

**On a bumpy road:  
historical survey of (unity) talks between the  
Dutch Reformed Church in Africa and the  
Dutch Reformed Church before 1994**

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*Abstract*

The events prior to and after church unity between the former Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in 1994 are perplexing because the white Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk) was influenced by apartheid ideology in its response to church unity within the DRC family.<sup>1</sup> Unsuccessful unity talks were previously held with the white Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk) and the Reformed Church of Africa (RCA), but minutes of these talks reveal that a biblical concept of church unity was problematic, especially to the NG Kerk, which created a language that made the issue of Christian unity elusive. This article gives a brief survey of the developments that shaped the unity process with the DRMC and the DRCA from 1986 until 1994, when the two churches eventually united. The role played by the white DRC and its motive to frustrate the unity process is analysed. The change of the leadership of the DRCA in 1987, the DRCA General Synod in Umtata and the momentum this change gave to the process of church unity between the DRMC and the DRCA are investigated. The internal struggles within the DRCA's Northern Transvaal Synod<sup>2</sup> are also discussed. The gender inclusivity in the ministry of the church, property ownership and the inclusion of both in the new Church Order are investigated. After seventeen years of democracy in South Africa, church unity among the Dutch Reformed family of churches (the RCA, NG Kerk and URCSA) has not yet been realised. This article sketches the DRCA's road to unity with the DRMC in 1994 without the NG Kerk and RCA, reading church history backwards to shed light on why it was so difficult for the NG Kerk and RCA to unite with the URCSA.

## Introduction

The events leading up to church unity between the former Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA)<sup>3</sup> and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in 1994 are perplexing. Many unity talks were held before 1994 between the (white) Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk)<sup>4</sup> and the Reformed Church of Africa (RCA) (Indian Church), but without success. Minutes from these unity talks reveal that adapting to a biblical concept of church unity (presbyterial and organic unity) was indeed a mammoth task, especially to the NG Kerk (NGKA Acta 1991:16). To sidestep the issue, the NG Kerk developed a specially created language that made the issue of Christian unity elusive. Since 1975, when the DRCA discussed the church unity between the two churches, there has not been any progress. The DRC has continued with these tactics to this day. At unity talks in 2007, they misrepresented the joint decisions with URCSA, DRCA and RCA at Achterberg in Krugersdorp (URCSA Acta 2008:197–2000).

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<sup>1</sup> The DRC family consists of four churches that came into existence because of the Dutch Reformed Church mission in South Africa. These churches include the white Dutch Reformed Church, the black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, and the Reformed Church in Africa.

<sup>2</sup> The DRCA was established in 1963 with six regional synods in the Cape, Northern Transvaal, Southern Transvaal, Natal, Free State and Phororo.

<sup>3</sup> The Dutch Reformed Mission Church in Africa was established by the Dutch Reformed Church as its mission church in different provinces: Dutch Reformed Mission Church in Orange Free State (1910), Dutch Reformed Church in Transvaal (1932), Dutch Reformed Mission Church of Natal (1952) and Dutch Reformed Bantu Church (1950). These various black churches came together within the borders of South Africa and gained autonomy in 1963. In 1994, this church united with the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (founded in 1881) to form the Uniting Reformed Church. A small section of this church has remained outside the union and it still calls itself the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. Afrikaans abbreviation for DRCA is NGKA.

<sup>4</sup> The official English abbreviation is DRC, but to prevent confusion with the Democratic Republic of Congo and to reduce the number of confusing abbreviations in the text, the term NG Kerk is preferred in this article.

After seventeen years of democracy in South Africa, complete church unity among the Dutch Reformed family of churches – the RCA, the NG Kerk and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) – has still not materialised. It is possible to read church history backwards to get some sense of why it was so difficult for the NG Kerk and the RCA to unite with the URCSA. This article also sketches the road taken by the DRCA until it eventually united with the DRMC in 1994 without the NG Kerk and the RCA.

### Church unity in the DRCA

The DRCA took the decision to unite with other churches in the Dutch Reformed Church family in 1975 at its Third General Synod in Worcester (NGKA Akta 1978:10). The decision was reiterated at the DRCA's Fifth General Synod held at Barkley-West in June 1983 (NGKA Akta 1983:38), when a report from the DRMC on reconciliation and apartheid was discussed. In the report, the apartheid policy was interpreted as a policy that separated and kept people apart based on language, race, religion and colour (NGKA Akta 1983:38). The possibility that people could come close to each other for God's purposes was in fact nullified by the apartheid policy, which was still in full force at the time and was underpinned by government legislation and police enforcement. In such a situation, there was no possibility of genuine Christian reconciliation, according to the meeting (NGKA Akta 1983:39). The report profoundly influenced the thinking of the DRCA Synod about the NG Kerk's ambiguous and ambivalent language of apartheid and reconciliation. The NG Kerk was seen as not ready for authentic church unity. At the same synod, the DRMC's synod decision on the *Status Confessionis*<sup>5</sup> of 1982 and its 1978 decision about apartheid and church unity were discussed, and the DRMC's *Status Confessionis* (drafted in 1982) was adopted. These two documents played a crucial role in shaping unity talks and the path towards unity between the DRCA and the DRMC.

