



# Concrete spirituality

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This article reflects on a number of liturgical innovations in the worship of Melodi ya Tshwane, an inner-city congregation of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). The focus of the innovations was to implement the understanding of justice in *Article 4 of the Confession of Belhar*, a confessional standard of the URCSA. The basic contention of the article is that well designed liturgies that facilitate experiences of beauty can nurture a concrete spirituality to mobilise urban church members for a justice-seeking lifestyle. After exploring the message of *Article 4 of Belhar*, the article analyses eight liturgical features of Melodi ya Tshwane, showing how beauty and justice interact in those acts of worship.

## Introduction

The posters on sale in Christian bookshops, which are designed to serve as daily reminders of God's love and goodness, often combine a Bible verse with an idyllic scene of snow-capped mountains or a sentimental portrayal of cuddly kittens. Such portrayals are not false, but they do perpetuate the notion that God's presence is more likely to be found in quiet and safe open spaces than on noisy and crowded urban pavements. What urban people need, in contrast, is a concrete spirituality<sup>1</sup> that connects God's presence directly with their daily struggles to be human in the city. Such a spirituality needs to be *concrete* in the sense of not being abstract and theoretical, but also in the sense of being at home in the hard pavement realities of a South African city.

I write this article as a minister of the Melodi ya Tshwane congregation of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). The congregation was established in 1992 under the inspirational leadership of Dr Nico Smith as a 'nonracial Reformed congregation'<sup>2</sup> in the centre of Pretoria. Its present membership is largely black and amongst its members are people who speak all eleven South Africa's official languages. It has joint ownership (with the Dutch Reformed Church [DRC] congregation 'Pretoria') of the historic Grootkerk building in Bosman Street in the inner city. The membership of the congregation was initially limited to domestic workers and a few families but has now diversified into a congregation of suburban families (including professionals, civil servants and business people), students and domestic workers, with a full-time minister paid by the congregation and two tent-making ministers.<sup>3</sup>

One of the concerns behind this article is my experience as a URCSA minister that the Belhar Confession, a confessional standard of the URCSA with a very important message for South African society, seems to have very little impact on the life of URCSA congregations. Considering that the Sunday service is one important vehicle to shape the ethos of church members, I have developed a number of liturgical innovations in the Melodi ya Tshwane congregation to entrench Belhar at the heart of a congregation's life. This article describes the liturgical innovations related to *Article 4 of Belhar*, which deals with doing justice.

The role of confessions in the life of Reformed churches is contested, but this article does not enter the debates on the authority of the confessions. It starts from the assumption that a 'confessing' church is not a church that 'has confessions' – carrying them as baggage on its pilgrimage through time – but a church that 'confesses its faith' in the midst of an ever-changing society. A confessing church stands firmly within a tradition, which is not 'given' to it but which it 'takes up' confidently and self-critically in a specific context. This article therefore explores ways in which an URCSA

1. The title of this article is based on the title of Workbook 5 of the Advanced Certificate in Urban Ministry that was developed jointly by the Institute for Urban Ministry and the University of South Africa (UNISA) in the late 1990s (cf. Kritzinger 1998).

2. This was the expression used by Dr Nico Smith when explaining why the establishment of a new congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) in former 'white' Pretoria was necessary, anticipating that it would grow into a much more representative community, as more members of the DRCA moved into the city for study or work, but also as people of other racially constituted churches in the DRC family joined this inclusively 'non-racial' congregation.

3. For details on the early history of the Melodi ya Tshwane congregation, see Saayman (2010).

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congregation can 'take up' the Reformed tradition in South Africa by embodying what the Belhar Confession says about doing justice.<sup>4</sup>

Taking up the Belhar Confession implies that it increasingly directs and informs every dimension of a congregation's life: its worship, instruction, care, witness and service.<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that the *words* of Belhar are on our lips all the time, but that a Belhar *ethos* embodying hope, unity, reconciliation, justice and discipleship<sup>6</sup> should permeate a congregation's life. This demands a huge task of ecclesial reformation and sanctification, but that is precisely what the URCSA has taken upon itself by according confessional status to Belhar. I address just one dimension in this task article, namely the integration of a justice-seeking praxis into the Sunday liturgy.

I use the gentle term 'nurturing' in my title, which refers to a stereotypically feminine role, because I believe that it best describes the way in which a Belhar ethos can become entrenched in a congregation's life. It affirms the classical notion of the church as the 'mother of believers' (Cyprian). It is also based on the view that discriminatory or oppressive behaviour is not rooted primarily in rational convictions about 'the other' but in deeply entrenched habits with rational, emotional and volitional dimensions. Ministry to overcome prejudice and negativity towards other people therefore requires a patient and persistent process in which ritual and celebration create a community of freedom within which people are more likely to make fundamental lifestyle shifts.

There is indeed a serious need for rational persuasion and for 'confronting' a congregation with the claims of Belhar in sermons, Bible studies and conferences, but I believe that for effective persuasion towards a justice ethos to take place it is also essential to create a caring and celebratory environment in which the radical demands of Belhar become part of 'the air we breathe' from Sunday to Sunday in worship. Such an approach through liturgy tries to avoid both a guilt-inducing moralism and a crude politicisation of worship; it attempts to nurture a concrete spirituality in which beauty and justice embrace.

Worship can justifiably be called 'the major character-forming event of the Christian church' (Villa-Vicencio 1988:210). It is the only gathering of a congregation where all its members are expected to be present, and therefore the ideal space

4.Theologically this task can be viewed as the process of Belhar gaining 'full reception' in congregations of the URCSA, which includes 'wider use in catechetical and liturgical settings, in order to make the confession part of its faith and life' (Naudé 2010:134). Alternatively, it can be viewed as the 'recovery' of the Reformed tradition as 'the living faith of the dead' (Pelikan 1984:23–40, 65), following Goethe: 'What you have as a heritage, take now as a task; For thus you will make it your own!' (Pelikan 1984:82).

5.These five fields of ministry are identified in the URCSA Church Order as 'universal services' that should characterise each URCSA congregation (URCSA 2011).

