Believers' Church and the (Counter) Political: The Promise of Anabaptist Ecclesiology in the South African Context

ANDREW G. SUDERMAN*

Abstract: Historically, the Believers' Church movement of the Reformation proved to be a counter political movement that challenged the status quo of Christendom Europe. Although this movement encouraged a separation of church and state, it was not apolitical. Rather it embraced an alternative political allegiance—an allegiance to Jesus and his politics over and above that of the state. South African churches whose historical roots derive from the Believers' Church movement (e.g., Baptist, Pentecostal, and the more recent charismatic and neo-Pentecostal churches), especially the white churches within these denominations, have largely adopted an apolitical stance, thereby forgetting their own (counter) political ecclesial expression. The Kairos Document of 1985 argued convincingly that such an apolitical stance made them complicit to apartheid and its racially-based social engineering. This paper argues that such churches have fallen into the Constantinian temptation of separating their responsibility for the spiritual from sociopolitical realities. The Anabaptist understanding of the Believers' Church tradition provides an alternative political imagination that can help the South African church reclaim and re-embody its prophetic witness.

Historically, the Believers' Church movement of the Reformation was a counter political movement that challenged the status quo of Christendom Europe. Although this movement encouraged the separation of church and state, it was not apolitical. Rather it embraced an alternative political allegiance—an allegiance to Jesus and his politics over and above that of the state. Yet within the South African context, those churches that ascribe to a Believers' Church theological orientation, especially white churches, have largely adopted an apolitical stance.[1] Such

*Andrew Suderman is assistant professor of theology, peace, and mission at Eastern Mennonite University (Harrisonburg, Va.).

1. A note of clarification is in order regarding language. Apartheid became a legal policy in 1948 that separated South Africa and its inhabitants by their different classified races—Black, Colored, Indian, and White. Since these forms of separation became a reality within the church, the church was also a "site of struggle" within the South African context.

a stance has caused them to forget their own (counter) political ecclesial expression; indeed, the 1985 Kairos Document demonstrated convincingly that such an apolitical stance made them complicit with apartheid and its racially-based social engineering.

This paper considers two particular examples—the Baptist Union of Southern Africa and the (white) Pentecostal churches—and demonstrates how their ecclesial witness became co-opted by the apartheid state, thereby falling silent and losing its prophetic voice. By contrast, the ecclesiological perspective of Anabaptism, as appropriated in the South African context, has provided a (counter) political imagination that has helped the church in South Africa reclaim and re-embody its prophetic witness.

THE BAPTIST UNION OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

> The once overwhelmingly white Baptist Union of Southern Africa offers a particularly lucid example of the extent to which a denomination became captive to secular values and political rhetoric, how its biblical foundations became subordinated thereto, and how it surrendered much of its prophetic voice on the pervasive question of race relations.[2]

Thus begins Frederick Hale's explanation of how the Baptist Union of Southern Africa came to support—if not actively, then at least passively—apartheid and its system of racial segregation. Although the Baptist Union never spoke with "one voice," given its ecclesiological polity that emphasized congregational autonomy, Hale identifies a noticeable shift in orientation from a willingness to critique the political landscape and direction as a denominational body to a growing hesitation, and finally a refusal, to become involved in matters that it deemed "political." According to Hale, this reflected the absence of a consistent meta-ethical foundation in the Baptist Union from which to act or make decisions.[3]

Therefore, many if not all of the historical denominations within the South African context have different racially based forms within them. Some existed as officially separate, or "daughter," churches—e.g., the Dutch Reformed Mission Church for Coloureds and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa for Blacks are "daughter" churches of the Dutch Reformed Church for whites. This racial separation also occurred in Baptist and Pentecostal churches.

2. Frederick Hale, "The Baptist Union of Southern Africa and Apartheid," *Journal of Church and State*, 48:4 (Autumn 2006), 754. In analyzing the Baptist Union's historical and theological development, I rely heavily on the work of Frederick Hale and Louise Kretzschmar, both of whom have spent considerable energy exploring and narrating this history.

3. This, for example, is part of the reason why Richard Steele, one of the first conscientious objectors in South Africa, "regarded his Baptist nurturing as insufficient for meeting the socio-political crisis in South Africa in which he was intimately involved and, concomitantly, why he found the pacifism of the Mennonite heritage far more relevant."—Frederick Hale,

The roots of the Baptist Union intersect deeply with the history of South Africa. The first known Anglophone Baptist arrived in South Africa in the 1820s. With the arrival of many more English to their newly acquired colony, numerous Baptist congregations began to emerge. By 1877, these Baptist congregations joined to form the Baptist Union of Southern Africa. Although in the latter half of the twentieth century leaders of the Baptist Union repeatedly asserted that the church would avoid taking positions on public issues, lest they follow the paths of the more "political" churches who were part of the South African Council of Churches, early in its history the Baptist Union frequently acted in accordance with its "nonconformist conscience" that was an important part of the early Baptist tradition.[4]

In 1912, for example, the Baptist Union responded critically to the newly-formed South African Union's Defence Bill that created the possibility of military conscription. J. J. Doke, editor of *The South African Baptist*, strongly opposed this bill, giving it a great deal of exposure in the journal.[5] In October 1912, delegates to the Baptist Union Assembly passed a resolution stating that the Baptists had "always emphasized the sacredness of conscience" and "stood for civil and religious liberty" and noted their "regret that the principle of compulsion should have been embodied in the South African Defence Act." The Assembly further urged the parliament to abolish military conscription.[6]

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Baptist Union exerted some pressure on the different racial policies that were either in existence or were being introduced.[7] Almost annually, the Baptist Union took stands against racially discriminatory governmental policies. Hale suggests that this could have created "an ethical-rhetorical tradition that could have served it well as a bulwark against the implementation of full-scale apartheid a few years later."[8] Nevertheless, the Baptist Union, like other Christian denominations that preceded its arrival to South Africa, quickly followed

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"Baptist Ethics of Conscientious Objection to Military Service in South Africa: The Watershed Case of Richard Steele," *Acta Theologica* no. 2 (2005), 19.