The DRCA Regional Synod first discussed the Belhar Confession, the fourth confession adopted by the DRMC synod, in 1986. A vote was taken: 182 voted for, and 11 voted against, with one abstaining. During the meeting, some individual black ministers received telephone threats from the NG Kerk, warning them that they would lose their subsidies if they voted for the adoption of the Belhar Confession. Indeed, some of these threats were carried out later, when the NG Kerk placed many ministers' stipend on a sliding salary scale (*glyskaal*). The NG Kerk was strongly opposed to the DRCA acceptance of the Belhar Confession and would do everything in its power to frustrate the process. However, the theological insights and influences from the DRMC did not take root in the DRCA without resistance. The moderator (chairperson) of the synod, Rev. Lebone, who later led a splinter group that is still resisting the URCSA unity, objected from the chair. His stance was also evident in his moderator's report to the DRCA general synod held in Umtata in 1987 (NGKA Akta 1987:38). In that document, he reported on the March 1985 meeting between the NG Kerk and the DRCA, convened by NG Kerk, where church unity was discussed. In their response to the NG Kerk's position that it believed that the Church of Jesus Christ is one, without different visible forms (implying it is invisible), Rev. Lebone's leadership said that they too were still considering the matter of church unity, which implied that they concurred with the NG Kerk stance on the church's invisible unity. Thus, the DRCA missed an opportunity to tell the NG Kerk what the DRCA's position regarding church unity was, by not taking a stand on the matter. Instead, the DRCA leadership played into the hands of the NG Kerk, frustrating visible and structural unity, by pleading that the leaders too had not taken any decision on such unity.

The agenda for the March 1985 meeting between the executives of the NG Kerk and the DRCA is revealing. The issues heading the agenda were the immigration of labourers (people moving from the Bantustans to white cities), NG Kerk subsidies to the DRCA ministers, and government social grants to black people. This meeting took place at the height of the apartheid struggle, when many black people were losing their lives, but nothing was said about that. The NG Kerk told the Executive Committee of the DRCA (Rev Lebone, Rev Mataboge, Dr Pitekeo and Dr Basson) that the Church's role in the country was joint prayer for all the people, but no involvement in politics (NGKA Akta 1987:38). The meeting concluded that if things from inside the Church would come right, it would follow that things from outside its purview would also come right. What mattered most, the meeting concluded, was a healthy relationship with Christ, and this relationship could be lived under the illuminating light of God. A healthy relationship with Christ implied living in harmony with the NG Kerk and apartheid laws. This implied that everything was fine and going well under apartheid rule.

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<sup>5</sup> Literally, *status confessionis* means a situation of confessing, a situation in which the confession of Jesus Christ is at stake. As it was stated in the Ottawa resolution of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in the case of white Reformed Afrikaner Churches in South Africa itself, declaring that a situation constitutes a status confessionis means "that we regard this as an issue on which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardizing the integrity of our common confession".

From the discussion between NG Kerk and DRCA Executive Committees at the meeting of March 1985, it was clear that the NG Kerk was not only opposed to visible church unity but also contemptuous of the process. It regarded itself as the author of the process to unity and that there would be no unity without its blessing (NGKA Akta 1991:16). Unfortunately, at that stage, the leadership of the DRCA was weak and relied heavily on the NG Kerk, both ideologically and materially. Clearly, the leadership in the DRCA had to change, otherwise the unification process within and among the DRC Family would remain stagnant. Something radical had to be done in order to take the process forward. Replacing the leadership of the general synod was imperative for church unity to take place.<sup>6</sup>

The new leadership elected at the Umtata synod in 1987 (with Dr S Buti as moderator, Rev. M Maphoto as assessor, Dr S Petikeo as scribe and Dr N Smith as actuary) swayed the direction of the DRCA from the DRC agenda. They immediately got in touch with the leadership of the DRCM and worked closely with them for the process of unity between the two churches. They challenged the DRC on its model of unity (federalism) and clearly paved the way for the acceptance of the Belhar Confession (NGKA Akta 1991:19–21). The two churches, DRCM and DRCA, could freely consult each other on the matters of confession and unity without impediment or fear of the DRC.