6.It has become customary to mention only three dimensions (unity, reconciliation justice) when referring to the 'message' of Belhar, but this is a serious reduction of its intention. The first and fifth articles of Belhar, though short, combine with the other three to give the confession its unique Reformed character as an obedient and hopeful response to God's gracious and compelling initiative in history.

where confessional identity and integrity are formed. A missional understanding of the church does not regard the public worship of a congregation as the place where its most important ministry takes place, seeing that the Christian church is 'missionary by its very nature'<sup>7</sup>, and it is therefore drawn into God's mission and pushed into the community to bear witness and render service from Monday to Saturday. But if a congregation does not 'catch' a missional vision in its public worship on Sundays, the chances are slim that its members will embody and express its mission from Monday to Saturday. So even though Sunday worship is not the only space where Christians are conscientised and empowered for a missional existence, Christian rituals experienced in weekly worship are impactful 'transformances' that shape believers for a missional existence.<sup>8</sup>

Hans Urs von Balthasar developed a compelling theological vision to integrate what is true (doctrine) with what is good (ethics) and what is beautiful (aesthetics).<sup>9</sup> The latter dimension is neglected (if not complete ignored) in South African missiology, and this article makes a modest start by proposing a missional aesthetic for an inner city congregation. It is my contention that urban Christian communities are called to create beauty-and-justice experiences in the midst of broken communities as an integral dimension of their mission praxis.

The article has three sections: the first reflects on beauty as it relates to worship; the second looks at justice in *Article 4 of the Confession of Belhar*, whilst the third (and longest) section describes and discusses some liturgical experiences in the life of Melodi ya Tshwane.

## Beauty and worship

Beauty, like truth and goodness, should shape the whole life of a Christian community, but in this article I focus on beauty in *worship*, as it relates to justice and human solidarity. These four terms are not often mentioned in one breath, but their integral relatedness lies at the heart of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. This article explores the integral connection between worship and work, joy and justice, beauty and solidarity in the praxis of Christian faith.

### The soft power of beauty

A good place to begin our exploration of a missional aesthetic is the moving prayer of that great North African theologian, Augustine of Hippo, in Book 10.27 of his *Confessions* (1961):

I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new! I have learnt to love you late! ... The beautiful things of this world kept me far from you, Yet, if they had not been in you, they would have had no being at all. (p. 231)

7.This expression from the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*) of the Second Vatican Council expresses a broad ecumenical consensus (cf. Flannery 1975:814).

8.See Driver (1991:212): 'A ritual is a "transformation" – a performance designed to change a situation.'

9.He wrote: 'Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance' (Von Balthasar 1982:18).

Augustine then confesses how Beauty overwhelmed him and – by addressing all five of his senses – overcame his disabilities and drew him out of his closed, ‘disabled’ lifestyle:

You called me; you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and now I gasp for your sweet odour. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace. (p. 232)

In terms of missional aesthetics, three features stand out. Firstly, beauty exercises a ‘soft power’ as it persuades and transforms. We are not confronted or challenged by beauty so much as we are intrigued, attracted and ‘won over’ by it. Secondly, beauty is not perceived or enjoyed passively; on the contrary, beauty mobilises and activates believers into a life of worship and ongoing spiritual growth. The experience of beauty transforms believers, drawing them into a lifelong journey of desiring and embracing God.<sup>10</sup> Thirdly, beauty is sensual; it engages all five of our senses. The journey of faith unfolds as believers use their restored and recovering senses of hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch. If Reformed worship is to become beautiful it will have to become more sensual and less rationalist, more surprising and less traditionalist.

There is much to learn from Orthodox and Roman Catholic colleagues. One example is the view expressed by Pope Benedict XVI (2009) in a meeting with artists at the Sistine Chapel in 2009:

Too often, though, the beauty that is thrust upon us is illusory and deceitful, superficial and blinding, leaving the onlooker dazed; instead of bringing him out of himself and opening him up to horizons of true freedom as it draws him aloft, it imprisons him within himself and further enslaves him, depriving him of hope and joy ... Authentic beauty, however, unlocks the yearning of the human heart, the profound desire to know, to love, to go towards the Other, to reach for the Beyond. If we acknowledge that beauty touches us intimately, that it wounds us, that it opens our eyes, then we rediscover the joy of seeing, of being able to grasp the profound meaning of our existence.

From the Orthodox tradition there is the enigmatic saying of Prince Myskin in Dostoyevsky’s novel, *The idiot*, echoed by Solzhenitsyn in his Nobel acceptance speech: ‘Beauty will save the world’ (see Wolfe 2011:1; Staudt 2013).

## God is worshipped as beautiful

Four Scripture passages also express the worship of God as Beauty that we encountered in Augustine (1961):

One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty (*no’am*) of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple (Psalm 27:4).<sup>11</sup>

Honour and majesty are before him; strength and beauty (*tiph’eret*) are in his sanctuary (Psalm 96:6).

10. In *Desiring the kingdom*, Smith (2009) develops interesting ideas on the role of desire and imagination in worship that is able to shape a Christian worldview.

11. In this article all Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

In that day the LORD of hosts will be a garland of glory and a diadem of beauty (*tiph’arah*) to the remnant of his people (Isaiah 28:5).

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God (Baruch 5:1). (pp. 231–232)

God comes forth<sup>12</sup> as beautiful to worshippers, as they experience God’s beauty in personal meditation (Ps 27) and communal celebration (Ps 96, Is 28 and Baruch 5). Furthermore, God’s beauty shines forth most brightly in the dark. That is why Isaiah 28, which addresses the situation of exile, is particularly powerful: ‘On that day’ – the day of prophetic promise, of return for the ‘remnant’ that survived the ordeal of exile – God will be a garland of glory over the shoulders and a beautiful crown on the heads of chastened and humbled Israel, as they finally pick themselves up from the dust to rebuild Jerusalem.

This link between God’s beauty and Israel’s restoration – or between God’s glory and human dignity – was expressed by Irenaeus in his famous statement: *Gloria Dei vivens homo* or the ‘The glory of God is a living person’.<sup>13</sup> As this phrase is often quoted in isolation from the surrounding argument, I quote some of the literary context. Irenaeus first explains how Christ, through the Incarnation, reveals God to humanity and presents humanity to God, whilst preserving the transcendence (‘invisibility’) of God. Then he continues:

For the glory of God is a living person; and human life is the vision of God [*or ‘is to see God’*]. So, if the revelation of God which is displayed through creation affords life to all those living on earth, much more does that manifestation of the Father which comes through the Word give life to those who see God. (*Adv Haer IV,20,7*)

For Irenaeus, then, the glory of God is revealed (made visible) in the fact that God *gives life* – in creation and through Christ’s incarnation – to human beings who *see* God. In seeing God they become fully alive and thereby God is glorified. God’s glory is manifested and God’s beauty shines forth when men, women and children begin to live a fully human life.

