCSA stance against the white supremacy during the Apartheid period (1948-1990) was admirable, not just in its assembly resolutions but in its prophetic actions. The UCCSA became an international and multi-racial denomination during the height of Apartheid, thus being by its own constitution a rejection of a heretical political system that prohibited those of different races from associating and worshipping the same God with one another.<sup>26</sup> GM, catalyzed by the UCC's strong emphasis on human rights, has been at the forefront of issues related to violent conflict, justice, and economic inequality around the world. Both the UCCSA in South Africa and the UCC and DOC in the United States struggle with the issue of same-sex marriages and the religious and societal discrimination homosexuals continue to experience. South Africa, in December, 2006, legalized same-sex marriages and therefore affords homosexuals their human rights. Perhaps the difficult theological dilemma of same-sex marriage can be an issue upon which GM and the UCCSA can explore together given that so many UCC churches are "open and affirming churches" and the South African government is one of only six countries in the world that understand the issue as one that is fundamentally about human rights. Both partners have struggled and will continue to struggle against racism and sexism, with mixed degrees of success. Let us pray that GM and the UCCSA will continue to be in partnership as they seek God's will on all issues and challenges that they may confront together.

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<sup>25</sup> De Gruchy, Steve. "The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa: An Inventory of its Land Holdings," p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Institute of Contextual Theology, "The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church, A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa," (Skotaville Publishers and WM B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Braamfontein and Grand Rapids Michigan, respectively), 1986. pp. 1-35.

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