

The search for common understanding with regard to ecology and justice in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa

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Abstract

The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) has a long-standing commitment to ecology and justice. Since 1994, the URCSA has increasingly engaged itself on the “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation” process. The URCSA is concerned about the impact of climate change, ocean change, lack of access to clean water, and resource extraction on the impoverished and vulnerable living beings. A close reading of the primary sources, namely agendas, Acts of the General Synod, booklets, sermons and media statements of the URCSA, brings various themes on ecology and justice to the fore. This article will take into account that ecology and justice are concepts that have not been traditionally held together. The goal of this article is to explore URCSA’s engagement with ecology under the following subthemes: caring for the earth keeping, URCSA’s response to the water crisis; URCSA’s response to genetic modification of food; URCSA’s response to the challenge of globalism; URCSA’s response to hydraulic fracking and, lastly, the connection between ecology and justice. This article argues that ecology and justice are concepts that should be held together.

Introduction: 1991–2013

In the past 20 years, URCSA has moved slowly, but surely from apathy to advocacy in ecology issues. The URCSA works in solidarity with ecumenical partners, local and global, and seek to protect clean air, water and soil. For example, *justice, peace, and the integrity of creation* was the theme of a process initiated by the World Council of Churches (WCC), Sixth Assembly, in Vancouver, Canada, in 1983. In Canberra, Australia, in 1991, the World Council of Churches adopted this emphasis as a priority area for the council’s programmes. To join the issues of peace, justice and the well-being of creation, the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) sent delegates to the pre-assembly meeting of the WCC held in June 1991. I attended on behalf of the DRMC the said consultation which had been hosted in Bellville by the South African Council of Churches (SACC) to engage member churches in a conciliar process of mutual commitment to justice, peace and integrity. The SACC affirmed at the consultation that the world, as God’s handiwork, has its own inherent integrity, and that land, waters, air, forests, mountains, and all creatures, including humanity, are “good” in God’s sight. The DRMC worked with the premises that integrity of creation has a social aspect. On 14 April 1994, the DRMC unified with the DRCA in order to form the URCSA. From 1994 up to 2002, the URCSA focused primarily on issues regarding church unification between the Dutch Reformed Family as well as on the court cases between the DRCA and the URCSA. During this period, the URCSA deviated slightly from engagement in earth keeping matters. In early 2002, the URCSA took up its advocacy role on earth keeping matters.

Caring for the earth keeping

The General Synod of URCSA 2002 appealed to all regional synods and congregations to respond to the environmental challenges. Congregations were also exhorted to participate in the Network of Earth keeping Christian Communities in South Africa (NECCSA). The NECCSA is a process whereby the consciousness of local communities to care for the earth is enhanced.¹ Members of URCSA attended a conference on climate change held at University of the Western Cape (UWC) in November 2007. This conference identified the need for a document which would frame and inform a church response to the challenges posed by climate change in the South African context. Initially, this was taken up by a sub-committee of the South African Faith Communities Environment Institute (SAFCEI). In March 2009, a Climate Change Committee of the SACC was formed to develop resources for the church in South Africa to respond appropriately with regard to issues of climate change. The URCSA, being a member of SACC, attended that meeting. The resolution on climate change by the 2007 Triennial National Conference of the SACC was adopted at General Synod of URCSA

¹ URCSA General Synod Agenda. 2005:247. Wellington:Christelike Lekturfonds.

2008. Global warming, more popularly referred to as the “greenhouse effect”, results from a disturbance of the very delicate energy balance within the earth’s atmosphere due to the presence of above normal concentrations of radioactive gases.² Human beings are influencing climate change with their production of greenhouse gases (mainly stemming from carbon dioxide and methane). The URCSA presupposition is that the drastically reducing of the greenhouse gas emissions of the countries that are overtaxing the atmosphere is the only way which promises justice and sustainability.³

The SACC issued a document, named *Climate change – A challenge to the churches in South Africa*. This document was guided by theological statements on social issues which emerged over the last few decades from within the (South) African region, including the *Message to the people of South Africa* (1968), the *Kairos Document* (1985/1986), the *Accra Declaration* (2005) as well as the *Belhar Confession* (1982/1986), which the DRMC approved in 1986 to form part of their confessional basis. The General Synod of URCSA 2008 also took note of the All African Churches statement on the Church fight against environmental degradation.⁴ The URCSA presupposition is that the earth is the common *oikos* (home) of all people. During 2009, the URCSA responded to *Climate change – A challenge to the churches in South Africa* with a commitment to climate justice, including climate debt. Climate change is caused largely by rich countries, yet its consequences most affect the impoverished and vulnerable. The URCSA’s proposition is that the way we use energy is undermining the health of current and future generations.⁵ The URCSA also partook in the Religious Leaders for a Sustainable Future National Summit jointly organised by Indalo Yethu⁶ and SAFCEI⁷ in Johannesburg on 10 to 12 February 2009. It became increasingly clear to URCSA that humankind is entering a new and potentially dangerous stage in human history and that economic injustice, poverty, rising food prices, growing water shortages and pollution, diminishing fish stocks and energy scarcity are all impacting on the world, particularly on the poor.