4. Hale, "The Baptist Union of Southern Africa and Apartheid," 755. Hale offers two such examples. This first pertained to the question as to whether Baptist missionaries in southern Africa should accept land taken by force that was offered to them by Cecil Rhodes's Chartered Company. The second was the Baptist Union's pro-British sentiments articulated at the outbreak of the Second Anglo-Boer War in 1899.—Ibid., 755-756. It is interesting to note that Louise Kretzschmar, however, contests whether Baptist nonconformity was ever extended from religious affairs to the sociopolitical realm.

5. Hale, "The Baptist Union of Southern Africa and Apartheid," 756.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 758.

8. Ibid., 759.

the trend of racial segregation, which the Dutch Reformed Church already firmly established.[9]

In 1949, one year after the National Party came into power and officially introduced the policy of apartheid, the Baptist Union issued a pronouncement that criticized the educational policy of the National Party as the "subordination of education for non-whites."[10] The Baptist Union raised a similar concern in 1953 when the apartheid government announced its Bantu Education Act, which had the effect of removing churches from the field of "native education" by placing mission schools under the direct supervision of the Department of Native Affairs.[11] In their Assembly in 1954, the Baptist Union, seeing how much the Bantu Education Act restricted the voice and work of the churches, formulated a bold resolution that dealt with three aspects of the law. Hale summarized their concerns as follows:

> The first expressed the Assembly's concern that the Verwoerdian understanding of education for black Africans, which was to prepare them almost exclusively for subordinate positions, would prevent most of the "Bantu people" from becoming "worthy members of society." The second was an outcry against "the gradual exclusion of the Christian Church from the field of education." In the third, for what appears to have been purely pragmatic reasons, delegates expressed their objection to the provision of the Bantu Education Act that blacks must financially provide and maintain their own schools, and they urged the government to make special appropriations towards the attainment of those ends.[12]

The Baptist Union again raised its critical voice when the apartheid government extended its racial policies into the churches. The "Native Laws Amendment Act," introduced in 1952, forbade integrated worship and worship by non-whites in white-only areas. In 1957, the executive of the Baptist Union denounced the bill in a letter to the minister of Native Affairs, expressing concern that the bill restricted the freedom of its people

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9. See John de Gruchy and Steve de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa: 25th Anniversary Edition* (London: SCM Press, 2004); John de Gruchy, "The Chastening of the English-Speaking Churches in South Africa," in *Race and Reconciliation in South Africa*, ed. William E. Van Vugt and G. Daan Cloete (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2000); Andrew G. Suderman, "In Search of Prophetic Theology: South African Political Theology in Conversation with Anabaptism" (PhD Diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2017), 44-55.

10. Hale, "The Baptist Union of Southern Africa and Apartheid," 760.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 761. "Verwoerdian" refers to a school of thought arising from Hendrik Verwoerd, who was one of the main architects of apartheid and who served as prime minister of South Africa from 1958 until his assassination in 1966.

to assemble in public worship.[13] The irony, of course, was that the churches that constituted the Baptist Union were already largely segregated along racial lines.

Although such pronouncements rarely led to a change in practice, clearly the Baptist Union was willing to occasionally raise a critical voice on social and political issues, especially where there was a perceived threat to personal—and particularly religious—freedom.[14] Regrettably, these examples proved to be anomalies, "exceptions in a decrescendo of expressed social conscience within the denomination."[15] As Louise Kretzschmar notes, "Unfortunately, the available evidence supports the view that 'unity' was not understood to be a unity that transcended racial and cultural lines and, in this sense, the Baptist Union's aims of 'unity, brotherly love and mutual assistance' were certainly not achieved."[16]

Although criticism of apartheid never fully died out among the Baptists, "it clearly went into remission."[17] One of the significant reasons for this, besides the comfort enjoyed and expected in the way the apartheid government structured society, was the growing fear of communism. By the 1960s Africa was becoming decolonized while the Cold War was gaining momentum. The growing fear of communism fed the notion that precautions had to be taken to combat this new formidable force in order to maintain economic and, more importantly, Christian order.[18] Thus, this larger concern soon displaced whatever reservations the Baptist Union may have had regarding apartheid and its social engineering system.

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13. Ibid., 762.

14. "Religious Liberty" would eventually become principle No. 5 in the 1987 *Statement on Baptist Principles* of the Baptist Union of South Africa. See *Baptist Union of South Africa: Handbook for 1989-1990* (Roodeport: Baptist Publishing House), 178. Also see James Harris's exposition of this principle in his "Baptist Identity in Ecumenical Context: A Critical Exposition of the 1987 Statement on Baptist Principles of the Baptist Union of South Africa" (University of Cape Town, 1996), 288-300.

15. Hale, "The Baptist Union of Southern Africa and Apartheid," 762-763.

16. Kretzschmar, *Privatization of the Christian Faith*, 37.

17. Hale, "The Baptist Union of Southern Africa and Apartheid," 763. For a more in-depth look into this history, see Frederick Hale, "The Social Ethics of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa" (PhD Diss., University of Natal, 1992).

18. Hale, "The Baptist Union of Southern Africa and Apartheid," 763. For example, during a visit to the United States in 1987, Roger Voke, who served as an evangelist and minister in the Baptist Union, commented that "if the South African government pulled out of the black areas, communist Cuban troops would move in immediately," and he noted that "communists are taking advantage of the situation."—Perry White, "South African Evangelist to Give Insider Viewpoint of Apartheid," *News Oklahoma* 1987: https://newsok.com/article/2177468/south-african-evangelist-to-give-insiders-viewpoint-of-apartheid (accessed July 25, 2018). Voke demonstrates just how pervasive this mentality had become by the end of the 1980s.

