

**The beautiful birdsong of Tshwane:
preliminary reflections on the beginnings of the
Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA)
congregation Melodi ya Tshwane**

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Abstract

The author recounts the history and reflects on the founding of the URCSA congregation Melodi ya Tshwane in the central business district of the Tshwane metropole. The history of this unique congregation has not yet been written. The congregation grew out of joint services of the various black Dutch Reformed Churches in Pretoria in the 1980s. It was the first black Dutch Reformed congregation constituted in “white” Pretoria. Prof Nico Smith, Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) pastor in Mamelodi, and Prof JNJ Kritzinger of Unisa played a very important role in the constitution of this congregation, which today forms the centre of various religious and social ministries, as well as URCSA theological education, in central Pretoria.

Introduction

In the heart of the central business district (CBD) of old “white” Pretoria (nowadays part of the Tshwane metropole), close to the statue of President Paul Kruger on Church Square, is a church building in Bosman Street bearing a plaque that indicates that it has been declared a national monument. This was the church building of arguably the most prominent/important congregation of the white Dutch Reformed Church in Pretoria, heartland of Afrikaner hegemony for such a long time. Some very important events in Afrikaner history in the apartheid years took place within its walls, such as the burial service of Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, the giant intellectual and political leader credited (though not quite accurately) with having been the architect of apartheid. If one visits this old and historical place on a Sunday morning, though, it bears little resemblance to the former symbol of Dutch

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Reformed piety or Afrikaner hegemony. It is a veritable hive of activity, with much coming and going. The building itself, as well as the gardens and parking areas surrounding it, play host to a crowd of exuberant black worshippers, and from inside the building, one sometimes even hears the characteristic sound of gospel music from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Only a few white faces are sprinkled among the crowd of worshippers. For today these are the main premises of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa's² Melodi ya Tshwane congregation. As yet, there is no written history recording how it came into being in a context where the founding of a black congregation in the heart of white Pretoria was, at first, illegal and, later, politically unacceptable. This article is meant to provide the bare outline of this history, written in the hope that other researchers will fill in the missing details. I am writing this history as someone who was intimately involved, over a number of years, in the founding of the congregation. In this respect, I am recording original history which, for various contextual reasons, exists mainly in oral form³.

Until the early 1990s, none of the younger black Dutch Reformed churches had congregations or church buildings in those parts of the city designated "white group areas" in terms of the apartheid era Group Areas Act. Soon thereafter, a separate law was passed to regulate the worshipping of each "group" (read: race) in its own group area⁴. As this law technically outlawed the presence of black churches in designated white areas, and as the

² The Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) came into existence in 1994 following union between the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC). The DRCA was the racially separated church for black African people instituted by missionaries of the DRC, and the DRMC was the racially separated church for coloured South Africans, also instituted by missionaries of the DRC. A personal account of this unification can be found in the biography of Prof Nico Smith (Saayman 2009).

³ This is especially true of the history in the early years, from 1983 until 1990. The congregation was eventually constituted as a result of what had, initially, been simply occasions for members of the DRCA, DRMC and RCA (Reformed Church in Africa, the racially separated church for South Africans of Indian descent) to attend regular joint worship services in Pretoria. Decisions at this time were taken by an organising committee on which members of the church councils of all three churches were represented (Prof Nico Smith was chairman and the late elder Fred Magardie of Eersterust DRMC was secretary), but very few decisions taken were recorded in writing (which is a fairly common practice in many African churches and societies). This is why my material is based on personal memory (since I was a participant-observer), personal conversations and discussions with other protagonists, notably Prof JNJ Kritzinger, Rev Frans Mnisi, Evangelist "Oom" Piet Mabusa, and others. I also made use of the unpublished manuscript of Prof Nico Smith's autobiographical account of his years in Mamelodi, provisionally entitled: *The god of my father died for me in Mamelodi*, which I translated into English and which will be published later this year. I argue that all these circumstances, taken together, have enabled me to write an acceptable account of the history of Melodi ya Tshwane as an academic essay.

