

The Anglican Diocese of Natal *A Saga of Division and Healing*

The new cathedral of the Holy Nativity in Pietermaritzburg was dedicated in November of this year. The vast cylinder of red brick stands next to the smaller neo-gothic shale and slate church of St Peter which was consecrated in 1857. The period of 124 years between the two events carries a tale of division which in its lurid details is as ugly as the subsequent process of reunion has been fruitful. Now follows the saga of division and healing.

In 1857 when St Peter's was first opened for worship there was already tension between the dean and bishop, though it was still below the surface. The private correspondence of Bishop John William Colenso shows that he would have preferred his former college friend, the Reverend T. Patterson Ferguson, to be dean. Dean James Green on the other hand was writing to Metropolitan Robert Gray of Cape Town and complaining about Colenso's methods of administering the diocese.

The disagreements between the two men became public during the following year, 1858. Dean Green, together with Canon John David Jenkins, walked out of the cathedral when they heard Colenso preaching about the theology of the eucharist. Although they later returned, Colenso had to administer holy communion unassisted. Later in the year the same men, together with Archdeacon C.F. Mackenzie and the Reverend Robert Robertson, walked out of a conference of clergy and laity of the diocese. On each occasion the dean and bishop were differing on points of detail. There is no evidence that they attempted to settle their differences. Instead they were each gaining clerical supporters and so producing factions. The course of division was now determined.

The major cause of controversy was Colenso's commentary, *St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*. This was published by his mission press at Ekukanyeni in 1861 and the opposing faction was ready to take up the cudgels on account of its daring theology. On reading it both Green and Archdeacon Fearnie protested at the doctrine it taught. A charge of heresy was presented to the metropolitan. In the meantime Colenso left for England, busy now with his critical studies of the Old Testament.

Metropolitan Gray presided over Colenso's heresy trial in December 1863. The nine charges were based on the bishop's ideas as expressed in his commentary on Romans and his Old Testament critical works. On 16 December Gray pronounced judgment, declaring Colenso guilty of all charges. Should he not retract from these heretical opinions within four months he would automatically be deposed from office.

A modern Anglican bishop and theologian is able to express far more unorthodox ideas and still survive in office, causing a mere flutter in the popular press. Last century the church's hierarchy was far less tolerant of such opinions.

Colenso nevertheless survived in office. Although his metropolitan both deposed and excommunicated him, the secular courts in England and Natal declared Gray's trial null and void and affirmed at least Colenso's temporal

right to his office and church properties. Technical faults in the letters patent appointing both bishops prevented Gray having authority over Colenso. The two prelates still remained legal *personae* and so could retain all properties vested in them.

The return of Bishop Colenso to his diocese in November 1865 marked his entry once again into the battlefield. Now the laity were also taking sides in the division. But the battle was still growing and taking place mostly in St Peter's cathedral. The dean wanted his services to continue as usual, undisturbed by the arrival of a heretical and deposed bishop. Colenso came to claim legal possession of his cathedral and no one could prevent him.

The spectacle in St Peter's on Sunday morning, 19 November, was a public scandal. Colenso was insisting on taking his service and Green was making it as difficult for him as was possible. The vestry and harmonium were locked and all service books and communion vessels put away. The churchwarden and dean each read protests but Colenso continued, leading prayers, pitching the music and preaching the sermon.

On the Sundays thereafter Green and Colenso held services at different times. Some minor incidents took place, squabbling over the bell ropes and the baptismal registers. When the Bishop of the Free State came to conduct confirmation, the Colenso party had flooded the building. Later, when they had locked the doors, Green's party broke them down.

Although few clergy were supporting the bishop, large congregations were present to hear his sermons. The man in the pew might not have understood Colenso's ideas but, being seen as a victim of authoritarian rule, the bishop must be supported. Colenso included a few anti-ritualist sermons in order to increase the opposition to Green's party, who were suspected of ritualism.

On 9 January 1868 the Natal Supreme Court ruled that all the Natal properties originally in the name of the bishop of Cape Town came under Colenso. By court order Green and his supporters were removed from their residences and churches. The battle was over and the Anglican church in Natal was divided into two distinct entities.

