

THE FEDERAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

An ecumenical witness to contextual theological education and ministerial formation during the Apartheid era

The Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa, perhaps better known as Fedsem, was founded in 1963. The Seminary was created for the purpose of providing theological education and ministerial formation for candidates from the Anglican, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian churches in southern Africa, in an ecumenical setting and within a non-racial community context.

The creation of Fedsem stemmed, to a large extent, from a response to the policies and practices of the Nationalist Party in South Africa, who came into power in 1948 on the basis of racist philosophy called ‘Apartheid’ or ‘Separate Development’. It was in particular the introduction of the Bantu Education Act and the Group Areas Act that galvanised the affected churches into ecumenical cooperation and increased opposition against government policy. These two explicitly racist laws, more than any other brought the churches to a ‘*kairos* moment that brought Fedsem into being’¹. The implementation of the Bantu Education Act meant that the churches were faced with either being deprived of their established centres for theological education and ministerial formation, or with the unwelcome scenario of them not being able to continue in educational and theological institutions that had been forcibly transferred to the control of the South African government’s Department of Bantu Education. An urgent need therefore arose to provide theological education for black² ministerial candidates at the highest possible academic level, as under the Apartheid laws, black students were barred from enrolling in ‘white’ universities. To their credit, the churches seized the *kairos* moment, responding boldly and creatively.

The trajectories of ecumenical relationships amongst the missionary churches³ that participated in Fedsem should be viewed against the background of two particular historical ecumenical developments, namely ‘the formation of the General Missionary

¹ Njongonkulu Ndungane, Quoted in PW,,, p. 2...

² Meaning black African, ‘coloured’ and Indian

³ Also known as the *historical churches* - these were churches established as a result of 19th century missionary work in southern Africa

Conference of South Africa in 1904 and the meeting of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910'⁴. Another earlier ecumenical strand that significantly contributed to the development of ecumenical activity amongst the churches that formed the Seminary, is formation of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1795, with its explicit ecumenical approach to mission. Although the LMS later became largely Congregational due to the withdrawal of other denominations, the churches it established through its mission work always sought to pursue an ecumenical vision, a factor that predisposed the different streams of Congregational churches in southern Africa towards ecumenical cooperation in theological education and ministerial formation. Several local experiments in non-racial and ecumenical education and theological education also prepared the way for the creation of ecumenical institution such as Fedsem. It was however at the International Missionary Conference in Tambaran, Madras in 1938 that desire for ecumenical cooperation in theological training translated into concrete ideas and, in due course, to funding commitments towards the establishment of ecumenical theological education and ministerial formation⁵.

Fedsem was inaugurated at Alice, in the Eastern Province of South Africa on..... 1963, some three years after accredited representatives of eight participating churches⁶ took the historical decision to establish a united seminary, but adopting a federal model for the institution. The four colleges that constituted the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa were Adams United College (Presbyterian), John Wesley College (Methodist), St Peter's College (Anglican) and St Columba's College (Congregational). St Columba's College and Adams United College merged to become Albert Luthuli College in 1974. Staff, students and their families stayed on the campus, thus creating an alternate non-racial community.

From the outset students from the four colleges would take lectures together, thus benefitting from a shared faculty that provided a broader and more comprehensive

⁴ PD....

⁵ PD,.....

⁶ These were: The American Board Mission in South Africa, the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa, the Church of Scotland South Africa Mission, the Congregational Union of South Africa, the London Missionary Society, the Methodist Church of South Africa, the Presbyterian Church. Two other churches, namely the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society and the Swiss Mission in South Africa were represented by an observer.

training that any one church on its own could give. Three levels of study were offered at the Seminary, namely certificate, diploma and degree, with the last leading to the Associate of the Federal Theological Seminary (AFTS). The AFTS, which obtained international recognition, represented a direct counter and challenge to the South African government's edict that degrees could only be taken by black people at one of the ethnic universities established by the state to perpetuate racial separation also at tertiary education. The AFTS also signaled the churches' determination that the nature and content of theological education for their ministerial students would be determined by themselves and not by a government, least of all by a racist state. The overall programme at Fedsem sought to incorporate and integrate three major components, namely a good academic standard, contextual relevance of the curricula and practical engagement by the students during the course of their studies.