To glorify God does not mean that believers *give* God something that God did not have; it is to see and acknowledge God’s greatness and grace, to receive the gift of life from God, and to become fully human by standing up to claim and express that God-given dignity. It is through seeing the beauty of God ‘displayed through creation’ and ‘manifested ... through the Word’ that people become truly alive.

This line of thought establishes a firm connection between glory, beauty and justice: God’s glory and beauty are revealed where people – exiled, oppressed, burdened with sorrow and affliction (Baruch) – *stand up* and take their *rightful* place in a *human* community. It is not surprising that Christians in situations of oppression make the statement of Irenaeus

12. I adopt the expression that God ‘comes forth’ from Edward Farley in his fascinating book *Divine empathy* (1996). He uses this as an alternative to speaking of God’s ‘existence’ as a ‘bare facticity’ (Farley 1996:5).

13. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* IV,20,7; the translation has been adapted slightly.

more concrete: '*Gloria Dei vivens pauper*' – The glory of God is the living poor person (Romero 1985:187).

The Hebrew word *no'am* is alternatively translated as beauty and favour in the NRSV. When referring to God, it is about being sweet, kind and pleasant, not in a sentimental way but by showing genuine human concern for others. What makes someone beautiful or attractive is her or his willingness to deal sensitively and compassionately with those who are weak, to affirm and empower those who are oppressed and marginalised.

### The life of Israel is beautiful

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty (*yofi*), God shines forth. (Psalm 50:2)

You shall be a crown of beauty (*tiph'eret*) in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. (Is 62:3)

Not only is God called a beautiful diadem (crown) to God's people (Is 28:5), but in God's hand, Israel itself becomes a beautiful crown, a radiant witness to the beauty and liberating acts of their faithful covenant Lord. The prophecy in Isaiah 62:3 promises restoration to 'forsaken' and 'desolate' Israel (Is 62:4). Zion is promised a new name and becomes a crown of beauty in God's hand before the nations, as the nations see Zion's vindication and renewal.

This language is dangerous, because the nationalist tradition of glorifying the temple gave Israel a false security, which the later prophets had to deconstruct (e.g. Jr 8). In 1 Maccabees 2:12 we read: 'And see, our holy place, our beauty, and our glory have been laid waste; the Gentiles have profaned them.' It is always possible to find God's beauty – and our beauty – primarily in buildings and institutions, rather than in a just and reconciled community of people, living fully human lives.

The beauty of Israel as God's people cannot be taken for granted; it is not a 'thing' that is permanently given to Israel – or to the church. The beauty of Israel is rather a way of life under God's promises, a journey in the light of God's presence, 'before the face of God', with all the provisionality and vulnerability that characterises the pilgrimage of God's people in history. But occasionally, when things go well, God's people become a shining witness, a royal diadem, a crown of beauty, a city on a hill and a lamp on a lampstand, from which God's beauty shines forth into society.

### God's beauty and our responsibility

The two foregoing sections in a way lead logically to this one. There is a close connection between worshipping God as beautiful and working for God, doing 'something beautiful for God' (Muggeridge 2003) in society. Psalm 90:17 (NRSV) makes this connection clear: 'Let the favour (*no'am*) of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands – O prosper the work of our hands!'

In Psalm 90, God shows kindness, sweetness and favour to people whose handiwork keep falling down, who just cannot seem to make it in life; either due to their waywardness and disobedience (as sinners) or through harm done to them by others (as sinned against). Psalm 90:17 suggests that when God's beauty and/or favour comes 'upon' such strugglers, the work of their hands can become firmly established; it will remain standing; it will prosper; it will not fall to the ground again.

Believers are involved in doing *God's* work in society, and yet what we do is the work of our hands. We are called and sent to participate in God's mission and yet what we engage in are our projects, our missions. Respecting and preserving this correlation – between God's will and our responsibility, between God's beauty and/or favour and the work of our hands, between God's mission and the missions of the churches – is perhaps *the* secret of sound missiology and healthy ministry or mission. Michael Goheen (2011) captures this well when he says that worship nurtures a missional identity:

A constant reorientation to the horizon of our calling – the world God loves – by continued repetition and redirection through all the common areas of worship Sunday after Sunday will gradually nurture a missional people. (p. 204)

### Justice and worship

The approach to justice that a URCSA congregation needs to embody in worship and life comes from *Article 4 of the Confession of Belhar*. Before focusing on the liturgical implementation of this vision, it is necessary to analyse *Article 4 of Belhar* briefly. I concentrate on two central phrases, which have also been the most controversial: 'God is in a special sense the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged' and 'the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands' (Belhar 2008).<sup>14</sup>

#### 'In a special sense the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged'

This statement echoes the consistent prophetic message in the Hebrew Bible that God cares about widows, orphans and strangers (e.g. Is 1:17), that God prefers a fast that consists in the breaking of yokes, the removal of chains and the sharing of bread with the hungry, rather than spiritual exercises that sit comfortably with oppressive attitudes and actions (Is 58). Jesus of Nazareth stood squarely in this prophetic tradition by living in solidarity with people side-lined and stigmatised by the oppressive purity system of second temple Judaism. It is therefore not surprising that Jesus identified himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick and the prisoners in his parable of the last judgement (Mt 25:31–46).

When Belhar calls God in a special sense 'the God of ...' it does not suggest that oppressed and marginalised people

14. The 2008 General Synod of the URCSA approved a new English translation of the Confession of Belhar (URCSA 2008:55). The text of the new translation is available at <http://www.vgksa.org.za/documents/The%20Belhar%20Confession.pdf>



own God or have a *monopoly* on God. It does suggest that God chooses to be deeply offended by human injustice: 'Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honour him' (Pr 14:31): 'The LORD of hosts is exalted by justice, and the holy God shows himself by righteousness' (Is 5:16). The message of the prophet Jeremiah to king Shallum of Judah is clear:

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, 'I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms', and who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father [Josiah] eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me?, says the LORD. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practising oppression and violence. (Jr 22:13–17)

To establish social justice *is* to know God, because, in the words of Rabbi Abraham Heschel (1962):

Perhaps the answer lies here: righteousness is not just a value; it is God's part of human life, *God's stake in human history*. Perhaps it is because the suffering of man is a blot upon God's conscience; because it is in relations between man and man that God is at stake. Or is it just that the infamy of a wicked act is infinitely greater than we are able to imagine? People act as they please, doing what is vile, abusing the weak, not realizing that they are fighting God, affronting the divine, or that oppression of a man is a humiliation of God. (p. 198)

What we do to the weak and vulnerable – the least of the sisters and brothers of Jesus – we do to him. He has identified himself with their plight; he is, in a special sense, the helper of the helpless. And in this he reveals to us who God is: the One who stands by the side of those who suffer unjustly.