⁴ The specifications stipulated in the law, as well as some of the debate that accompanied its passing, can be read in Saayman 1993.

white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) by and large fully supported the government's apartheid policies (cf. Saayman 2007:69–99), all old Dutch Reformed Mission Churches (DRMCs – the DRC daughter church for coloured South Africans) and DRCA churches in white areas (such as the DRMC building in Marabastad) were moved to the new coloured and black group areas, and no new black churches were built in “white” parts of the cities, such as central Pretoria. According to the last National Party President, FW de Klerk, the turning point came after the (white) parliamentary elections of 1987, when the NP decided to accelerate the rate of political change; by 1988, he declared, more than 100 petty apartheid laws had already been abolished (De Klerk 1998:128). Some of these laws had determined the presence of black people in previously white areas and institutions, and racial integration was very slowly becoming more visible in previously white city centres. Then, of course, after his own accession to power in the NP in 1989, De Klerk made the astonishing declaration in parliament on 2 February 1990 that the liberation movements would be unbanned and political prisoners would be released. It was clear that the writing was on the wall for white hegemony in SA. These unfolding events gave greater impetus to a process of greater unity among the young black Dutch Reformed churches, which had started in Pretoria about ten years earlier and which would eventually culminate in the formation of the congregation of *Melodi ya Tshwane*.

*Beginnings: the joint worship services*⁵

In the early 1980s, the involvement of especially three ministers in separate black Dutch Reformed Churches in townships around Pretoria started bringing more and more mainly black DRC members together in joint worship services on a regular basis. Rev Klippies Kritizinger (RCA, Laudium), Rev Lucas Mabusela (DRCA, Mamelodi-North) and Dr Willem Saayman (DRMC, Eersterust) were friends and members of the “Belydende Kring” (BK – Confessional Circle), an association of ministers and members of the three black DRCs who especially strove for church unity and political liberation in SA. They started arranging regular joint services in white Pretoria, where many of the members of their churches were working and living, but where there were no churches for them. In terms of the law of the land at that time, specifically the Group Areas Act, members of different race groups were supposed to worship in churches in their own separate residential areas. Having joint services in “white” Pretoria was therefore a way of

⁵ The author was one of the three young ministers in the various black Dutch Reformed Churches who initiated the joint services. (These three were also members of the Belydende Kring (Confessional Circle)). Much of this history is therefore based on his personal recollection of the process. No written records are available, although some references may be found in the minutes of the meetings of the church councils involved.

providing them with the opportunity to worship together where they were living and working, but it was also an invitation to members of the white DRC to come and join them as members of a community who subscribed to the same confessions of faith, but were separated on spurious “racial” grounds. When Prof Nico Smith came to minister in Mamelodi in 1983, he was immediately invited to join in the effort, and he became actively and enthusiastically involved. Transport had to be provided for members living in the black townships to come and join the services in “white” Pretoria, as there was no regular public transport to and from the townships on Sundays (which was not a workday). So it was necessary to rent buses. Smith, with his wide range of foreign contacts, helped to secure funding for this purpose. It was difficult to find a venue where such services could be held, because at that time no white DRC was willing to offer their church buildings or halls for this purpose. Eventually the decision was taken to use the building of Hatfield Baptist Church in Brooklyn. The good and respectable citizens of Brooklyn (an upper middle class Afrikaner suburb) were not entirely happy to have their Sunday afternoon siesta interrupted by diesel-belching Putco buses, noisy black worshippers and frenzied singing and clapping. So there were attempts to stop the services by making use of an old Act passed by the NP in Verwoerd’s time, which prohibited black churchgoing in white residential areas (cf Saayman 1993). The Act had never been applied before in practice, and the police were reluctant to start applying it then. So although there was a supervisory police presence on some Sunday afternoons, the services were allowed to continue, as it was clear that the main concern was indeed legitimate religious activities: worshipping, celebrating communion, and so on. Soon a small number of members from white DRC congregations started to attend the services, and the ministry expanded organically. Eventually there were joint meetings for the various organised groups in the black congregations, such as the church councils, the women’s movements and the youth groups. There were even unofficial joint presbytery meetings, and a joyous sense of unity was palpable among the racially/ethnically separated black Dutch Reformed members in Pretoria. It seemed to some of those concerned as if a model of growth towards organic unity was developing there. What also became clear very soon was that there was indeed a need to constitute an “open” (racially integrated) congregation in “white” Pretoria as a first step. The question was: how to go about this?

As the DRC accepted the basic premises of the apartheid policy (indeed, members of the DRC often claimed that the church and not the NP was the original formulator of apartheid – Saayman 2007:69–72), there were – as mentioned previously – no congregations of black Dutch Reformed churches in “white” Pretoria. The legislation controlling separate residential areas required that racial and even ethnic groups live in separate areas, have their own schools, colleges, hospitals and cemeteries (!) in separate areas,