Bilateral talks between the NG Kerk and the DRCA leadership structures made it apparent that church unity was not possible in the near future. The church unity process, whose form and structure were not defined, had to start from scratch. This was merely a delaying tactic on the side of the NG Kerk. A special regional synod of the DRCA Northern Transvaal (NTvl) was convened from 22 to 27 April 1991 to discuss unity with the DRCM. Informal talks between the DRCA and DRCM had already taken place and common ground between the two churches had been found. In April 1991, the DRCA Regional Synod of the Northern Transvaal expressed its unequivocal support for church unity with the DRCM (NGKA Akta 1991:28).

On 14 April 1994, the DRCM and the DRCA unified in order to constitute the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). At the founding synod, the URCSA affirmed the Belhar Confession as one of its four confessions (Reformed Standards of Unity, namely, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Belgium Confession (1561, revised 1619), and the Canons of Dort (1618-1619). It is therefore one of the “standards of unity” of the URCSA (*Agenda en Handelinge VGKSA* 1997:26, 504).

### **Proposed new Church Order for the uniting church**

The next item on the agenda was a draft Church Order for the envisaged new church. The first eight articles of the proposed Church Order were accepted without much discussion, but article 9, concerning the calling and retirement of ministers, and the representation of congregations at the presbytery level and Regional Synod (NGKA Akta 1991:28), met with some resistance. Some delegates raised their objections because article 9 concerns the livelihood of the ministers. The low salary with virtually no sustainable pension at retirement was not discussed in the article. Congregations established from the NG Kerk missionary work were never prepared to look after their ministers.

One of the questions that were raised was whether presbyteries should not rather be empowered to come up with their own stipulations than allowing the Regional Synod to impose its will on them. After a long discussion, a compromise was reached: it was decided that the Regional Synod would provide presbyteries with stipulations to ensure unity and conformity, but that presbyteries were free to develop their own stipulations suitable for their local needs. Emphasis was placed on own solutions, rather than on bureaucracy. These concessions compromised the classical reformed principles of church polity of elder-centred rule.

Representativity at presbyteries and in the Regional Synod was no longer to be based on the number of ministers, or posts, in a congregation, but on the involvement of the laity, women and the youth (NGKA NTvl Akta 1995:40). All church structures were to be represented at those meetings. These structures became the cornerstone on which the Church Order was built. The stipulations of the Church Order were not regarded as legalistic rules but as church-governing regulations. Finally, the Regional Synod decided on a four-tier church structure that consisted of the congregation, presbytery, Regional Synod and General Synod (NGKA NTvl Akta 1995:41).

The next items discussed were the effectiveness and efficiency of the General Synod in the new church. It was decided that the General Synod as policy-maker should not choke the development of the church by its absolute structures. The guiding principle was that the Regional Synod be watchdogs against the inability to deliver service in their regions. New ways and structures were to be sought to

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<sup>6</sup> At this stage, the leadership of the DRCA consisted of people who were easily manipulated by the NG Kerk and had a white clerk (the actuary, Dr Basson) who dictated terms for the leadership. On their own, black leadership within the DRCA would not dare differ with the NG Kerk policy at that stage.

make the church effective and these were to be embedded in the curriculum of the theological training in the North and the South (URCSA NTvl Akta 1995:40).

Names for the new church were suggested, and the name Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) was mostly favoured. Finally, the Synod instructed all the congregations and presbyteries resorting under it to sign a concert form for unity. A circular in newsletters and in personal letters was issued to congregations (URCSA NTvl Akta 1995:40). An overwhelming number of congregations signed the concert form and returned it to the church office. At the congregational and presbyterial levels, the movement toward church unity enjoyed support from a substantial majority.

### **Church property**

A worrying factor that faced the regional synod as it was preparing itself for church unity was church property (URCSA NTvl Akta 1995:161). Nearly all church buildings and all immovable property were registered in the name of the NG Kerk. The question arose whether the NG Kerk would use this factor to frustrate church unity. This concern later proved to be genuine, as, to this day, the DRCA and URCSA are still involved in legal battles in connection with church property. The NG Kerk pleads innocent in the court battles between the DRCA and URCSA (after the union of DRCA and DRCA), although the contested properties are in its name. Many URCSA members see the silence on the part of the NG Kerk as disapproval of the unity that the DRCA and DRCA achieved without its involvement and approval.

The Regional Synod that gathered from 22 to 27 April 1991 instructed its congregations to negotiate with the NG Kerk to transfer the ownership of church property to them (URCSA NTvl Akta 1995:160). The Church Office Administration was tasked to assist the process wherever possible. A special form called **H** was designed to guide congregations. The majority of these congregations did not take heed and registered properties in their names despite the government Land Tenure Act 32 of 1966 that enables properties to be properly registered.