This does not give the poor a moral privilege or declares them to be saints, but it does give them a hermeneutical or epistemological priority in a Christian interpretation of society: when we wish to understand the will of God for our society, we need to take our vantage point amongst the poor and the suffering. We discover a Christian view of society when we look at it from below, through the eyes of its victims. We need to look at Jerusalem from outside the gate, from the vantage point of the Crucified Christ, and weep with him over the city that stones its prophets and misses the *kairos* moments that could lead to its salvation (Lk 13:31–35). This does not mean that God hates the rich and powerful or that we should ignore them in our ministry. Quite the contrary! Like Jesus, we need to engage the powerful of our time, but we need to do so for the sake of justice, informed by the interests of the least and the lowest, devoted to the overcoming of their suffering.

We need to engage the political rulers, the captains of industry and the gurus of culture, measuring their performance and evaluating their exercise of power by what they have done to the poor, the homeless, the unemployed, the raped and the hijacked. Or by what they have failed to do in relation

to those who suffer around them, as with the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31). God loves the rich and powerful as much as the poor and humble, but God's love to those who abuse, exploit and manipulate the poor – or simply ignore them – takes the following forms:

- a prophetic rebuke; for example, 'Go and tell that fox' (Lk 13:32)
- a heartfelt lament, addressed to their conscience; for example, 'Saul Saul, why do you persecute me?' (Ac 9:4)
- a call to conversion; for example:
 

Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Is 1:16f.)
- an exhortation to action; for example, 'Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Am 5:24).

Many challenges face a liturgist who leads a congregation in worshipping this God, who is in a special sense the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged. What is fundamental is that such a liturgy dare not create the impression that only 'the world out there' or 'the government' are responsible for injustice. A congregation who worships God with Belhar open before them first of all needs to 'take its own medicine', before recommending or prescribing it to others. A Belhar-guided liturgy will therefore first have to expose the members themselves to the challenging presence of this uncomfortable and 'unsettling' God (cf. Brueggemann 2009). Those who exercise authority in a congregation – ministers, elders, deacons, youth leaders, Sunday school teachers and parents – need to experience God in the liturgy as the God who has a special 'soft spot' for the weak and vulnerable and be drawn into adopting that commitment for the way they exercise power. Congregation members need to learn in the liturgy how to assess their own performance by the yardstick of what they have done to the destitute, the poor and the wronged – because judgement must *begin* with the *household of God* (1 Pt 4:17).

### 'To stand where God stands'

The *Belhar Confession* does not only guide a congregation to recognise who God is, but also calls it to imitate God:

We believe: that the Church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others. (Belhar 2008)

This expression in Belhar is a fascinating one, particularly because the Bible does not often use the metaphor of God as *standing* with those who are wronged – in solidarity with the poor and suffering. To my knowledge, the only passage that does this explicitly is Psalm 109:30f.:

With my mouth I will give great thanks to the LORD; I will praise him in the midst of the throng. For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save them from those who would condemn them to death.



There are many passages in the Bible that affirm God's solidarity with the poor and oppressed, but the image of 'standing with' suffering people is rare. To mention 'standing with the wronged' and 'standing against unjust oppressors' in one breath (as it occurs both in Psalm 109:31 and in Belhar) suggests the language of a law court. In the life of ancient Israel, the one who stands at the right hand of the poor – to save them from those who wish to 'condemn them to death' – is a family member or a community leader who argues as an advocate before the elders seated in the gate (where the local court had its sessions) on behalf of someone who is being falsely accused and unfairly treated. In the prophetic witness of Scripture, this is where God 'stands' in human society: 'against injustice and with the wronged'.<sup>15</sup>

This 'standing where God stands' should however not become an arrogant claim to know exactly what God's will is, elbowing every other view aside. It is with fear and trembling that we go to stand there, outside the gate, to share the shame of Christ (Heb 13:13), where he stands amongst abused children and women, underpaid workers, people struggling with illness, those burying their relatives, widows, orphans and strangers, fearful elderly people and frustrated, unemployed youth.

## Belhar in the liturgy

In this section I describe some of the liturgical innovations in which I have been involved at Melodi ya Tshwane to embody the Belhar Confession liturgically and to integrate it into the life of our congregation.<sup>16</sup> Seeing that justice issues are sensitive and emotive in nature, these liturgical events were planned in such a way as not to be moralistic and guilt-inducing but evocative and compelling. In bearing witness to the God of compassionate justice, we tried to avoid the two dangers identified by Driver (1991:212) when planning Christian rituals: 'To be boring is to bear false witness. To be sensational is to bear no witness at all'.

### Confessing Belhar in the liturgy

A confession needs to be confessed. For this reason our first priority was to formulate a brief summary of Belhar that would be suitable for liturgical use. We chose an antiphonal format, which we adapted from an Afrikaans original developed by the URCSA Cape Synod (URCSA 1994). The section in this liturgical version that deals with *Article 4* is recited in responsorial fashion by liturgist (L) and congregation (C):

- L: We believe that God wants to bring about true justice and lasting peace on earth.  
We believe that God is, in a special sense,  
The God of the suffering, the poor and the downtrodden.

- C: God gives justice to the oppressed  
and bread to the hungry;  
God sets captives free  
and makes the blind to see;  
God protects strangers, orphans and widows  
and obstructs the plans of the wicked.
- L: We believe that the Church, belonging to God,  
should stand where God stands:  
against injustice and with those who are wronged.
- C: We oppose every policy that causes injustice:  
We witness against the powerful  
who seek their own interest and harm others.  
We stand with those who suffer –  
to share our lives with them.<sup>17</sup>

This liturgical version of Belhar has a poetic ring to it and when it is recited in unison by a large congregation it has a dramatic effect. In that way it has a conscientising impact on the participants. Liturgical statements that are experienced as 'beautiful' when recited together have the potential to fire the imagination and move the emotions of a worshipping community towards embodying the ideas in deeds.

The liturgical version of Belhar does not replace the Apostles' Creed in the liturgy of Melodi ya Tshwane, as the ecumenical nature of the latter is an important dimension of Reformed worship. On some Sundays it is used in the place of the Creed, but sometimes it is recited after the celebration of the Lord's Supper, as a commitment by the members to go and embody the justice and equality of the Table in the community as they leave the church building.