Another moment of revelation regarding Baptist Union's character and its attitude toward apartheid arose when the South African Council of Churches released its *Message to the People of South Africa* in 1968.[19] *The Message* argued that apartheid itself, not merely the abuse of it, ran contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and was hostile to Christianity.[20] Many white Baptists responded to *The Message* with hostility.[21] For Allen Townsend, who edited *The South African Baptist,* the idea that apartheid offered an alternative gospel was "arrant nonsense"[22] because:

> "separate development" is not a "gospel" at all, nor is it being offered as an alternative to the Gospel; its area of relevance is only a fractional part of the total relevance of the Christian Gospel; it is a technique (accepted by the majority of the country's electorate) for the government of a multiracial community.[23]

According to Townsend, apartheid and its social strategy was one way of dealing with the "problem" of race. What's more, as Hale notes, Townsend assumed that the message of the Gospel was strictly personal in nature:

> and, in this matter of salvation, nothing, but nothing can take the place of a restored personal relationship to Him through an individual commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. To this, the heart of the Gospel, all other issues are secondary.[24]

Thus, in response to *The Message*, the Baptist Union at its next Assembly revised its membership in the South African Council of Churches from "full status" to "observer status" in order to distance itself from any further assault by Christians on the apartheid system.[25]

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19. South African Council of Churches, *Message to the People of South Africa* (Braamfontein: South African Council of Churches, 1968).

20. Hale, "The Baptist Union of Southern Africa and Apartheid," 764.

21. Ibid. James Harris also makes this observation. See Harris, "Baptist Identity in Ecumenical Context," 294.

22. Hale, "The Baptist Union of Southern Africa and Apartheid," 764.

23. Allen Townsend, "Politics and the Gospel," *The South African Baptist*, Nov. 1968, as quoted in Hale, "The Baptist Union of Southern Africa and Apartheid," 764-765.

24. Hale, "The Baptist Union of Southern Africa and Apartheid," 765. Hale is here quoting Allen C. Townsend, "Politics and the Gospel," *The South African Baptist* (Nov. 1968), 12-13.

25. Hale, "The Baptist Union of Southern Africa and Apartheid," 765. Again, it is indicative how Roger Voke spoke during a 1987 visit to the U.S. about the South African situation and apartheid. During his visit, Voke argued that Bishop Desmond Tutu was not really speaking for the blacks (or the whites), but only for a small constituency; that a one-man-one-vote system "would create an impossible situation" as the Zulu tribe would over-run all elected offices; and that the Boycott, Divesting, and Sanctions strategy, which Tutu encouraged, was "undermining the economy and crippling the South African government in its effort to change the situation."—White, "South African Evangelist to Give Insider Viewpoint of Apartheid."

Ultimately, the Baptist Union's failure to speak out against apartheid or to live in a way that challenged its policies prompted the Black Baptist Church, known as the Baptist Convention, to sever its relationship with the Baptist Union in 1987. According to Kretzschmar, black Baptists "were no longer willing to tolerate oppression at the hands of whites; they were determined that if unity was to be achieved it would be a meaningful unity and not just a continuation of the old pattern of white dominance and black acquiescence."[26]

Over time, the Baptist Union became captive to the values of apartheid, its social engineering project, and its political rhetoric. The overwhelming assumption was that, at best, the Christian faith had nothing to say regarding political and social realities; at worst, it argued that Christians should actively supported the maintenance of the status quo of apartheid's social structure and rule. Kretzschmar has suggested that this social and political captivity of the Baptist Union was the result of a more general privatization of faith defined as: "the limitation of the Christian Gospel to the private spiritual concerns of the individual," whereby the social and political ramifications of the Gospel are either ignored or misunderstood.[27] A privatized faith, Kretzschmar argues, is a result of secularization in which "religious authority is first opposed by the growing secular powers, then becomes more and more alienated from social affairs and is, finally, limited to the existential realm of individual persons."[28] If the state is the entity responsible for the social lives of its citizens, the argument goes, then the role of religion should focus on the individual and her/his private life.

Kretzschmar highlights four key features of privatization, to which, she argues, the Baptist Union fell victim. The first is that such a theology becomes inherently dualistic. This dualism is expressed on several levels:

- between the spiritual and the material;
- between the secular and the sacred;
- between saving souls and social involvement;
- between theological statements and political activism.

These dualisms create a wedge between the experiences and realities of this world and those of a distant future world. The social implications of this world are not the concerns of faith and religion. Affairs of "this world" are managed by the powers that God has put in place to maintain order and govern within this world—i.e., the state. The task of the church is to focus on the individual and on spiritual preparation for the next world.

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26. Kretzschmar, *Privatization of the Christian Faith*, 312.
27. Ibid., 1.
28. Ibid., 19.

Such dualisms, according to Kretzschmar, fail to take seriously the ways in which the Christian message affects the present, the social, and the political. Even worse, these dualisms allow particular Christian groups, such as white Baptists, to

> indulge in a "corporate" form of withdrawal from the world which, ironically, permits individual believers to practice a "this-worldly" adherence to the advancement of themselves and their social group at the expense of the welfare of their black "brothers and sisters" in the faith."[29]

A second feature of a privatized faith is the spiritualization of the Gospel, so that human realities such as hunger, blindness, and poverty are interpreted as a result of personal sin, or alienation from God. Sin and salvation are understood as an exclusively vertical pairing (God-human), rather than holistic.[30]

Third, a privatized faith lacks the capacity for contextual analysis. "Theological doctrines (such as justification by faith)," argues Kretzschmar, "are isolated from their original socio-historical context and uncritically imposed on the present context."[31] The lack of such analysis results in both an intellectual and social disengagement. In the specific case of South African Baptists, Kretzschmar notes:

> Baptists have distanced themselves, intellectually, from the thinking of academic theologians, especially from South African contextual theologians, and from social sciences such as sociology, history and psychology. Socially, white Baptists are distanced from the exploitation, poverty, fear, and lack of opportunity that is the daily experience of black Baptists. Equally, they are isolated from the black consciousness and resistance movements. Consequently, the white members of the Baptist Union are largely detached from the intellectual and social context of black Baptists and are, thus, able to perpetuate a privatised and inward looking "laager" mentality.[32]

These factors reinforce the fourth element of a privatized faith—individualism. Individualism is the fruit of Christian doctrines interpreted in a privatized way. Salvation, for example, is understood primarily as the justification and sanctification of the individual and not of society or the world at large.[33] Kretzschmar notes how this has encouraged Baptists to

29. Ibid., 23-24.
30. Ibid., 24.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 25.
33. Ibid., 26.

assume that the renewal of the individual automatically reforms society,[34] an assumption that seriously underestimates the power of corporate evil.[35]

Kretzschmar's analysis helps to explain how the Baptist Union came to embody a privatized faith during the apartheid era. Such a perspective enabled many whites to refuse to stand in solidarity with their black brothers and sisters in Christ out of a desire to remain neutral and apolitical. It also disassociated itself from the social implications of following Jesus Christ. The pursuit of a "real" or pure gospel became contextually and socially separate. In order to remain neutral and pure, faithful to its understanding of the gospel, the church needed to remain apolitical—disassociated from the social. Thus, the Baptist Union failed to challenge ongoing unjust social conditions of racial segregation, injustice, and oppression that was already fully evident from the time of Baptist Union's birth and which culminated in the system of apartheid.

Hale and Kretzschmar provide an in-depth perspective into the direction many white Baptists pursued throughout the apartheid era. Although the Baptist Union raised some concerns regarding apartheid, most white Baptists defended the system and refused to support those who would challenge it.[36]

THE WHITE PENTECOSTAL CHURCH

The story of the white Pentecostal church in South Africa closely parallels that of the Baptist Union. Like the Baptist Union, Pentecostals conceded "to the pressures of a racist society."[37]

Many Pentecostal historians have highlighted the "non-racial" nature of the revival that took place on Azusa Street in 1906, the birthplace of Pentecostalism. Leonard Lovett, for example, observed that "the color line was washed away in the blood."[38] Allan Anderson observed: "At Azusa

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. The Baptist Union's failure in not challenging apartheid, but also in not supporting those who would challenge it, is highlighted in the way it treated those few white Baptists—such as Peter Moll, Richard Steele, and Graham Philpott—who took a stand by not serving in the South African Defense Force (SADF), the force that sustained the apartheid system. Most white Baptist men participated readily in the SADF by fulfilling their military service obligation. The Baptist Union also provided chaplains for the SADF. See Suderman, "In Search of Prophetic Theology," 70.

37. Iain MacRobert, *The Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA* (New York, N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 68.

38. Leonard Lovett, "Black Origins of the Pentecostal Movement," in *Aspects of Pentecostal - Charismatic Origins*, ed. Vinson Synan (Plainfield, N.J.: Logos International, 1975), 131. It is interesting, however, that Lovett describes the Azusa Street revival in such a way – that the color line was washed away in the blood—yet later distinguishes the church in which this revival took place as a "Black" church to which whites came. Lovett's description highlights

Street people of all races and social backgrounds 'achieved a new sense of dignity and community in fully integrated Pentecostal services.'"[39] Significantly, this interracial harmony emerged in one of the most racist eras of U.S. history.

Nevertheless, very soon after the initial Azusa Street revival, the racial conflicts of the time began to affect the character of these revivalist churches. Soon after the initial revival, for example, white congregants found it difficult to be led by a black man—a "son of a slave." This resulted in the formation of new racially divided churches, which had their roots in the Azusa Street revival, but which found their footing under white leadership rather than black leadership.

In many ways the story of Pentecostalism in South Africa, which began in 1908, only two years after the Asuza Street experience, is similar to that of the U.S. Pentecostals. The first Pentecostal churches in South Africa, the Apostolic Faith Mission, like those in the U.S., were also integrated. Yet only four months later the executive council of the Apostolic Faith Mission began to suggest that "adequate accommodation" for colored people was needed, implying that the location in which whites met was not appropriate for those who were "coloured."[40]

By 1909 the executive council began to designate the roles within the church as well as the sacramental practices along racial lines. In February 1909, for example, the executive council of the Apostolic Faith Mission decided that the "Native Work" superintendent had to be white.[41] By July of the same year, they stated that baptism of whites, coloreds, and natives would also be separate. By 1910, the national conferences were separate for whites and blacks, with the "Native Council's" decisions subject to review by an all-white executive council. Thus, even though it was racially integrated at birth, only two short years after the emergence of the first Pentecostal church in South Africa racial segregation had become rooted in its ecclesial structures and theology. By 1915 the executive council declared that no ordination or leadership appointment could be made by a black church official "except with the consent of the White Superintendent."[42]

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how, even though the focus is on the interracial element of this movement, there is a tendency to disregard such traits and impose one's own assumptions—that it is either "black" or "white."

39. Allan Anderson, *Bazalwane: African Pentecostals in South Africa* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1992), 23.

40. C. R. De Wet, "The Apostolic Faith Mission in Africa: 1908-1980. A Case Study in Church Growth in a Segregated Society" (University of Cape Town, 1989), 60.