After its first decade of existence the Seminary had not only survived the many and varied difficulties and obstacles that came from within and without, it had in fact consolidated its position. One of its founding principles, namely the establishment of ecumenical cooperation in the training of ministers, proved to be both desirable and realizable. It was inevitable that the existence and the witness of the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa was going to prove to be stinging political thorn in the side of a bellicose and belligerent South African government, given, for instance, the explicit non-racial profile of the community and the Seminary's anti-Apartheid activism. It was also to be expected that the Apartheid state would seek to remove this thorn, and to do so by means most foul. The first major blow landed on Fedsem, when on the 26th November 1974, the government issued an expropriation order, giving the Seminary three months to vacate the land and the buildings. All attempts to obtain a reversal of the expropriation order were met with total intransigence by the state authorities.

On 13 March 1975 the Seminary was forcibly handed over to the University of Fort Hare⁷, in terms of the expropriation order. Thus begun a period of exile and wilderness experience for the beleaguered community of the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa. After being forced to leave Alice, the Seminary

⁷ Also one of the government created ethnic universities

community relocated to Umtata in the Transkei⁸, to share limited accommodation that had been generously made available by St. Bede's College⁹. Their stay in this location did however not last very long, as the president of the Transkei 'homeland', true to the attitude of his South African masters, cast the Seminary community as political troublemakers and ordered them to leave, barely a year after they found sanctuary at Umtata. A lay ecumenical centre near Pietermaritzburg, in the province of Natal, served as the next temporary accommodation and campus for Fedsem, until the new Seminary plant was constructed at Imbali, a black township also near Pietermaritzburg. At the height of the political violence between the African National Congress and the Inkatha freedom Party, Imbali turned out to be a flashpoint of conflict. It was yet again in a context of political conflict and crisis that the new campus was opened in August 1980, with Bishop Leslie Newbigin preaching the sermon at the dedication Service of Worship.

Notwithstanding the substantial challenges faced by Fedsem since its inception, and particularly in its latter years presenting testing times for the participating churches to sustain their ecumenical commitment, the Seminary took a further significant step of converting from a federal structure to a *united* seminary. One of Fedsem's founders, the Rev Joseph Wing, a former LMS missionary and South African church leader renowned for his passion and commitment to ecumenism, served as the first president of the unified Seminary¹⁰. The unification meant that the former constituent colleges were dissolved, making way for the creation of church communities, in order to provide for the continuing needs of the participating churches.

It is to be understood that the Seminary community would experience many difficulties and at times, severe tensions, generated not only from outside but also created from within. For one thing, the composition of the student body and the staff, although mainly drawn from black church constituencies, was not homogeneous. As such ethnic, language and cultural differences often reared its head in ways that brought about conflict, confrontation and disunity. Although the Fedsem as a whole

⁸ Homeland.....

⁹ Anglican.....

¹⁰ The name, *Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa*, was however retained.

was united in opposition to Apartheid there were different perspectives within the Seminary community as to the nature and extent of political engagement. Perhaps the greatest challenge the Seminary faced consistently was for the institution to remain united in an ecumenical commitment, in the face of denominational differences.

Notwithstanding the above substantial challenges, Fedsem represents a shining witness to ecumenical commitment in the task of theological education and ministerial formation in southern Africa. Wing sums up the nature of the Seminary's witness as follows:

At the time of its formation and throughout its history, the Seminary has been perceived as a symbol of positive resistance to the structures of apartheid, as an institution with a reputation for excellence in contemporary theological education and as an exciting ecumenical venture¹¹

Denis observes that Fedsem 'is regarded by many as one of the most remarkable achievements of the Christian church in South Africa'¹². Such accolades which recognizes and celebrates the remarkable achievements of the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa, renders the fact of the Seminary's ignoble termination all the more sad and lamentable. There are several factors that brought about the closure of Fedsem. One major factor was clearly the demise of Apartheid. The question therefore emerges about the churches ongoing commitment to ecumenical cooperation in theological education, beyond the Apartheid era and whether it was inevitable that the Fedsem project would come to an end. Denis concludes that the Seminary's closure was not inevitable¹³ and many would agree with this finding. There remains, amongst other things, therefore the 'unfinished business' of addressing the very painful story of the closure of the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa.

¹¹ Liturgy....

¹² PD.....

¹³ PD.....