## Standing tall and dignified

Another liturgical statement that was developed in Melodi ya Tshwane to embody Belhar is recited by the congregation early in the service, before the reading of the law:

- I stand tall and dignified before God  
and among my sisters and brothers.  
I accept myself as a precious and unique person,  
because I am created in the image of the living God.  
Together we discover who we are, as a family:  
*Motho ke motho ka batho.*<sup>18</sup>

The purpose of this statement is to overcome the negative anthropology of much traditional Reformed worship that starts (like the Heidelberg Catechism) by emphasising the knowledge of one's own sin and misery. By using this statement before reading the law, the congregation members remind themselves (and one another) that the primary truth about their lives is not that they are sinners, but that they are precious bearers of God's image and beauty.

To relate this to the message of Belhar, one could say: if we are to stand where God stands, then we have to be *standing* in the first place! But that cannot be assumed. Some people have been knocked down by life, either through their own

15. In another article (Kritzinger 2010), I analysed the role of Dr Chris Loff and the 1979 *Theological Declaration of the Belydende Kring* in shaping the wording of Belhar at this point.

16. I have not referred to the ways in which Melodi ya Tshwane embodies Belhar in the celebration of the Eucharist, as that would have made the article much too long.

17. This liturgical summary of Belhar has not been published before. The full text is available from the author on request.

18. A Sesotho saying that means 'a person is a person through (other) persons'. This statement has not been published before.

irresponsible behaviour or through injustice that others have done to them. This self-affirmation ('I stand tall') moves to an affirmation of *ubuntu/botho* community ('together we discover') as an embodiment of an African Reformed identity as well as an antiracist and antisexist statement of human equality.

In response to helpful comments by Professor Ernst Conradie on the first version of the affirmation, I broadened it to include a trinitarian and an environmental dimension. It now reads:

I stand tall and dignified in the presence of God  
and among my fellow human beings.  
I accept myself as a precious and unique person,  
created through Christ to be the image of the living God.  
Together with animals, trees and rivers  
we are one living community,  
belonging to the earth, our common home.  
Guided by the Spirit, we discover who we are, as a family:  
*Motho ke motho ka batho.*<sup>19</sup>

The purpose of these liturgical statements is not 'Pelagian' – to deny or soften the reality of human sin – but to affirm human dignity, which is the basic assumption on which a sense of sin is based. Human beings can understand themselves to be sinners only when they affirm that they have been created in God's image and are therefore designed and destined for goodness – and consequently accountable to God.<sup>20</sup> Empereur and Kiesling (1990) agree that the liturgy:

[S]hould reveal what is fully human and show how this full humanity is the place where the kingdom of God's justice and peace is made alive. In other words, a justice-directed liturgy is a fully human one. (p. 23)

The writing of this declaration was occasioned by a woman member of the congregation who complained about the emphasis on human sinfulness that played such a dominant (and for her, oppressive) role in Melodi ya Tshwane's liturgy. Perhaps one could say that this statement enabled the congregation to hear *Article 4 of Belhar* not as a *moral imperative* (Go and stand where God stands), but in the first place as a *gracious indicative* (God stands where you stand, by your side; God gives you dignity and humanity). It also makes a huge difference to the flow and the emotional 'feel' of the liturgy when believers first affirm their human dignity before they confess their failures.

In the long journey to 'live down' the destructive legacy of racism in the minds of black Christians, such a statement also has a therapeutic dimension. It was Desmond Tutu who pointed out that the greatest evil of apartheid was to make black people distrust and hate themselves. A Christian ministry that constantly stresses only the sinfulness of people – whilst they are being humiliated and harassed by political, economic or social systems – can only have a destructive effect. The first word of the gospel to people who are being oppressed – or have been oppressed – is 'Stand up!' It is only when you are standing that it makes sense to hear 'Turn

around!'<sup>21</sup> This is the liberating effect that the 'standing tall' affirmation wishes to achieve in the liturgy.

## Belonging to God

Belhar stresses that the church should stand where God stands *because it belongs to God*. The logic of this thinking is that Christian discipleship is about imitation and participation (cf. Yoder 1994:112–133). The unity of all five articles of Belhar also becomes clear here. *Article 1* confesses that it is the triune God who gathers, protects and nourishes the church on its pilgrimage through history. On the basis of having been called into fellowship with the living God, the church commits itself to a life of obedience to Christ as Lord (*Article 5*) (Belhar 2008). The church's 'stand' on justice issues (*Article 4*) is therefore not motivated by party political concerns, expediency or opportunism; Christians are moved by an inner compulsion flowing from a life of discipleship, following God into the arena of injustice to stand there, side by side with God, against injustice and with wronged people. This foundation of the church's politics of justice therefore flows from a distinct spirituality based on the gracious initiative of the triune God, which is most clearly expressed in baptism.

In 2006 Melodi ya Tshwane organised an event for the renewal of baptismal promises, with the title 'Living our baptism'. A liturgical statement to be recited during the ceremony was prepared and structured according to all five articles of Belhar to emphasise different dimensions of belonging to God: the gracious initiative of the triune God, the call to obedient discipleship and the commitment to work for unity, reconciliation and justice. The statement looked as follows (spoken antiphonally by a liturgist and a family group standing in front of him):

- L: You are baptised  
into the name of the Father
- C: I am a child of the living God.  
God has forgiven all my sins;  
I belong to God's family.  
Father, I will serve no one but you;  
I love you with all my heart,  
all my soul and all my strength.  
I will work for unity among all Christians,  
and give my time, energy and money  
to build this congregation.
- L: You are baptised  
into the name of the Son
- C: I am a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ;  
He has called me and transformed my life;  
I am a member of the Body of Christ.  
Lord Jesus, I renounce evil in all its forms  
and with all its attractions;  
I take up my cross to follow you,  
to work for reconciliation in society,  
to give my time, energy and money  
to bring people together.
- L: You are baptised  
into the name of the Holy Spirit

19. This statement has not been published before.

20. Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Mpho, have argued this case with conviction in *Made for goodness* (Tutu & Tutu 2010).

21. I developed this notion in more detail in Kritzing (1990:41–43).



C: I am a temple of the Holy Spirit;  
 The Spirit fills me and controls me  
 from day to day  
 to give me wisdom, courage, love and humility.  
 Lord, I will bring your good news to people,  
 to proclaim forgiveness and renewal  
 to all who need you;  
 to stand where you stand: against injustice  
 and with those who are suffering.  
 Come, Creator Spirit, take control of my life  
 and make me fruitful in your service.<sup>22</sup>

The wording of the statement emphasised how baptism seals the intrinsic connection between the unmerited (beautiful) grace of God in Jesus Christ and our calling to join God's mission of unifying, reconciling and transforming society. It aimed at helping members *live* their baptism, to be constantly aware that they *are* baptised, not merely that they *were* (once) baptised. This was based on the pastoral insight of Martin Luther that Christians need to be continuously resocialised into Christ by 'crawling back to our baptism'<sup>23</sup> and regarding baptism as the 'daily garment ... to wear all the time' (Ramshaw 1996:127).