41. Ibid., 161.

42. Anderson, *Bazalwane*, 33.

On July 7, 1917, the executive council of the Apostolic Faith Mission adopted the following resolution:

> . . . we do not teach or encourage social equality between Whites and Natives. We recognise that God is no respecter of persons, but that in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is acceptable to Him. We therefore preach the Gospel equally to all peoples, making no distinctions. We wish it to be generally known that our White, Coloured and Native peoples have their separate places of worship, where the Sacraments are administered to them.[43]

Thus, Pentecostalism as a new Christian expression in South Africa quickly accepted the socio-political context in which it emerged and adopted policies of segregation that were already prominent in society and in the church.[44]

This has led historian Allan Anderson to conclude that Pentecostalism "expended its revolutionary impulses in veiled, ineffectual, displaced attacks that amounted to withdrawal from the social struggle and passive acquiescence to a world they hated and wished to escape."[45] Japie Lapoorta, a theologian and leader in the Apostolic Faith Mission, has asserted that Pentecostals began to preach the "gospel" as if it were separate from the context in which it was preached.[46] "They preached a gospel," Lapoorta said, "that concentrated only on the souls of human beings as if they had no bodies."[47] As a result, South African white Pentecostals embraced an apolitical orientation. Any involvement in what they described as political—such as apartheid—was deemed sinful. Thus, the Apostolic Faith Mission suspended Frank Chikane, one of South Africa's most prominent Pentecostal figures and a minister in the black Apostolic Faith Mission, from "full-time service" because of his involvement in the struggle against apartheid. The irony, of course, is that "political activity" was only viewed as such when one struggled *against* apartheid. The interrogation and torture that Chikane endured during one of his detentions by a deacon in the white church of his own denomination was not understood as "political."

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43. Quoted in Ibid.

44. By 1944, the AFM adopted a resolution on "race relations" that stated: "the mission stands for segregation. The fact that the Native, Indian and Coloured is saved does not render him European. . ."—Ibid. The racial distinction that was becoming more prominent in South Africa was also becoming more prevalent in the Pentecostal church and its church structures.

45. Ibid., 28-29.

46. Japie Lapoorta, "The Necessity for a Relevant Pentecostal Witness in South Africa," *EPTA Bulletin* 10, no. 1 (1991), 26.

47. Ibid.

Given the above, we can see how white Pentecostals, even in their stated desire to be and remain apolitical, did indeed participate in the political life of South Africa and the apartheid system—sometimes overtly, but most often in simply being willing to remain benefactors of the status quo. This was due largely to a very narrow understanding of the meaning of "politics" and the social or "public" implications of the Christian faith. The result was a general readiness to maintain the status quo of apartheid along with the benefits of a racially structured society.

ANABAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY AND ITS (COUNTER) POLITICAL PROMISE

The Anabaptist-Mennonite witness has never been very influential in terms of numbers or political impact, nor has it often sought to be.[48] Indeed, throughout its 500 years of existence it has been largely a peripheral, if not marginal, movement. As a rule, its adherents have placed more emphasis on being faithful to the ways of Jesus than on numerical growth or social influence.[49] Thus, it is not surprising that Mennonite involvement in the South African context was not a highly-visible part of the story,[50] especially as Mennonites came to South Africa only after the struggle against apartheid was well underway. In terms of their desire to support and walk with those who were challenging injustice and violence, Mennonites were just one more presence among others in challenging the injustices of apartheid. As Jon Rudy notes, "We went there to support and accompany people working for change."[51] Thus, any account of Anabaptist-Mennonite work or influence in the South African context must be regarded with a certain humility.

And yet despite the relatively small number of Mennonites, or others who were denominationally related to the Anabaptist tradition, Anabaptist-Mennonite thought has had a disproportionally significant influence in South Africa, especially among the theological and activist voices during the struggle against apartheid.[52] Since the 1970s Anabaptism, both in its theological expressions and incarnational embodiments, has provided an alternative perspective and foundation for

48. See Andrew Suderman, "The Mennonite Experience in South Africa: An Alternative Imagination," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (April 2015), 253-274.

49. This would be an ongoing Anabaptist critique of Christendom—working with the state to ensure, or force, church membership and to use the state to coerce society to assume a particular way of living.

50. Jon Rudy, "Mennonite Central Committee South Africa," *MCC Institutional Memory booklet* 5, no. 1 (1998), 3.

51. Ibid.

52. Suderman, "The Mennonite Experience in South Africa," 253.

challenging apartheid and its social engineering project.[53] For many Christian activists, Anabaptist theology provided what Hale described as a "meta-ethical foundation." Put simply, Anabaptism offered a theological and ecclesial vision that rejected apartheid logic, encouraged the struggle against the injustice and oppression of the apartheid system, and called upon those who embraced such a faith—e.g., Mennonites living in that particular context—to be present alongside those who were suffering and struggling. It also challenged apartheid in a way that did not lead to or justify counterviolence against the apartheid state, thus stepping outside of the ongoing cycle of violence.[54]

Three particular, inter-related characteristics of Anabaptist-Mennonite thought proved to be significant as it either reinforced understandings already held by some South Africans or provided new insights that fed an alternative imagination for the way in which Christians could challenge apartheid and its logic.

The first of these characteristics was an alternative ecclesiology, which, by seeking to be an embodied alternative community, embraced and was led by an alternative politics—the politics of Jesus.[55] Such an understanding provided an alternative in the South African context in that it did not simply present an "other worldly" understanding of salvation, or focus on simply altering the particular government of the country (i.e., who ruled and according to what policy). Rather, Anabaptist ecclesiology offered a vision of an embodied, visible community that pursued right

53. For a more in-depth overview of such history and the influence of Anabaptism in the South(ern) African context, provided often through the work and presence of Mennonite agencies in the South(ern) Africa region, see Suderman, "Mennonite Experience in South Africa." See also Robert Herr and Judy Zimmerman Herr, "Building Peace in South Africa: A Case Study of Mennonite Program," in *From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contributions to International Peacebuilding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Jim Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM: A Story of Vision, Commitment and Grace* (Elkhart, Ind.: Africa Inter Mennonite Mission, 1998).

54. Again, for more, see Suderman, "Mennonite Experience in South Africa," as well as John de Gruchy, "Radical Peace Making, the Challenge of Some Anabaptists," in *Theology and Violence, the South African Debate*, ed. Charles Villa Vicencio (Johannesburg: C. Skotaville, 1987); David Bosch, *The Church as the Alternative Community* (Potchefstroom: Instituut vir Reformatoriese Studie, 1982); and also Cobus van Wyngaard, "The Public Role of the Christian Community in the Work of David Bosch," in *Missionalia* 39:1/2 (April 2011), 151-167.