Church farms and properties at Kranspoort, Bethesda, Emmerentia Geldenhuys and church schools were identified as church properties where negotiations should be entered into with the NG Kerk. However, the negotiations yielded nothing until the Land Claims Commission took over the matter (*African Eye*, 12 December 1999:2). The farms at Kranspoort and Bethesda have since been handed over to the black people who were residing on them before the NG Kerk missionary take-over in the mid-1880s. These developments further worsened the fragile relationships between the two churches. The claims of church land by members of URCSA are seen as an extension of government appropriations of white land in the country.

### **Calling of ministers**

Finally, the Regional Synod considered the calling system of the ministers. As the Synod was moving towards unity, it wished to contribute to a certain extent to the calling system and move away from the former DRCA Church practices. The Synod acknowledged that the calling system at the time put a strong emphasis on the working and guidance of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of church council members (URCSA NTvl Akta 1995:162). The Synod felt that the Holy Spirit was working in various ways and that the Holy Spirit could also use the system of advertising vacant posts where people applied and were interviewed. The Synod eventually took a decision to use both methods, and this practice is reflected in the present Church Order for the Regional Synod of the Northern Transvaal (URCSA NTvl Akta 1995:160). Included in this practice is the concept of the tent-making ministry. Part-time ministry by church workers is accepted and practised in terms of the current Church Order.

### **General Synod of July 1991: Pretoria**

As already mentioned, church unity in the DRCA depended on the quality of church leadership available. A true shepherd (John 10) leads his sheep, and the sheep follow. The leadership of the General Synod of DRCA changed at the Synod of Umtata in June 1987. After the Umtata Synod, the church unity talks between the DRCA and the NG Kerk reached a dead end, but the talks between the DRCA and DRCA bore fruit.

The new chairperson of the DRCA General Synod was Rev. SPE Buti. Under his leadership, the unity talks were purposive and unambiguous. On 3 July 1990, the DRCA and NG Kerk executives met in Pretoria to discuss church unity, the Dutch Reformed Church family, and church relationships. The NG Kerk's (NGKA Akta 1991:17) stance on church unity was tabled as follows:

- Church unity is important.
- It should be more visible.
- At that stage, it was not clear what it should look like.
- Instead of top to bottom, it should grow from the bottom up.
- Church unity is not fixed, but it takes place where believers meet and live.
- Structures for cooperation could develop.
- It is an open model that could differ in terms of local needs and it is dependent on historical and other circumstances.
- The Holy Spirit should work in the hearts of people to see the need for church unity.
- It is thus a local, organic, dynamic model, which evolves and grows.
- Church councils, presbyteries and synods could form joint commissions.
- The direction of such an approach would crystallise as time went on.

Finally, the NG Kerk pronounced (ironically) its blessings on unity developments between the DRCA and the DRMC. It was clear that the NG Kerk was certain that unity between DRCA and DRMC would not materialise.<sup>7</sup>

The DRCA's (NGKA Akta 1991:16) stance on church unity was as follows:

- The Federal Council of the Dutch Reformed Churches could not serve as a forum for church unity. It had avoided church unity and that was the reason the DRCA withdrew from it.
- Structural church unity should be accepted as an accomplished fact. The DRCA and the DRMC had no problem with that. Since 1975, the DRCA has been convinced that structural church unity should be the basis on which the new church would be formed.
- The NG Kerk should admit that there was only one Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and should repudiate its decision of 1857.
- The NG Kerk should not try to initiate or hinder the unity process.
- Improper and condescending attitudes in NG Kerk congregations, which suggest that the NG Kerk financially subsidised the DRCA congregations, should be corrected.

The DRCA General Synod of July 1991 endorsed this stance and united with the DRMC church in April 1994. Church unity between the DRCA and DRMC took place on 17 April 1994, nine days before the first democratic elections in South Africa. The first URCSA Regional Synod of the Northern Transvaal was held in Pretoria from 3 to 8 April 1995. The Synod was characterised by a spirit of joy and optimism. The meeting ended with Holy Communion at a local congregation.

At this synod, the foundation was laid for various strategies to take the Synod forward, as is evident in the Commissions' reports. We single out two of the 17 reports to demonstrate the enthusiastic spirit in the Synod, those of the Church Office and Judicial Commission (NGKA Akta 1991:18). The work of these two commissions presents a contrast of strength and weakness, which clearly depicts the situation of the Regional Synod of the Northern Transvaal.