This ritual of renewal was intended to nurture a living baptismal spirituality that would motivate and mobilise members into embodying the message of Belhar. It dramatised the radical nature of God's grace that unites all Christians in a fundamental way. Included in the exercise was the distant hope that a ritual like this, if a significant number of URCSA and DRC congregations were to adopt it, could help to establish a convergent spirituality as a basis for the structural reunification of the DRC family of churches.<sup>24</sup>

## Justice for women

Manala (2012:219) has rightly pointed out that the marginalisation of women and children<sup>25</sup> in Christian worship is a key justice issue that needs to be corrected. At the 2005 General Synod of the URCSA, a group of men, of which I was part, drafted an 'Open letter from the men of the URCSA to the women of the URCSA' in which the Belhar Confession was interpreted as a call to gender justice within the church itself. It said, amongst others:

This Confession has been a bright light on our painful journey as Reformed churches in Southern Africa to dismantle the racist structures and attitudes of apartheid. However, we confess that we have applied the liberating guidance of Belhar primarily to the problems of overcoming barriers of 'race', culture and ethnicity. So today, as URCSA, we stand judged by the Belhar Confession:

- for having discriminated against women in church and society

22.This liturgical statement was published earlier in Kritzing (2007:149).

23.The attribution of this saying to Luther may be false, as I have not found any reference to Luther's own writings amongst the authors who attribute the saying to him (e.g. Mühlen 1978:136).

24.For detail on this proposal of 'Covenanting together for reunification', see Kritzing (2007).

25.Due to space considerations I cannot address the issue of justice for children in this article, but can point out that Melodi ya Tshwane welcomes children to the Eucharist and runs a well organised Sunday school.

- for having worked against reconciliation by alienating women from significant participation in leadership positions and ministerial formation
- for having practiced injustice against women in church and society.

In the light of the above, we as male members of the URCSA, wish to say to our sisters in the church:

- We confess that our discrimination against you has hurt and alienated you in many ways.
- We admit that these actions have been a lack of respect and a failure of love.
- We humbly apologise to you for all the actions, attitudes and structures for which we have been responsible.
- We commit ourselves to make restitution for this wrong and to build a new church with you – in which you are free to exercise all your gifts and ministries and in which we develop an equal partnership to the glory of God. (URCSA 2005:176)

The Melodi ya Tshwane congregation put this commitment into practice firstly by inviting women members to be trained, along with men, to lead the worship services on Sunday mornings. Women responded and now more women than men have become accomplished liturgy leaders. They make a unique contribution to the worship through the well prepared and creative ways in which they present the liturgy. Secondly, the church council, which is constituted by representatives of various ministry task teams, consists of close to 50% female members. The 'equal partnership to the glory of God' of which the Open Letter spoke, is becoming a reality in the worship and leadership structures of the congregation. The multicoloured beauty of the Body of Christ is manifested in a just community where there is room for both women and men to be human<sup>26</sup> and to exercise their God-given talents in partnership to build up the church.

## Multilingual worship

In South Africa language is also a justice issue. The language policy of the apartheid government to enshrine Afrikaans and English as the only two official languages of South Africa marginalised indigenous African languages and linked them to the homeland system. Nevertheless these languages flourished in black communities, particularly in the context of families and clans, but also in religious practices. Singing in black congregations played a huge role in affirming the dignity of the participants and in sustaining the humanity of black communities in situations of discrimination, insecurity and suffering. The aesthetics of African musical performance is a key factor in the attractiveness and resilience of African Christianity.

Melodi ya Tshwane uses a data projector to project the words of its songs on a large screen and has created Powerpoint slides in which the different stanzas of a song are sung in different languages; mainly Sesotho, isiZulu, English, Afrikaans, but occasionally also in Tshivenda and

26.Miguez Bonino worked out this idea of justice as 'making space' in his Room to be people (1979).





Xitsonga. The purpose of this is to do justice to the members who speak these different languages, thereby making them feel at home. Much still needs to be done to expand the multilingual repertoire of the congregation, but the members do get the message that Melodi ya Tshwane is a consciously intercultural and multilingual community.

Another way in which this multilingual nature of the congregation is celebrated is through a set of pulpit cloths in the colours of the Christian year and containing words in four languages. One example is the pulpit cloth for the season of Christmas, which has four statements underneath each other: God with us / *God met ons* / *uNkulunkulu unathi* / *Modimo o na le rona*. This is not a hard persuasive strategy to 'confront' members with the need to make room symbolically for 'others', but an indirect and aesthetically attractive way of drawing members into an inclusive ethos that does justice in the multilingual reality of the congregation and the city.

### Engaging the powers

The Confession of Belhar states that 'in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others' (Belhar 2008). After 1994, the churches in South Africa have largely disappeared as ecumenical witnesses for social justice in the public terrain and withdrawn into pursuing more privatised and denominational priorities. To challenge Melodi ya Tshwane members to rethink their relationship with the 'powers and principalities' in the capital city of Pretoria or Tshwane and to consciously engage those powers in the name of God, I developed the following interactive 'votum', based on the traditional votum taken from Psalm 121<sup>27</sup> for the start of the worship service:

- L: We lift up our eyes to the hills,  
to the high places in and around Pretoria;  
Where does our help come from?
- C: Our help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth
- L: Does our help come from Meintjeskop,  
from the Union Buildings, centre of political power?  
Our help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth  
Does our help come from Thaba Tshwane,  
from the National Defence Force, centre of military power?  
Our help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth  
Does our help come from Monumentkoppie,  
from the Voortrekker Monument, the power of the past?  
Our help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth  
Does our help come from the high building of  
the Reserve Bank, centre of economic power?  
Our help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth
- L: Does our help come from the high buildings of the  
University of South Africa, the University of Pretoria or  
the Tshwane University of Technology, centres of  
intellectual power?

27. The opening rubric of a Reformed worship service is traditionally called a votum (i.e. vow or prayer in Latin). Since the time of John Calvin, Psalm 121:1 has commonly been used as a votum by Reformed churches (cf. Müller 1988:59f.).