and, therefore, also their own churches in their own areas. Many black women who worked as domestic workers in white residences were allowed, by special legal permission, to live in back rooms (so-called *bediendekamers* or servants' quarters) on their employers' property. Many of them were also members of the DRCA. If they wanted to attend a worship service on a Sunday morning, they were supposed to travel (with great difficulty, as there was basically no public transport available on a Sunday) to the distant black townships to join "their own kind" in worshipping God there "in their own church". And the white DRC taught their members that it was their Christian duty to allow their domestic workers to attend church on Sunday. But there was a problem: the same white DRC members also kept to the old Afrikaner custom of having a hearty family meal at lunchtime on Sundays. So the domestic worker's assistance was urgently required on Sunday mornings to prepare for the hearty family meal while the white family worshipped in peace. The domestic worker also had to clean up all the dirty dishes and other utensils afterwards. So she would usually only be free at around 15:00 on a Sunday – by which time all Sunday morning worship services in the townships would long be over. As a result, probably 99% of black female domestic workers in white Pretoria never had a chance to attend a worship service on a Sunday, despite generally being very committed Christians⁶. So the white DRC came up with a compromise: they would contribute financially to the DRCA congregations in the townships to appoint evangelists to minister to the domestic workers. The idea was that these evangelists would conduct prayer services for the domestic workers on Sunday afternoons in "white" Pretoria, sometimes in garages attached to the homes of white members, but mostly in parks and other public areas. Obviously this was a totally inadequate and unsatisfactory solution – even an insult to the faith commitment of the domestic workers. This was one reason why the decision was taken to arrange the joint services in "white" Pretoria and why they drew such an enthusiastic response. And as the services grew and improved, it became clear to the ministers arranging them that something more was necessary if they were serious about ministering to the real needs of black Dutch Reformed members living in "white" Pretoria.

Constituting the new congregation

The next development was precipitated by an event that took place in the related (Indian) Reformed Church in Africa. Three white DRC missionaries who had, by the mid-80s, become congregational ministers in the RCA felt

⁶ In the 1990s, a Unisa student, Dr Allan Anderson, conducted a very thorough survey, which established that more than 90% of black residents in urban Pretoria were participant Christians (Anderson 1992).

conscience-bound to forego their salary subsidy from the white DRC and became full members of the RCA as “tent-making ministers” (a term used for ministers who raise their own financial support, independent of the church where they are ministering). The DRC claimed that there was no such office in the organisation and subsequently withdrew their ministerial ordination (in other words, their licence to be ministers, even in the RCA). One of the three was Rev Klippies Kritizinger, who was one of the founding fathers of the Pretoria joint services. He chose to leave his ministry in the RCA, Laudium rather than submit to DRC discipline on a matter of principle. A number of his congregants left with him and they formed the “Reformed Confessing Community” in Pretoria, inviting white, black, coloured, Indian and – any others – to join them. This paved the way for the joint services concept. By that time, the Group Areas Act was no longer strictly applied and many other apartheid measures were on their way out. Soon thereafter, in February 1990, President De Klerk would unban the ANC, PAC and other liberation movements. So circumstances favoured the possibility of constituting an “open” DRCA congregation in “white” Pretoria under the auspices of Prof Nico Smith’s congregation in Mamelodi. The core of this congregation would be formed by the “Confessing Community” and the black domestic workers who were, by then, enthusiastic participants in all the joint ministries. Prof Smith dreamed big and looked much further into the future: soon, he foresaw, black students would be studying in significant numbers at the formerly segregated Pretoria University and many black professionals would be working and living in the city, looking for an ecclesiastical “home” in the city. So an “open” congregation in the centre of “white” Pretoria made sense, not only in terms of the present, but also in terms of the future.

Prof Smith took the proposal to the white DRC congregations that financially supported the black DRCA congregations in the townships with their ministry in “white” Pretoria⁷. The white ministers asked to meet with the members of the prospective new congregation. The white ministers started the discussion by pointing out that their congregations were financially stretched to the limit and that they would not be able to provide any additional support to the proposed new congregation (implying that the proposal would not get off the ground – the general perception being that no black Dutch Reformed congregation could be financially self-sufficient). They also pointed out that it would be very expensive to obtain a church building for the congregation as property prices in the Pretoria CBD were very high. And then a manse or manses would still be needed. They painted a very grim picture of all the practical difficulties the constitution of a new

⁷ The material on which the following paragraphs are based can be found in an unpublished manuscript of Prof Smith about his years in Mamelodi. He will most probably have it published in 2010.

congregation would bring – most of which were, admittedly, realistic; the white ministers were not simply using scare tactics.