## **Unity and subsequent events**

### *Church Office Commission*

The ownership of church buildings, farms and buildings in cities occupied the Regional Synod of the Northern Transvaal from the late 1980s into the 1990s. At the last Regional Synod – before church unification in 1991 – congregations were specifically urged to have all properties falling under them registered in their names (NGKA Akta 1991:18). Congregations were issued with forms and were urged to approach the Synod where they faced an *impasse* with the NG Kerk.

All church properties built by the NG Kerk for the NGKA were registered in the name of the NG Kerk. After the DRCA took the decision to unite with the DRMC in order to form the URCSA, the

<sup>7</sup> The DRC was sure that the church unity between DRMC and DRCA would not succeed, partly because both churches depended heavily on DRC subsidy and they had many white missionaries in their midst and partly because the DRCA would not lawfully change article 36.1 in order to accept the Belhar Confession which stipulated that all churches of the DRC family should not only be consulted but also give permission for the amendment of the article. A two-third majority vote of the DRCA General Synod and of six Regional Synods should be obtained. Any decision to amend article 36.1 would be ultra vires in the eyes of secular courts.

DRCA leadership approached the NG Kerk to transfer the buildings to the URCSA congregations. The NG Kerk agreed with this arrangement, but some incidents that occurred after the unification between the DRCA and DRMC showed that the NG Kerk was not fully committed to its undertaking. Where problems arose regarding church buildings between the URCSA and DRCA congregations, the NG Kerk was always on the side of the DRCA. Examples are to be found in the then Orange Free State and Northern Cape. In the then Northern Transvaal, isolated incidents happened, for example, in Sabie (now in Mpumalanga) and Saulspoor (now in the North West Province).

Congregations falling under the Northern Transvaal Synod of the URCSA, were continuously exhorted to acquire title deeds for their church buildings. Safekeeping of the ownership documents was regarded extremely important. Copies of ownership documents were to be kept at congregations, while original copies were to be sent to church offices for safekeeping. Places that were particularly affected by these decisions were NG Kerk mission hospitals, schools and farms such as Emmerentia Geldenhuys, Bethesda and Kranspoort.

The process of registering church buildings in the names of congregations, and transferring farms to the URCSA, as well as the properties on mission hospitals and schools, did not run smoothly. A few congregations managed to get their church buildings registered in their names, but the rest failed, mainly because of a lack of knowledge of what needed to be done or because they lacked funds to purchase the properties. The Land Claims Commission settled the matter of the two farms Bethesda and Kranspoort (*African Eye News Service* 1999:2). The two farms were handed over to the descendants of the people who lived on them prior to missionary occupation. Emmerentia Geldenhuys is still the property of the NG Kerk. Properties on the former mission stations either have been taken over by the local municipalities or have been handed over to the local congregations.

The church farm schools, which fell under the jurisdiction of the Regional Synod of the then Northern Transvaal, were Karneelzijn Kraal Farm and Draaikraal Farm. Two special schools were Yingsani School at Letaba near Tzaneen and Bosele Handcraft School, near Groblersdal. The Training Centre at the Church Office in Mamelodi was also flourishing. From 1992 to 1998 (six years), 2 293 students graduated in different work-related fields from Mamelodi Service Centre (URCSA NTv1 1999:145). Of these fields, computer literacy was the most effective, because ninety per cent of the graduates found jobs in the open market.

The other church projects that still contribute meaningfully towards the trust fund held at the church office include the Willie Theron Project in Pretoria City, the Christian Women Ministry and the SIBSMARAIS Cooking Centre. From these projects, retired ministers and evangelists were given R12 000 to augment their meagre annuities at their retirement.

The Dibukeng Project (a church bookshop) is still functioning very well in providing all literature needs of the church, in addition to the excellent service of providing essential Christian literature. Dibukeng is also making profit for the church. In 1998, an amount of R1.8 million rand passed through its books (URCSA NTv1 Akta 2003:25). In 1997 Dibukeng celebrated its 50th anniversary.

The church farm Seboeng, situated next to Ga-Rankuwa, is one of the stories of loss with which the Church has had to contend. The farm can no longer be used fruitfully, because of squatters who invaded it. The buildings on the farm became dilapidated. Because of squalid conditions around it and the soil on which it was situated, it did not have a good market value. Chances of finding a lawyer to repossess the property are rather slim.

Interestingly, the issue of the acquisition of property rights by the congregations has disappeared from the reports of the Church Office Commission. Few congregations have acquired their title deeds. This means that the ownership of properties on which they are staying is still held by the NG Kerk. It is very strange that a crucial matter such as property rights could simply be neglected.