Our help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth  
We lift up our eyes to the hills,  
to the high places in and around Pretoria;  
Where does our help come from?  
Our help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth;  
who is the same, yesterday, today and forever;  
who remains faithful to his promises,  
who never forsakes the work of his hands.  
Amen.<sup>28</sup>

This votum has an interesting effect on people when they recite it for the first time. They express surprise at the fact that the 'hills' in the Psalm could be conceived as present day places or centres of power. And then they realise how this well-known verse has become so 'commonplace' through constant use that they have never really 'heard' what it says.

The strength of this votum is that it creates awareness amongst members of the relevance of faith for the daily engagement with the realities of power in the city. The danger of using it is that members could hear it as saying that they need not take 'the powers that be' seriously, as it is God who is their help and strength. It could thus be understood as advocating withdrawal from public life: 'We don't need these powers, we only need God'. It is worth taking this risk, as long as the preaching and other liturgical acts do not reinforce such a privatised Christian praxis.

What is at stake here is an affirmation of the 'independence' of the church as faith community in society, often expressed in the slogan 'in the world but not of the world'. To say 'Let the church be the church' does not mean withdrawal from the world but, in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr (1986), it means:

[T]hat by prayer and fasting it has at least extricated itself in some degree from its embarrassing alliances with this or that class, race and nation, so that it may speak the word of God more purely and more forthrightly to each person and nation, but also to each generation, according to the peculiar needs of the person and the hour. (p. 99; cf. Hall 1999:79)

Such a votum intends to draw church members into engaging the powers by living a public theology in their daily work as citizens of the city. It fosters a public Christian praxis which recognises that the powers are not inherently evil and that they need to be entered into and sanctified by believers, but without 'putting their trust' in those powers or 'selling their souls' to them. Mobilising the courage during Sunday worship for such a public praxis is particularly relevant in a congregation like Melodi ya Tshwane, which has a number of members who occupy positions of responsibility in government departments, academic institutions and businesses.

28. This liturgical saying was published before, together with some theological reflection (Kritzinger 2008:337). My UNISA colleague, Professor T.D. Mashau, has used this liturgical statement for his inaugural lecture at UNISA (Mashau 2014), adapting the notions of 'hills' and 'valleys' in a highly creative way to develop an agenda for urban mission and missiology. His contribution is included in this volume.



The key question is: how is power exercised? In whose interest(s) are the powers managed and controlled? From the vantage point of Belhar this votum wishes to express that we engage the powers of the city and the country from the vantage point of trust in God, who is in a special sense the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged. This means that we engage the powers from our position of solidarity with the poor, the unjustly treated, the oppressed. We therefore enter 'corridors of power' and 'dens of lions' with great circumspection and with an acute awareness that power corrupts – and that it can corrupt us as well. In a healthy self-criticism we need to admit that our religious assemblies sometimes resemble a 'den of robbers' more than a 'house of prayer for all nations' (Mk 11:17), believers who like Jesus – in bold humility – 'testify to the truth' in the presence of the powers (Jn 18:37).

To stand 'where' God stands does not mean that we turn our backs on the powers and physically spend all our time *amongst* poor and suffering people. This is essential because the poor and the suffering people need to be our primary interlocutors, but that cannot be *all* that Belhar expects of a Christian congregation. We also need to learn how to stand before king David like Nathan (2 Sm 12); before king Ahab like Elijah (1 Ki 18); before the priest Amaziah like Amos (Am 7); before Herod and Pilate like Jesus; before the Sanhedrin like Peter and John (Ac 5) or Stephen (Ac 7); before Festus and Agrippa like Paul (Ac 25). Liturgy should mobilise and encourage Christians to do this with wisdom, innocent as doves and shrewd (*phronimos*) as serpents (Mt 10:16), working with confidence and integrity for the coming of God's promised reign of justice, making it clear that our concern is the 'welfare of the city' (Jr 29) and the common good of society.

This does not mean that the engagement between Christians and the powers always has to be confrontational. It is just as important to learn how to work with authorities in the interest of society and how to exercise power without being corrupted by it. In order to do this with credibility, a series of interdisciplinary think tanks and task teams need to be established, each focusing on one of the 'powers', composed of theologians, economists, lawyers, engineers, etc. to develop informed positions and plans for public life. Through regular workshops they could develop an informed and credible public theology and communicate their insights in significant ways to the city through the media, including the social media. Perhaps an annual joint conference on urban public theology could coordinate the work of the task teams and develop a common vision amongst them. The votum suggests that the Confession of Belhar cannot be adequately embodied within the four walls of a church building; instead, it draws us out into the streets and onto the hills of the city.

## The way of the cross

Is it possible to nurture an ethos for a public theology of justice without engaging in public rituals? If worship always takes place within the safe confines of a church building, will

the minds of believers ever be transformed into relating the truth of the gospel to the public realities of society? How do we empower ourselves to go up the street (or outside the gate) to stand where God stands? To nurture an ethos that embodies public courage as well as vulnerability, we need to develop street liturgies, not to make spectacles of ourselves but to get ourselves outside our liturgical comfort zones and (occasionally) make our point publicly.

Myers *et al.* (1996:145) speak of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as told in Mark 11 as 'carefully choreographed political street theater', which should not be called the 'triumphal' entry, because it was designed precisely to repudiate Messianic triumphalism. Can we develop liturgies that amount to carefully choreographed street theatre – and that nurture in us the courage to stand publicly where God stands, whilst making a public and prophetic appeal to our communities in God's name?<sup>29</sup> The Melodi ya Tshwane congregation has adapted the fourteen-step 'Stations of the cross' of the Catholic tradition into a eight-step 'Way of the cross' for this purpose, which is used every two or three years. It is a public walkabout on Good Friday around the church building in Bosman Street that moves through the following eight 'stations':

1. A woman anoints Jesus (Mk 14:1–9)
2. Jesus prays in Gethsemane (Mk 14:32–42)
3. Jesus appears before the Jewish Council (Mk 14:53–65)
4. Peter denies Jesus (Lk 22:54–62)
5. Jesus is condemned to death – and takes up his cross (Lk 23:13–25)
6. Simon of Cyrene carries Jesus' cross (Lk 23:26)
7. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem (Lk 23:27–31)
8. Jesus is nailed to the cross (Lk 23:32).<sup>30</sup>

Members take turns at carrying a large wooden cross from one station to the next and at each station someone reads a Scripture passage in a different language, they sing a song and pray an interactive litany together. Peter's denial (station 4) is enacted in the courtyard of the youth hostel adjoining the church building and station 7 in front of Sediba Hope HIV and Aids clinic. Station 8 is enacted in Bosman Street, literally outside the gate of the church property, where the nails are hammered into the cross.