Soon Green had bought property and arranged for a church to be built. By Ascension Day of that year St Saviour's was open for worship. In January of the following year William Kenneth Macrorie, Bishop of Maritzburg, arrived to administer the diocese which recognised Metropolitan Gray.

The two factions now enjoyed a settled coexistence. Each had its bishop, churches and other properties and enjoyed some progress. Colenso had greater support from the laity. Macrorie, with larger resources of finance and man-power, was able to make much faster progress. As Colenso became more involved with his campaigns for a just treatment of the Zulu, support from the colonists waned. At St Saviour's in 1879 ritualist developments caused a faction to break away and worship instead in the drill-shed in Loop Street. On both sides growth was retarded by internal problems.

The death of Colenso in June 1883 did not bring about any reconciliation. His church council continued to seek for a new bishop. It was only with the resignation of Bishop Macrorie in 1891 that the tide turned. This was marked by the elective assembly of his diocese and the Colensoite church council both delegating to the archbishop of Canterbury the responsibility of appointing a bishop.

In 1893 Archbishop Benson of Canterbury chose his former chaplain, Arthur Hamilton Baynes, to be bishop of both parties in Natal and to bring about reunion. Baynes arrived in the following year and was moderately successful in his aim for unity. Although the church council refused to recognise him as its bishop, he invited individual Colenso congregations to accept him. St Peter's was one of the first to do this on 29 March 1894. Perhaps the most decisive step in the process of reunion was the decision of St Peter's vestry in October 1897 to join the Church of the Province of South Africa. From this moment both city churches were members of the same denomination. In 1903 a further important step was taken by dividing the city parish into two, enabling each church to recognise the geographical area and responsibility of the other. The two were brought into line with the normal Anglican parochial structure, St Saviour's being retained as the cathedral and St Peter's being known as the old cathedral.

Although by the beginning of the twentieth century certain goals in the unity of the two churches in Pietermaritzburg were achieved, there was still to be a further growing together. In 1902 the two churches did not hold a joint service to mark the coronation of King Edward VII. In 1911 they did when George V was crowned. As the century progressed there were further signs that former animosities were dying out. Upon the death of James Green in 1906 the parish magazine, *St Peter's Bells*, referred to his 'triumphant faith which sustained him . . .'. And in 1933 a joint commemoration was held to mark the centenary of the Oxford Movement. If differences in ceremonial had been a factor in the division of the two churches such a commemoration showed that they were no longer of great moment.

Two important events of the present century must be noted. In 1910 the Church Properties Act was passed by the Natal Parliament. This enabled the properties of the Colenso congregations to be transferred to a special trust board of which the bishop was chairman. This meant that the St Peter's property was no longer in an ambivalent position. The second event was the call made in 1938 by the bishop, Leonard Noel Fisher, for the amalgamation of the two city parishes and the building of a new cathedral. The bishop admitted that it might take 50 years to be fulfilled but it was important to start it.

The story of the reunion of the two city parishes comes into more recent history. In 1946 a call was made to rebuild St Saviour's as a new cathedral. In 1957 St Peter's vestry offered its grounds as a site for the future cathedral. Although in 1964 property was bought for this purpose in lower Church Street, six years later the new cathedral committee had decided to build on St Peter's grounds. The two parishes would unite at Pentecost 1976 as the cathedral parish of the Holy Nativity. In July of that year the design of the new cathedral centre by architects H. Kammeÿer and N. Rozendal was accepted. Building began late in 1978 and the dedication took place this year.

If the sad process of division took almost forty years, it has taken nearly ninety years since 1892 for reunion to be fulfilled. The healing has been a much longer process than the division. It has included a great deal of faith, hope, prayer and waiting. Credit must go to the leadership of several diocesan bishops and the incumbents of both parishes who have had the

vision of reunion and have steered their people towards it, even if they themselves have not lived to see it fulfilled. The days when there would be a fight to the death over doctrine, ritualism and legal rights have fortunately gone. There have been fewer personality clashes. In place of those ugly scenes, the gospel of peace and reconciliation has been realistically proclaimed.

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Two of the entrances to the new Cathedral: Bells' door (top left) and Maze door (bottom right).

Photographs by John Oliver

