

THE SOUTH AFRICAN CORPORATION OF THE GENERAL CHURCH OF THE NEW JERUSALEM

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(Second in a series on Corporations of the General Church)

Introduction

It is with delight that I offer some insight into the founding of the South African Corporation of the church, the function it performs, and the progress that has come about since it was founded in 1994.

Prior to 1994 the so called ‘Mission’ societies—all of them black—fell under the control and supervision of a Superintendent, a minister specially appointed to that position by the Bishop of the General Church. All matters relating to these societies initially were dealt with by this Superintendent. In later years, a treasurer was appointed to assist the Superintendent, and they together, would liaise with the Episcopal office and General Church treasurer in Bryn Athyn in overseeing and providing for the needs of these societies. For many, many years this form of government and leadership of the black societies prevailed and seemed the most practical way to deal with their needs.

Happily, very happily, in 1994 we saw the birth of the new democratic South Africa, and it became fitting and necessary for all societies of the church in our country, both black and white, to be governed, particularly in terms of financial and administrative matters, on an equal basis. Very prudently, some three years prior to this, Bishop Peter Buss saw the need for an umbrella body to be formed to help bring this about. He, no doubt, also recognized the need for unity amongst church members if the potential growth of the church in this country was to be realized. The time had come for the church in South Africa to determine its own destiny and learn to stand on its own two feet. And so it was that Bishop Buss commissioned the Rev.

Geoffrey Childs to come to South Africa and establish an incorporated body of the church to carry out its essential uses.

On the weekend of October 7-9, 1994, what became known as “The South African Founders Assembly” was held in Westville for the specific purpose of founding *The South African Corporation of the General Church*. Three years of hard work went into drawing up a constitution for the Corporation and determining the manner in which the Corporation would operate. Mr. Childs was the architect behind it all, ably and lovingly assisted by his dear wife, Helga. In the Lord’s providence we were sent the right man to handle a challenging situation, and to this day we are most grateful to Geoffrey and Helga for all that they did for us and the Lord’s church in this country.

Mr. Childs, as the Bishop’s Representative, was appointed as the first Executive Vice President of the Corporation, a position he held for the next five years. He was succeeded by the Rev. Christopher Smith. Mr. Smith then ably led the Corporation for a little over two years. These years proved to be quite a challenging time for this fledgling body. We continue to be grateful for Mr. Smith’s contribution in helping to get the Corporation fully functional. We also thank Heather, Christopher’s lovely wife, who bravely supported him in a country so far from home.

Pleasingly in the history of the Church in South Africa, in 2001 the late Rev. Albert ‘Lucky’ Thabede was appointed the first black Executive Vice President of the Corporation. This was a momentous and happy occasion for us all as it was generally felt that the time had come for the leadership of the Corporation to be taken over by a black minister. Very sadly though, the Rev. Thabede was not a well man and, having led only one Corporation meeting, he was unable to continue. It was a sad time for all of us as he had been so enthusiastic and vision-driven to bring understanding amongst the different cultures of

the church and see them grow as a united body. Lucky, together with Christopher Smith, contributed a great deal to the functioning of the Corporation, especially in drawing up a job description and employment contract for ministers which he, Lucky, believed would conform to the newly promulgated labor laws of the country. Many will know that Lucky passed into the spiritual world a few months ago [see *New Church Life* January 2007] and for those of us who knew him well and worked with him, he will be remembered for the man he was and the significant contribution he made. In 2002 Bishop Buss appointed me as the acting Executive Vice President, and in 2004 I was elected to the position.

Purpose and Functions of the Corporation

According to our constitution, the primary purpose of the Corporation is: “To serve the Lord by promoting the establishment of the New Church in the hearts and minds of the people of Southern Africa” and to do this by promoting one united church in our country.

Whilst the Corporation strives to achieve this goal, it must be pointed out that it does so purely in terms of the externals of the church. All matters of an ecclesiastical nature relating to the clergy and their uses as pastors to their respective societies fall under the guidance and leadership of the Regional Pastor [currently the Rev. Erik J. Buss].

The functions of the Corporation can broadly be summarized as follows:

- 1) To attend to the ongoing management and administration of funds: a) those taken over from the Mission, b) those made available by the General Church in Bryn Athyn, and c) those contributions received locally for the promotion of the church in our country. This embraces:

- The payment of ministers' salaries/costs and any other financial needs.
- Making provision for ministers' pension and medical benefits.
- Providing both financial and logistical support for various uses of the church as identified by the clergy.
- Supporting societies, where justified, with the renovation of their buildings and, at times, with the extension/improvement of their complexes.
- Assisting financially, where possible, with the development of new complexes. Currently an entirely new complex is underway for the Alexandra Society.
- The prudent investment of capital to provide revenue for the on-going needs of the church.

It should be pointed out that this work is done almost entirely for the black societies as the two white societies are financially independent and manage and administer their own affairs.

2) To provide a forum at which all the societies and isolated members of the church can be represented to discuss and deliberate upon their own situations, to learn from one another, and to look to ways to improve their positions. It is the goal of the Corporation to help the seven black societies to become independent both financially and in terms of the management of their own affairs. To achieve this we encourage and assist them to:

- Set up governing structures within their societies.
- Draw up constitutions to give them legal status to take ownership of their own complexes.
- Understand and accept that they have to contribute financially to the church and work towards becoming self-supporting.

3) To strive to generally promote the growth and development of a united church by supporting and financing exciting projects such as NYAASA (New Church Young Adults Association in South Africa) aimed at keeping the young people in the church, the annual Winter/Summer School retreats, setting up a website for the church, supporting evangelization projects, matching society contributions, and the like. Sadly, a number of these projects have fallen away because of restricted funding.

Progress Made

In trying to give some idea of the progress made since the formation of the Corporation one might ask the questions, “So, what is so different now as opposed to twelve years ago?” or “Has any real progress been made in this time?” In terms of growth of numbers or the manner in which societies now operate or the support that is now being given by individuals to their respective societies, it is hard to say or measure whether or not the existence of the Corporation has made much difference. What can be said is that great strides have been made in improved communication and understanding. Significant success has also been achieved in improving medical and retirement benefits for ministers, and better attention is being given to the various needs of societies.

Perhaps of most significance is the greater understanding that has come about between the different cultures of the church in South Africa. Whereas in the past the black and white societies each went their own way, today we try to work as a team, conscious of the fact that we are striving together to help the Lord build His church in our country.

In conclusion, it must be said that all of this could not take place without the generous funding provided by the General Church for which all of us in South Africa are most grateful.