### **Congregations and their financial capability**

The Northern Transvaal Regional Synod inherited congregations from the DRCA, which were demotivated, paralysed by the apartheid legacy and disoriented by a recipient mentality. Out of one hundred and eighteen congregations, forty-seven owed synodal levies for ten years or more. The rest owed three to nine years' levies. Only sixty-one were duly paying their levies (URCSA NTv1 Akta 1999:63). Some of the congregations were not meeting their synodal obligations, not because they could not, but because they saw no reason to do so. The Synod expenditure was growing, while the income was declining, and the deficit was doubling every second year.

Drastic decisions were taken about those congregations whose levies were in arrears. Their members were required to attend Synod meetings at their own cost, pay for their own travelling costs, provide their meals, and buy the agenda for meetings. These harsh measures did not yield positive

results, because those who were affected saw the action as hostile and antagonistic instead of as loving and encouraging.

The situation of the congregations that were not paying their levies to Synod remained unchanged until 1999. Strategic intervention was needed to deal with the situation and influence change positively. However, between 1995 and 1998, Synod did realise a steady increase of levies, especially from contributing congregations. In 1995, it stood at R127 880. In 2002, the levies from the congregations had doubled to R282 778, and a year later, in 2003, the figure was R300 882. Although synodal levies have increased phenomenally over the past ten years, the deficit could not be kept low. In 2002, the deficit stood at R151 727 and in 2003, it was R189 872, and the overall overdraft was R500 405 (URCSA NTvl 2003:48).

Intervention strategies were introduced at the Synodal Commission that gathered from 26 to 28 August 1996 to attempt to reverse the culture of nonpayment in the congregations. This culture of nonpayment was not unique to the URCSA or other churches; government, especially municipalities, were also battling with citizens who did not want to pay for services they received during the same period. The church learnt from the government's methods of dealing with the problem; however, it adopted a slightly different approach. It was at this Synodal Commission meeting that members of Moderature, in conjunction with the Commission for Church Administration, were mandated to visit presbyteries to investigate the matter (URCSA NTvl Akta 1999:63). The executive commissions of the presbyteries were also urged to place the matter on their agendas and try to change the mindset of the congregations.

Names of defaulting congregations and the years during which they had defaulted were published in the Synodal Commission agendas, with members of Moderature giving reports about their visits to these presbyteries (URCSA NTvl Akta 1999:66). The process was repeated annually at ecclesiastical meetings, with apparently positive results. The present Moderature is continuing the process, with some success.

### **Development of a new Church Order for the Regional (NTVL) Synod**

We have already mentioned the unprecedented optimism triggered by the twelve articles of the draft Church Order of the URCSA, discussed at the last Regional Synod of the DRCA in the then Northern Transvaal held at Mamelodi in April 1991. Issues such as the calling and retirement of ministers, gender sensitivity and inclusivity at ecclesiastical meetings, devolution of power to presbyteries and congregations to make their own stipulations, and the training of ministers were on the agenda.

The possibility of church unification between the DRCA and DRMC energised delegates at the Regional Synod of the Northern Transvaal to such an extent that in 1992, they found themselves in the Cape for the unification meeting. Unfortunately, the DRMC was not yet ready for the unification and the matter had to be postponed to 17 April 1994 (URCSA Akta 1994:4). From the minutes of the Regional Synod, it is evident that the Synod had never found itself so united and enthusiastic about its future. Church unification profoundly shook off the shackles of the past and placed the church in a new dispensation, where democracy, rule of law, and respect for basic human rights reigned supreme.

### **Calling and retirement of ministers**

The Synod (Northern Synod) reaffirmed its previous age limit of 65 years as the age for retirement of ministers. Presbyteries and congregations were urged to support ministers in their contributions to the Pension Fund (the joint Retirement Pension Fund of the DRCA and URCSA) so that they could retire with a decent pension. Members of Moderature and the Church Office Administration had to monitor the situation (as already stated). Because of the fact that many ministers are paid below the synodal salary scale, as already stated, congregations find it hard to have them retire at the age of 65. Some stay on with the hope that congregations will pay them their arrears before they formally cut ties with them. This is still one of the thorny issues that need attention (URCSA Church Order NTvl 1999:51).

### **Gender sensitivity and inclusivity**

South African society is a male-dominated society and women are often relegated to the periphery of societal influence. Their voices and contributions are not considered even in organisations where they constitute a majority. This was the case in the Regional Synod of the Northern Transvaal. The training of ministers, the composition of church councils, presbyteries and the Regional Synod were all a preserve of male members of the church. At the last Regional Synod of the DRCA Northern Transvaal

in 1991, the issues of gender were rigorously interrogated and then taken up in the URCSA Regional Synod NTvI to correct the imbalances (URCSA Church Order NTvI 1999:51).