In this way the spaces around the church building that are associated with different forms of suffering and specific social challenges are inscribed with new meaning as the *via dolorosa* of Jesus traces its way through them. The participants acquire new insights into the Crucified Christ as they trace his last steps amongst the cross-bearers of today.<sup>31</sup> As they venture outside the comfort of the church building and see onlookers and passers-by stare at them, they become acutely aware of the vulnerability and public shame Jesus endured

29.The annual Feast of the Clowns procession in August through the streets of the inner city of Tshwane, organised by the Tshwane Leadership Foundation, is an excellent example of this.

30.The litanies, prayers and songs used in this version of the 'Way of the cross' has not been published. It is available from the author on request.

31.The language used in this sentence is influenced by the title (and content) of Mofokeng (1983).

on his way to the cross. It would be inappropriate to describe this public ritual as beautiful, but it makes a definite aesthetic impact on all the participants as it draws them into the reality of Jesus' unjust condemnation and death.

Such non-triumphalistic public rituals can become potent 'transformances' (Driver 1991:212) in the life of a congregation, as members learn to connect the suffering of today's crucified people with the redemptive suffering of Christ – and become personally involved in addressing that suffering.

### A spirituality of 'striving against injustice'

There is a well-known chorus that is sung occasionally in the Melodi ya Tshwane congregation, initiated mainly by the youth:

If you believe and I believe and we together pray,  
the Holy Spirit will come down<sup>32</sup> and Africa will be saved;  
and Africa will be saved (2X)  
the Holy Spirit will come down and Africa will be saved.<sup>33</sup>

I was worried about the narrow theology expressed in this song and added two verses to include the notion of human initiative and participation in God's mission:

If you have love and I have love and we together care,  
the Holy Spirit will come down and Africa will rise up;  
and Africa will rise up (2X)  
the Holy Spirit will come down and Africa will rise up.

If you have hope and I have hope and we together strive  
the Holy Spirit will come down and Africa will survive,  
and Africa will survive (2X)  
the Holy Spirit will come down and Africa will survive.

By adding the last two stanzas, an isolated faith (if you and I believe) is broadened into a life of faith, love and hope, and an isolated activity of prayer is broadened into praying, caring and striving. It also transforms an unrealistic expectation – of Africa being miraculously 'saved' one day when the Holy Spirit 'comes down' – into an emphasis on African people rising up themselves and learning together how to survive against all the odds.

The Belhar Confession leads us into developing a whole new repertoire of songs in order to embody its liberating and justice-seeking ethos. Liberation theologians and black theologians sometimes lament the fact that their liberating ideas did not (and do not) find widespread acceptance amongst rank and file church members.<sup>34</sup> One of the reasons for this may be the fact that those ideas were not transformed into songs (in all South Africa's indigenous languages) that could capture the imagination of members and mobilise them into liberating action. The 'liberation songs' that were popular in the struggle against apartheid were relatively effective in

32. This song is often sung with the words 'the Holy Spirit *must* come down', which is theologically problematic, suggesting that prayer can 'force the hand' of the Holy Spirit.

33. According to the Hymnary.org website, this is Song 168 of the *Renew!* Hymnal. It is based on Matthew 18:19 and originated in 1995 in Zimbabwe with slightly different words: '... the Holy Spirit will come and down and set God's people free'.

34. One example, amongst many others, is Mosala (1989:2) who spoke of the inability of Black Theology to 'become a useful weapon in the hands of the oppressed and exploited black people themselves'.

inspiring black Christians and sustaining their commitment to justice, but the post-1994 political and economic situation requires different songs. For one thing, we are now no longer dealing with an illegitimate regime but a legitimately chosen democratic government.

We need to renew the spirituality of our church hymns – away from the narrow missionary pietism that they breathe – into a spirituality that is concrete, reformational, ecumenical and justice-seeking. On the other hand, we need to renew the spirituality of the 'struggle songs' from the liberation era – away from the stridency and enemy images they often expressed – into a spirituality that is unifying and reconciling. The Confession of Belhar provides us with precisely such a spirituality, but to transform it into a compelling message that can mobilise and challenge a congregation to move out of its own comfort zones will require some creative musical work.

It requires of us to edit and reform our existing church songs but also to compose a whole new set of songs or choruses<sup>35</sup> in all of our languages – so that Belhar's inclusive justice-seeking vision may become enshrined in the hearts and minds of URCSA members through the aesthetic experience of song and dance. As long ago as 1966, Albert van den Heuvel wrote in the preface of *New hymns for a new day*, a youth hymnal of the World Council of Churches:

It is the hymns, repeated over and over again, which form the container of much of our faith. They are probably, in our age, the only confessional documents which we learn by heart. As such, they have taken the place of our catechisms.... That means, it seems to me, that we can talk about new theological insights as much as we like, but as long as these insights are not translated into liturgical hymns, they will never reach the people. (De Gruchy 1991:7)

## Conclusion

Liturgy in itself is not sufficient to reshape or re-evangelise<sup>36</sup> the URCSA into a justice-practising church according to Belhar. Inspired and imaginative leaders will have to discern how worship should be complemented with sermons, Bible studies, conferences, and community projects to mobilise URCSA members (and others) towards that goal. Despite the limitations of liturgy, however, it is an indispensable dimension of the church's life and the nurturing of a concrete spirituality of beauty-and-justice, as suggested in this article, could gradually transform a congregation into a community of believers who live Belhar from day to day.

These liturgical suggestions are intended to develop a concrete spirituality and beautiful worship. This means that the God who is in a special sense the God of the downtrodden is glorified as beautiful in the church's joyful praise; that

35. A valuable, but largely ignored, contribution in this regard is Steve de Gruchy (1991). He suggested four strategies of renewing Christian singing to embody a holistic and liberating spirituality, responding to the challenge of the Kairos Document: Re-writing verses to existing hymns, rewriting songs, writing songs to well-known hymn tunes, and writing completely new songs (1991:22–25).

36. See my reflections on 're-evangelising' South African churches in Kritzinger (1990:45–48).



church members become a crown of beauty in the hand of God as their liturgy inspires them to go and stand where God stands; that the Holy Spirit comes down and empowers believers to engage the hills and high places of the city, from their vantage point of solidarity with the least of Christ's sisters and brothers.

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