55. See, for example, John de Gruchy's depiction in ""Radical Peace Making," 181-184. This phrase obviously highlights the importance and influence of John Howard Yoder's theology and particularly his *Politics of Jesus*. We recognize today, however, the inconsistency in how Yoder's theology may have provided a foundation for peace and an alternative ecclesiological imagination while at the same time his own personal actions failed to live up to such a vision. For more see Rachel Waltner Goossen, "'Defanging the Beast': Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (Jan. 2015), 7-80.

relations.[56] David Bosch, a well-known South African theologian and missiologist, for example, drawing on the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, argued that "the 'people of God' is a 'pilgrim people', 'called out' of the world. 'Foreignness is an element of its constitution.' 'It is called to flesh out, already in the here and now, something of the conditions which are to prevail in God's reign.'"[57] By embracing this calling—a calling that requires becoming a visible community that embodies Jesus' form of politics—the church becomes an alternative community in the world.[58]

John de Gruchy, one of South Africa's most significant theologians, suggests that the Anabaptist "witness to the world, and therefore their testimony to God's order for the world, derived from their struggle to be the church."[59] Thus the socio-political engagement of the church, de Gruchy notes, emerges from the Gospel rather than secular norms, values and pragmatism.[60] In particular, he writes, "the Christian and the church are called to take sides with the oppressed in the struggle for justice, but in ways which are consonant with the cross of redemptive suffering."[61] Such a vision is overtly political in that it affected the way in which people would relate with one another, with creation, and with God. This would also affect the way in which one would struggle against the apartheid state—the way a community embodied its convictions as actual practices mattered just as much as its emancipatory vision.[62]

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56. This became a centerpiece in David Bosch's thought. See David Bosch, *The Alternative Community* (Unpublished paper read at the church and society dinner in Pietermaritzburg, Sept. 19, 1975), as well as David Bosch, *The Church as the Alternative Community*.

57. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 19th ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 373-374.

58. Bosch, interestingly, explains how he was influenced to think in this way: "Perhaps it would be correct to say that, in the course of time, the essence of my thinking in this area has crystallised in the concept of the church as the 'alternative community.' The expression was not coined by me; it originated, I think, in American Mennonite circles. What I have attempted to do—not very successfully, I am afraid, judging by the reaction, particularly in the Afrikaans Reformed Churches—was to build on and develop further the intrinsic similarities that I believe exist between Reformed and Anabaptist ecclesiologies."—Bosch, *The Church as the Alternative Community*, 8.

59. John de Gruchy's depiction in ""Radical Peace Making, the Challenge of Some Anabaptists," in *Theology and Violence, the South African Debate*, ed. Charles Villa Vicencio (Johannesburg: C. Skotaville, 1987), 183.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

62. In this way, Anabaptism proved to be a challenge to evangelical, "Believers' Church" churches, *and* "mainline" churches. The former, as noted in the examples pertaining to the Baptist Union and the (white) Pentecostal churches, tended to focus on an "other worldly" salvation of souls, thus separating the gospel message from the sociopolitical context, whereas the latter assumed its task was to struggle for the change in political order.

A second characteristic, closely related to the first, was an alternative understanding of power that the Anabaptist theological tradition embraces and seeks to embody. Rather than viewing power negatively and therefore something to avoid, which tended to be the perception of the more evangelical churches—or regarding the state as the only legitimate body that could exercise power—Anabaptism encouraged an understanding whereby everyone was an agent of power.[63] In this way, Anabaptism shares a theological commonality with the South African struggle cry "Amandla, awethu!" ("the power is ours"). This ideal was not an abstract hope in the distant future; rather, one could already live and participate in the future envisioned. Equally important, one did not have to wait until the government changed to do this.[64]

Third, Anabaptism provided a deeper, more robust eschatological perspective that nourished and shaped the way in which those committed to such an expression of faith challenged and struggled against the apartheid system. Such a perspective provided a vision of *shalom*—holistic political, economic, social, racial togetherness and wellness—along with an emancipatory politics required to embody and live into such a vision. It assumed that we must embody now that for which we hope.[65] But, because our cause is grounded in the "not yet," that is our eschatological vision and hope of God's kingdom, the struggle continues until that time comes.

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63. Anthony Balcomb has some interesting perspectives on this in his *Third Way Theology: Reconciliation, Revolution, and Reform in the South African Church During the 1980s* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993).

64. See Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel* (Cape Town and Grand Rapids, Mich.: D. Philip & W.B. Eerdmans, 1988), 141-142. See also my exposition of Nolan's argument in "In Search of Prophetic Theology," 144-149.

65. The Church Land Programme (CLP) offers a contemporary example. CLP, which began in 1997, is an organization that walks with the landless poor in South Africa. It is noteworthy that the director of the program, Graham Philpott, had been influenced by some Anabaptist theology, especially in his journey of being a conscientious objector in the early 1980s, and has been an integral part in the formation of the Anabaptist Network in South Africa (ANiSA) serving on its Discerning Group from 2009-2016. CLP, through its journey, has learned to work intentionally "within the spaces of the impossible possible" as it seeks to embody emancipatory politics in the cracks of the hegemonic powers of the state.—Butler et al, "Finding Our Voice in the World," 2. "CLP and its reflective praxis focuses on how to embody now the politics and relationships of what could be."—Suderman, "In Search of Prophetic Theology," 330. "We believe *now* in the project of egalitarianism, and we demonstrate that belief through our praxis *now*. . . ."—Butler, "Finding Our Voice in the World," 4. Thus, although CLP does not often use eschatological language as such, we can see how their practice reflects such a perspective.

A CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLE: THE ANABAPTIST NETWORK IN SOUTH AFRICA (ANISA)

One of the challenges in recounting the story of Anabaptism in the South African context is the near absence of churches that overtly identify themselves as Anabaptist or Mennonite.[66] Very early in their work in the southern Africa region, Mennonites made a missiological decision not to plant (Mennonite) churches but rather to walk alongside already existing churches. This decision has led to a rich and meaningful relationship between Mennonites and African Initiated (or Independent) Churches.[67] Mennonites also worked with mainline churches and especially with their ecumenical bodies such as the South African Council of Churches.[68] Mennonites did not, therefore, plant churches to which we can now point. What's more, Mennonites were not officially allowed to live in South Africa during apartheid as the apartheid government found that Mennonites' interest in peace closely aligned with questions of justice, which the apartheid government did not appreciate.[69] As a result, it is challenging to point to concrete, embodied examples of Anabaptist communities during the struggle against apartheid.[70] Nevertheless, the influence of Mennonite-Anabaptist thought has been deep and transformative, especially for those who actively sought to challenge the logic and theology on which apartheid relied (e.g., conscientious objectors, activists, and theologians who argued against the prevailing theological perceptions during apartheid, and so forth).

One can, however, point to a contemporary example that has emerged as a result of Mennonite-Anabaptist presence and influence: the Anabaptist Network in South Africa (ANiSA). ANiSA defines itself as a "network of people, churches, and organizations who together explore

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66. Currently there are only two ecclesial bodies associated with Mennonite World Conference: Grace Community Church that contains four congregations, located mostly in the Karoo area of South Africa (Northern Cape and the western part of the Eastern Cape), and the Brethren in Christ Church of South Africa, which has around a dozen congregations situated mostly in the Gauteng region (Pretoria, Johannesburg, and surrounding area). There is also one small Mennonite Brethren church in Durban, which was a Congolese church plant.

67. See, for example, James Krabill, *Where Teachers Become Learners and Learners, Teachers: MBM Marks Four Decades of Ministry with African Initiated Churches* (Elkhart, Ind.: Mennonite Board of Missions, 2001); and David A. Shank, *What Western Christians Can Learn from African-Initiated Churches* (Elkhart, Ind.: Mennonite Board of Missions, 2000).

68. See Suderman, "The Mennonite Experience in South Africa." See also Jim Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM: A Story of Vision, Commitment and Grace* (Elkhart, Ind.: Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission, 1998).

69. Again, see Suderman, "The Mennonite Experience in South Africa."

70. Arguably, however, one could point to the missiological approach and practice among Mennonite mission agencies as demonstrating another concrete example and theological expression.

and embrace a radical faith in Jesus Christ and lifestyle that is nourished by the example found within the Anabaptist movement."[71] While there are few denominational expressions within South Africa that have direct affiliation with the global Mennonite-Anabaptist tradition, most of the members (or "pilgrims") of ANiSA represent the full spectrum of church affiliations in South Africa: African Initiated Churches; so-called "mainline" churches in all their traditionally European varieties; and Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.[72]

As a network of people, churches, and organizations who are already doing much work through their churches, organizations, and educational institutions, ANiSA does not try to replicate this work but rather seeks to support, resource, connect, and nourish the work that its members are already doing. ANiSA does this by sharing information, connecting members of the network with each other, as well as providing resources from an Anabaptist perspective.[73] Sometimes this required ANiSA itself to *be* a resource in other settings (e.g., teaching in Bible schools and theology programs in educational institutions; providing an Anabaptist perspective and voice in conferences; preaching and/or delivering workshops).

Perhaps one of the most important activities that ANiSA does is to create a space where people can connect, learn about each other, build relationships, support each other, and find ways in which they can stand in solidarity with one another. Among other activities ANiSA has helped to organize book discussions, dialogues, conferences, and intentional community building times or events (e.g., meals, Bible studies, time together) around the country.[74]

Many of those who form ANiSA have had some connection with Mennonites with Mennonite-Anabaptist theology, or both, during the latter years of apartheid. In reflecting on the current South African realities, the ANiSA Discerning Group, in its 2016 self-identity document, notes that "the Anabaptist story, history and witness, and theology has offered a unique and worthwhile perspective within the South African context. Indeed, it has provided a language for values and practices that

71. ANiSA Discerning Group, "ANiSA Vision and Value Statements" (South Africa: Anabaptist Network in South Africa, 2012).

72. Anabaptist Network in South Africa Discerning Group, "Anabaptist Network in South Africa (ANiSA): Conscientisation and Presence at a Distance from Power. The Journey Beyond 2016" (South Africa: Anabaptist Network in South Africa, 2016), 2.

73. In the past this has included a Peace Library and Resource Centre, with books circulating all across the country, sharing stories and articles, as well as an e-zine.

74. For more, see Andrew Suderman and Mzwandile Nkutha, "Christmas challenges apartheid, exclusion," (Dec. 20, 2017), for Mennonite Mission Network—www.mennonitemission.net/blog/Christmas-challenges-apartheid (accessed Aug. 9, 2018).

often already exist, and continue to emerge, within this context."[75] The document further affirms that

> In a country marked by extreme inequality, a well-known history of racial oppression, and ongoing high levels of violence, ANiSA [seeks] to bring together Christians who are drawn to the Anabaptist emphasis on peace, justice, discipleship and community.[76]

In further defining the types of spaces ANiSA desires to create, the organization highlights three particular core values:[77]