At this stage Smith asked the white ministers to permit the DRCA members to give their side of the story. Smith deliberately refrained from participating in the discussion, as the white ministers suspected that the whole idea of constituting a new congregation was something that Smith was forcing on the black members. One of the prospective black members, a middle-aged domestic worker, started speaking. She started by pointing out that she had never realised that forming a new congregation entailed such enormous problems; she had thought that if a number of Christians gathered together regularly and felt the need to form a congregation, they could simply go ahead and other Christians would encourage and help them. It was, after all, a sign of the expansion of the church, which should bring happiness to other Christians. But she remarked that she had heard only about the problems and difficulties from the white ministers. When the Israelites were called out of Egypt, they did not go and sit first to discuss all the problems that lay ahead of them. Indeed, if they had done so, they would most probably still be in Egypt today. So she wanted to tell the learned white *dominees* (ministers) that the workers who wanted to start this congregation would go ahead, despite the dark picture the ministers had painted. Smith noted that her words sounded like a voice from heaven to him: the true gospel from the mouth of a poor and simple believer. This was also the end of the discussion: the white ministers had nothing more to say.

Smith then took the proposal to his church council, which eventually endorsed it after some initial hesitation, and sent a request to the DRCA presbytery of Tshwane to constitute a new congregation in the central city. The very dignified and respectable black male elders who “served” on the presbytery (or rather, “ruled” over it) had some serious objections to this new congregation. Whatever the organisers of the joint services dreamt about the future, they said, it was clear that for the time being this congregation would consist mostly of female domestic workers. And after all, they continued, it was well known that a group of women could not run the intricate affairs of a congregation of the DRCA on their own. Nevertheless, since there were a few female delegates sprinkled among the dignified gentlemen elders on this occasion (by then, women had been allowed to be appointed as elders for some years), the female delegates proceeded to clear their throats and ask a few very pointed questions: Who is it that cleans out church buildings and prepares them for weekend services regularly? Who are responsible for by far the greatest proportion of the funds collected annually? To which gender do most worshippers belong, week in and week out? Who form the groups that regularly pray for the sick? By that stage the dignified gentlemen elders were looking a bit flustered and embarrassed, so they raised no further objections and the proposal was carried unanimously.

Now practicalities could be addressed, and one of the first concerns was a name for the new congregation. The future congregants decided to name the congregation *Melodi ya Tshwane*, and there is an interesting bit of history attached to this name. Everybody concerned realised that the founding of this congregation in the heart of Afrikanerdom marked a special occasion. So nobody wanted to call it by a prosaic, platitudinous name like DRCA Pretoria Central. Much discussion went into the debate about the name. The “Tshwane” part is self-evident: long before the controversy about name changes started after 1994, Pretoria was known in the black community as Tshwane. But what should be added to make it a really distinctive name? Then the well-loved Oom⁸ (Uncle) Piet Mabusa, evangelist in the new congregation and a wonderful repository of oral history about the DRCA ministry in Pretoria, told a story: His father was one of the manual labourers employed to build the Union Buildings (seat of the national executive government) in Pretoria at the beginning of the twentieth century. In those years there were no proper black townships yet, and obviously white Pretoria (such as it was at the time) did not provide accommodation for the black manual labourers. So they camped next to the Apies River, which flows right through central Pretoria. Here they were regaled with beautiful birdsong early in the mornings and again when they returned exhausted to their campsite at night. Oom Piet remembered that the workers still talked about the relaxing and restful effect of the birdsong many years later. So it was decided to call the congregation *Melodi ya Tshwane* in recognition of those early years and as a symbolic way of expressing the hope that the congregation would become a place of rest and recuperation. And so the congregation that celebrates Tshwane’s birdsong came into being.

As the constitution of this new DRCA congregation had been approved, the necessary preliminary steps were taken by the presbytery and the Mamelodi congregation, and the congregation was founded in 1992. The first two ministers called to the congregation were Prof Nico Smith and his colleague in Mamelodi, Rev Frans Mnisi, while some of their evangelist colleagues (Piet Mabusa and Louis Thobela) also accompanied them. In 1993 Klippiess Kritzinger had his status as minister reinstated by the DRCA. The congregation was still without any permanent address, though, as it was financially unable to buy or build a church centre in central Pretoria. The search to find a permanent home is a story about relationships between black and white Dutch Reformed churches on its own, and must be told separately. So I will move straight to the successful conclusion: After lengthy discussions, facilitated by younger white ministers of congregations in central

⁸ “Oom” is the Afrikaans word for “uncle”, and is the colloquial form of address of a respected older person. As Evangelist Mabusa was addressed thus by all and sundry, I use the term here as well.