After church unification in 1994, the process of gender sensitivity and inclusivity was taken up (URCSA Church Order 1999:51). Stipulations for the presbyteries and Synod were introduced according to which the presbyteries and Synod had to be constituted. According to stipulations 66 and 67, at least twenty-five per cent of the delegates to the presbyteries should be women, and at the Regional Synod women should form thirty-three per cent of the delegates. These constitutional arrangements brought far-reaching changes. Women's voices were heard for the first time in the church on an equal basis with those of men. In addition to this arrangement, women's organisations were also able to send their representatives (one for each organisation) to the ecclesiastical meetings (URCSA Church Order 1999:52).

Although the inclusion of women in these meetings made the meetings large and expensive, the net benefit outweighed the disadvantages. Women, who constitute fifty-one per cent of South African society (Moletsane et al 2010:ii), are now for the first time represented in the church structures, as is the case in government, national parliament, and the Cabinet. There are enabling clauses in the Church Order, which pertinently compel church meetings to allow women to be represented (URCSA NTvI 2003:45).

### **Devolution of powers to minority meetings**

The constitutional reform that came about with church unification has been very inspiring to the members. For the first time, people feel the church is taking them seriously and that they are involved in shaping their own future. The church has indeed become a covenantal community where all members are taken more seriously and are treated more lovingly. The present climate in which the church operates is conducive to building a true united Church of Christ with a specific purpose in the world.

The new Church Order adopted at the Regional Synod of 1999 has a few stipulations that empower church councils and presbyteries to make their own local arrangements and regulations (URCSA NTvI Church Order 1999:52). Stipulation 67.1, for example, empowers presbyteries to determine how many delegates from the congregation can constitute the presbytery meeting, provided gender representation is observed. Representatives or chairpersons of Commission of the Presbytery can also be delegated to the presbytery and serve in its commissions, provided they do not have voting rights. In terms of Stipulation 64 of the new Church Order, Council is allowed to make its own internal stipulations for its meetings and activities, provided such stipulations are not in conflict with the Word of God, the Church Order and other stipulations of the Presbytery and the Regional Synod.

Church ministries and organisations such as the Christian Women's Ministry, Christian Youth Movement, and Christian Men's Ministry have their own constitutions, approved by the Regional Synod. They are allowed to make their own internal stipulations to regulate their activities, provided they are not in conflict with the church regulations.

### **Representativity of the laity at church meetings**

One of the major innovations the Regional Synod of the Northern Transvaal brought about is representativity of the laity in church meetings. Traditionally, the clergy and laity were represented on a one-to-one basis. If a congregation had two ministers, it would delegate both ministers to the Synod and Presbytery, with two elders representing the laity. Where a congregation had no minister, one elder would be delegated. This arrangement, however, brought about skewed representation, as congregations with more ministers would have more delegates than those with one or no minister (URCSA NTvI Church Order 1999:52).

With the new dispensation since unification, this picture has changed. Every presbytery now decides how many delegates a congregation should delegate based on equal representativity. Stipulations 66 and 67 of the Church Order spell out how delegation to the presbyteries should be organised. In addition to official delegates to the presbytery, church councils are expected to nominate one person per commission from their ranks to the presbytery to serve on the commission concerned. If the presbytery functions with five commissions as stipulated in its forms, each congregation would delegate five persons over and above the official delegate to serve on these commissions.

With regard to the representation of the clergy, all ministers who fall under a presbytery are permanent members of that presbytery. They attend the presbytery meetings, representing their congregations, together with the elders who have been officially delegated. These arrangements have brought about far-reaching changes at presbytery meetings. Lack of representation and the resulting



distortion have been eliminated. More people could now collaborate on reports from presbyteries to the congregations than in the past.

The situation at the Regional Synod has also changed. In the past, each congregation delegated its members to the Regional Synod based on its number of members or ministers. The same situation that applied to the Regional Synod applied to the presbyteries (URCSA NTvI Church Order 1999:42). At present, each congregation in the Regional Synod delegates three persons to the Regional Synod, at least one of whom is a minister and one of whom is a woman (URCSA NTvI Church Order 1999:42). The effect of this decision is that delegates to the Regional Synod have increased by one hundred delegates, allowing all congregations to be represented equally. Thirty per cent of the delegates to the Regional Synod are women and the other thirty per cent are composed of ministers. The remaining forty per cent constitute a mixture of both male and female elders.

### **The issue of a quorum at church meetings**

According to the Old Church Order of the DRCA, which the Regional Synod continued using until 1999, a quorum at a presbytery and the Regional Synod meeting was formed by three thirds of the members present. However, under the new arrangements, half plus one of the members present can form a quorum for the church council, presbytery and Regional Synod (URCSA NTvI Church Order 1999:56).