- *Peace*, understood not as the mere absence of explicit violence, but as the foundation for God's life-giving kingdom, is a key marker which describes ANiSA to us. Peace is not only a matter of what we *do*, but is rather who and how we *are* as we walk the way of peace.
- Closely connected to this is an emphasis on *justice* and on following in the ways of Jesus. The expression of shalom makes explicit the connection of peace and justice. This shalom embraces both the redistributive and restorative dimensions of justice, so fundamental in our South African context. This enables us to stand, witnessing to the restoring of relationships, the making whole of shattered communities, and the affirming of our dignity in the face of such prevalent dehumanisation.
- *Power* and its abuse has been a key feature of ANiSA's reflections and discernment. We make a conscious choice to walk the way of peace and justice in the South African context *at a distance from systemic and structural oppressive power*. Often we find that the church's work for peace and justice is reduced to a mere attempt to influence the political and economic powers of this day to be more closely aligned with a Christian vision, often resulting in the church being co-opted into various systems of power and oppression. This positioning at a distance from power has led to conscious choices for us to stand with the marginalised and their struggles for life and justice; as well as the creating of safe spaces where the dynamics of power are dismantled, there is a sense of belonging, and where everybody matters. This practice has its own particular costs, as it fundamentally disrupts the architecture of power in our society and gives expression to a new dynamic of collective thought and action—an assertion of the dignity and

75. ANiSA Discerning Group, "Conscientisation and Presence," 2.

76. Ibid., 1.

77. This is taken from ANiSA Discerning Group, "Conscientisation and Presence," 2-3 (emphasis original).

> power of our humanity. Over the years it has therefore become of particular importance to us to experiment at working for peace and justice from a position at a distance from power, and to encourage others to reflect on what this would mean.

As noted above, these core values are significant in the type of spaces ANiSA seeks to create and in what kind of activities it seeks to get involved. It also shapes the way in which ANiSA and its members critically address "the South African context in a way that explores and offers alternatives to the way society acts and thinks."[78] This has been particularly important in the way ANiSA engages the South African church and people of faith generally as it and its members stand and work with those who continue to suffer and struggle in South Africa's new political dispensation, as well as in their participation in conferences and work with other organizations and churches.[79] ANiSA describes this as "the work of conscientisation and presence."[80]

> We want to raise a particular consciousness amongst Christians which allows them to imagine what it would mean to work for peace and justice from a position at a distance from power. In doing so we hope to create a presence which ''cracks'' the dominant belief that only through acquiring political or economic power can we bring about change in the world; and we seek to find ways of living in those cracks.[81]

Mzwandile Nkutha, the coordinator of ANiSA, described the effort in this way:

> The Anabaptist Network in South Africa (ANiSA) has attempted to create space for a robust theological and political conversation around issues of justice, peace, and the re-imagination of power that identifies with the marginalized and their struggle for life and justice.[82]

Seeing how Anabaptism in the South African context became equated with actively challenging injustice (e.g., the injustice of apartheid) in a nonviolent manner, thus stepping outside of the cycle of ongoing violence,[83] Nkutha compared it with the black "prophetic" church, which

78. ANiSA Discerning Group, "Conscientisation and Presence," 3.

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid.

82. Mzwandile Nkutha, personal correspondence, Aug. 26, 2016.

83. In this way Anabaptism, which also talked about finding a third way, was different than other options. Anabaptism did not seek to be apolitical. Rather, it sought to embody a radically different form of politics.

"sought to decolonize and create a space for a new imagination beyond the apartheid theology of social, political, racial and economic segregation."[84] In reflecting on this connection, he noted how:

> both narratives [the black church and Anabaptism] expressed an ecclesiology distant from the state hegemonic power. There is a compelling binary between black liberation theology within the South African context and the nonresistance and nonviolence posture [of Anabaptism], that speaks to the church identity in South Africa.
>
> Anabaptism provides a theological and ecclesial perspective that refuses to move away from the margins. Instead it speaks from the margins. It is this kind of alternative ecclesial and theological politics that attracted me to explore Anabaptism. This is of utmost importance to me because colonialism and apartheid narrative has largely and in most ways negatively shaped the black church in South Africa.[85]

One specific way that ANiSA expresses its commitments is in the simple practice of creating spaces for its members to spend time together, often over meals. In the South African context, to have people of different colors and socioeconomic backgrounds join together for sharing, eating, and Bible study was—and continues to be—revolutionary. This simple act creates a different kind of space with a different kind of power dynamic than what otherwise exists in the South African context—one that steps outside of the typical racial dynamics in ways that both embody peace and envision an alternative future.

In very real and practical ways, ANiSA highlights its eschatological perspective by providing a glimpse of a desired future through the type of spaces it works to create and the type of communities it seeks to foster. Although ANiSA does not describe itself as a "church," participants in the network often describe its gatherings as times when they experience what it truly means to be the church (*ekklesia*)—a "called out" people who seek to embody the politics of God's kingdom. It offers, in other words, an alternative ecclesiological experience in the South African context. It does this by trying to create spaces where a different political reality exists and is embodied; where love, radical hospitality, care for the other, the elevation everyone's voice, and peace, justice, and reconciliation are pursued. Finally, ANiSA seeks to do this while assuming an alternative understanding of power, one that is not co-opted by the political and economic forms of power and its systems of oppression, but rather is present with the marginalized and gives expression to a *new dynamic of*

84. Mzwandile Nkutha, Aug. 26, 2016.

85. Ibid.

collective thought and action.[86] Although the presence and influence of ANiSA continues to be small, the experiences of those who belong to it prove to be significant and life giving.

CONCLUSION

Although the Believers' Church movement of the Reformation has historically embodied a counter political movement that challenged the status quo of Christendom Europe, this essay has sought to demonstrate how several church expressions within the South African context who would ascribe to a Believers' Church theological orientation adopted a largely apolitical stance. This has been true of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa and the (white) Pentecostal Church. Such a stance, enabled them to forget their own (counter) political ecclesial expression and made them complicit with apartheid and its racially based social engineering.

Despite the modest Anabaptist numerical presence in the South African context and near absence from standard narratives of the anti-apartheid movement, Anabaptist theology in its appropriated South African form has provided an ecclesiological perspective that offers a (counter) political imagination. Its particular ecclesiological perspective, anchored in an alternative understanding of power and grounded in an eschatological vision of *shalom*, provides a theological perspective that can, and does, help the church in South Africa reclaim and re-embody its prophetic witness.

86. ANiSA Discerning Group, "Conscientisation and Presence," 3.