Pretoria, the old “mother congregation” of the DRC in Pretoria, in Bosman Street, offered a half share in their church centre and a share in the maintenance for R500 000. There was, of course, no way that the new congregation could afford that amount, so Nico Smith’s overseas contacts had to help out again. The Lutheran Church in Germany contributed R250 000 and some Presbyterian churches in the USA a further R150 000. The DRC church council of Bosman Street congregation agreed to help further by lowering their asking price to R400 000. But when the records of the transaction were sent to the deeds office, an unexpected complication arose. Some officious official in that office came up with the peculiar objection that, according to ancient Greek tradition, religious buildings with national significance may not be bought and sold as they are dedicated to religious usage and therefore remain the property of the people. So, according to this official, this church had to remain “white” property, as the building had been declared a national monument. The leaders of the new congregation took counsel and informed the official that his knowledge of ancient Greek tradition was impressive, but as SA used Roman-Dutch law, not Greek law, it was completely meaningless. So there was no legal objection to the transaction going through. Until today, some of those involved in founding the congregation wonder whether this official was a loyal Afrikaner who could not bear the thought that the holiest of holy Afrikaner shrines would fall into the hands of “black barbarians”. For this was indeed a holy place in Afrikaner tradition: some state presidents were buried from there and other state presidents were inaugurated there. And to think that it would become the property of blacks! Human history is filled with such delightful divine ironies.

In any case, what had started in 1983 as a few irregular joint worship services between three black Dutch Reformed congregations had grown into a wonderful celebration of interracial Christian unity in the heart of Pretoria. At present, the Bosman Street premises accommodate the administrative offices of the Northern Theological Seminary of the URCSA, accommodation for young working people, medical consulting rooms, and other social services. It has grown into a possible ministerial model for other URCSA congregations in the CBDs of previously “white” cities. Obviously, this is not the end of the story. It is, though, the point at which this specific story ends, with the urgent call for further research in recording and analysing the life and times of the URCSA congregation *Melodi ya Tshwane*.

A few random conclusions

As this account of the origins of *Melodi ya Tshwane* is preliminary and incomplete (many other protagonists must add their recollections to the story, and documents such as the minutes of church council meetings must be

studied), I do not claim to be able to draw definitive conclusions about this historical episode. I merely wish to take this opportunity to indicate a few possible items for a proper research agenda:

- 1 The constitution of this new congregation does not fit the mould of the general pattern of “church growth” at all. The usual understanding of constituting or “growing a new congregation” is that it starts out as an evangelistic exercise aimed very consciously at conversion of unchurched people. As the evangelistic outreach succeeds, enough new members are won in order to constitute a new congregation. The story recounted above makes it clear that this is *not* how Melodi ya Tshwane came into being. This new congregation was constituted in response to a specific desire for greater unity among Christ’s disciples in a specific place. It was also constituted in response to the need of neglected black Christians for a proper ecclesiastical home of their own, “a place to feel at home”. I am of the opinion that this is ultimately as strong and legitimate an evangelistic concern as any other. The congregation of Melodi ya Tshwane is a very clear example of what David Bosch describes as “church with others”: a church “ambiguous in the extreme”, yet “missionary by its very nature”, and also a sign, sacrament and instrument of “a most sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race [in South Africa]” (Bosch 1991:368–389).
- 2 Very often doctrinal differences are indicated as the major cause of disunity in the Christian community, especially in the study of church history in the First World. The desire of Christians from various “race groups” in SA to celebrate their faith and unity as disciples of Christ, despite the obstacles laid in their way by a racist political economy, indicates a positive response to Jesus’s urgent wish, articulated in his last high-priestly prayer for his future disciples (John 17:20–23). If the adjective that the ruling party in SA is so fond of attaching to any qualitative description of the republic (“non-racist”) is to have any meaning at all, it is especially the responsibility of South African Christians to provide the authentic content for this concept.
- 3 I was a participant and protagonist in organising the joint services that eventually led to the constitution of the congregation of Melodi ya Tshwane, and I still worship both there and in the URCSA congregation in Eersterust. In this capacity, I am able to compare the situation then and now, and the comparison is disturbing in some respects. The strong, somewhat existential, desire for church unity back then has definitely grown weaker. Congregations that used to have first-hand knowledge of the weal and woe of congregations from other townships and other “group areas” (in other words, other races) no longer

have an intimate knowledge of one another's circumstances today. And they certainly create far fewer opportunities to worship and celebrate together.

As I mentioned earlier, these are really nothing more than preliminary reflections. But I do hope that they will serve as inspiration for students and other researchers to dig deeper and draw more definite conclusions. What is very clear and very certain, however, is that the story of Melodi ya Tshwane is one of the essential building blocks of the story of URCSA, and indeed the whole DRC "family" of churches, in the "new" South Africa.

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