The church council is, in terms of stipulation 61.3 of the new Church Order, free to decide who should chair its meetings, provided that ministers form part of the church council. Furthermore, the church council is expected to be in compliance with stipulation 17 (containing duties of the minister) of the Church Order. The disadvantage of this arrangement is that if there is a person who has better skills to run meetings and who should be given the opportunity, that person cannot be given the lead. Where there is no minister to chair the meetings, elders should feel free to do so, but may not do so under stipulation 61.3.

### **Introduction of a new Church Order (Regional Synod NTvI)**

At its last meeting before unification of 1991, the Regional Synod of the DRCA Northern Transvaal took a decision, in principle, that it would continue using the Church Order of the DRCA Regional Synod (as far as it is not in conflict with the twelve articles of the URCSA Church Order). They decided to use this Church Order until 1995, when the new Church Order would be inaugurated. However, at the Regional Synod of 1995, the Judicial Commission had not yet come up with a revised Church Order of the Regional Synod. Apparently, the main obstacle at that stage was appeal cases that pre-occupied the Judicial Commission.

The matter of the new Church Order was again put on the agenda for the Synodal Commission of 1996. A proposal from the Judicial Commission to the Synodal Commission was that a workshop be held for the whole Synodal Commission in order to draft and translate the new Church Order from Afrikaans to English. Members of church councils were calling for a new Church Order in English. The proposal was accepted and this was made a resolution of the meeting. The matter of drafting a new Church Order remained the responsibility of the Judicial Commission (URCSA Akta 1997:3).

In 1997, the second General Synod of the URCSA was held at Mooigenoeg in Bloemfontein. The activities of the General Synod had a negative impact on the arrangements for the Regional Synodal Commission, because the leadership of the Regional Synod is also represented at the General Synod. They were expected to function in both roles of arranging and holding meetings of such magnitude with an interval of three months. The negative results were clearly demonstrated in the agenda of the Regional Synod, especially with regard to the project of drafting a new Church Order. Added to these factors, the Regional Synod lost an experienced and hardworking actuary, Rev. LS Mataboge, who retired. At this Regional Synodal Commission, no report was forthcoming from the Judicial Commission. During recess in 1997, Moderature tasked Rev. HC Krause, the former scribe of the Regional Synod, to draft a new Church Order (URCSA NTvI Akta 1999:60).

Rev. HC Krause finished the draft in May 1998. A workshop was arranged for 25 August 1998 for members of the Regional Synodal Commission in order to review the draft and suggest amendments and improvements. An ordinary meeting of the Regional Synodal Commission was convened from 28 September to 1 October 1998. The Commission had an opportunity to consider the draft and the improvements suggested at the workshop. The Regional Synod decided to appoint Reverends Masenya, Ledwaba, Mabitsele, Ditshwene, Maluleke, Moller, Masipa, Waggenaar, Krause, Mabusela and Kgatla, and task them with scrutinising the draft, collating all comments from members

of the commissions, presbyteries and congregations and writing the final draft for the Regional Synod of 1999 (URCSA the Northern Transvaal Church Akta 1999:17).

The draft was eventually adopted by the Regional Synod of 1999 with the proviso that congregations be encouraged to submit their comments, which would be considered for inclusion in and improvement of the concept of church order. Very few comments were received from congregations, and very few improvements and amendments have been effected in the last five years. However, the Regional Synod has its own Church Order with its stipulations regulating its activities. Although the Church Order still needs legal and linguistic editing, it remains a valuable document in guiding the Synod.

## Conclusion

The road to church unity that culminated into reconciliation and unification in 1994 and the subsequent developments posed enormous challenges and brought about uncertainties. However, both uniting churches had a will and determination, against all odds, to make it a reality. The Synod had to face the challenges of transformation, transparency, empowerment and equity. The legacy of the NG Kerk of dominance, intimidation and control lingered on the whole way. The weakness, on the part of URCSA, of not being able to shake off the colonial chains caused it irreparable damage. Many congregations still expect that the NG Kerk will assist them in their acquisition and registration of property, despite the setbacks they have suffered. To this day, there are leaders within URCSA who still believe in the generosity and well meaning of the NG Kerk towards URCSA.

The DRCA and the DRMC gave birth to a new child, namely, URCSA, in 1994 against all odds. They had no midwife to help in this process, so the only solution was a Caesarean section. Sadly, the NG Kerk, which had sown the seed in its missionary endeavours and which was supposed to serve as a midwife at their unity, was opposed to this birth. The birth of this child (URCSA) nevertheless did take place, despite attempts to cause a miscarriage. This entire process was a miracle, because at that stage, both churches were heavily dependent on the NG Kerk for financial support, especially for the stipends paid to their ministers.

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