The General Synodical Commission (GSC) 2002 requested one of the standing committees of the URCSA, namely the Commission for Public Witness, to evaluate the Radioactive Waste Management Policy Bill (July 2003) imposed by the South African government as a matter of urgency and to respond to the appropriate authorities within the cut-off date of 31 December 2003. The URCSA took cognizance of the fact that radioactive waste should be managed in such a way as to secure an acceptable level of protection for human health, to provide an acceptable level of protection of the environment, to assure that possible effects on human health and the environment beyond national borders would be taken into account and to predict that impacts on the health of future generations will not be greater than relevant levels of impact that are acceptable currently. The commission was also requested to commit the congregations and individuals directly involved and affected by the bill’s implementation (i.e. those around Koeberg, Vaalputs and Pelindaba). The Synod took note that apart from its main operations at Pelindaba, the South African Nuclear Energy Corporation (Necsa) also operates the Vaalputs radioactive waste-disposal facility. The presumption of URCSA was that all nuclear resources of South Africa are national assets and are therefore the heritage of its entire people, and should be managed and developed for the benefit of present and future generations in the country as a whole. The General Synod mandated the Executive Committee to study the book by Dr David Fig⁸ on South Africa’s nuclear route plus, other relevant documentation and to release a public statement on URCSA’s position on nuclear policy and development.⁹ The General Synod 2005 encouraged all regional synod and congregations of URCSA to take the environmental challenges posed to the world seriously. Congregations were also encouraged to participate in the NECCSA process whereby the consciousness of the local communities to care for the earth is being enhanced.¹⁰

² Michael Kinnamon (ed.): *World Council of Churches. Signs of the Spirit*. Official Report Seventh Assembly. Canberra, Australia, 7-20 February 1991; Geneva (WCC Publications) 1991, ISBN 2-8254-1000-4; Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 1991, ISBN 0-8028-0628-7. pp. 67–70. Commission on Faith and Order World Council of Churches 150 Route de Ferney CH 1211 Geneva 2 tel. (+41 22) 791 6338, fax (+41 22) 791 0361

³ *Dreaming a different world globalisation and justice for humanity and the earth the challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches* Edited by Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali, Stellenbosch: Sunmedia, 2010:49

⁴ *URCSA General Synod Agenda*. 2008:369-370. Wellington: Christelike Lekturfonds.

⁵ *Dreaming a different world* Edited by Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali, 2010:74.

⁶ Indalo Yethu is South Africa’s national environmental campaign which seeks to implement behaviour change and action. It was initiated and funded by the government following the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development.

⁷ The South African Faith Communities Environment Institute (SAFCEI) aims to support the faith communities in fulfilling their environmental and social responsibility in pursuit of a more sustainable world.

⁸ David Fig is a South African environmental sociologist and political economist. He holds a PhD from the London School of Economics in South-South relations (South Africa-Latin America). He has specialised in questions of energy, trade, biodiversity and corporate responsibility. Recent books include: *Uranium Road: Questioning South Africa’s nuclear direction* (Jacana, 2005) and *Staking their claims: Corporate social and environmental responsibility in South Africa* (UKZN Press, 2007). He is a research associate in the Sociology of Work Unit and the School of Animal, Plant and Environmental Sciences at Wits University. He works closely with environmental justice NGOs and chairs the board of Biowatch South Africa (www.biowatch.org.za). *URCSA General Synod Acts*. 2008:193.

⁹ *URCSA General Synodical Commission Minutes*. 2008:11-12.

¹⁰ *URCSA General Synod Acts*. 2005:362.

URCSA's response to the water crisis

Access to clean water poses the question of justice. In a joint statement, the Evangelical Reformed Church (ERC) in Germany and the URCSA took note of the warnings of climate change prophecies of local disasters, dangers to air and sea, accounts of coral reefs that are lost and deserts that grow, the atmosphere that is polluted and snow that disappears, reports about lack of clean water and abuse of natural resources.¹¹ In post-apartheid South Africa, the provision of clean water and basic sanitary facilities is becoming a serious challenge. The numerous boycotts for access to basic sanitary facilities which dominated the South African scene the past decade are understandably from an eco-justice point of view. Pure water is in short supply in South Africa. Farms and lawns or home gardens are fertilised sometimes more than needed. When it rains, run-off from storm drains pour into the local waters and cause algal blooms. This is also caused by over consumption of vitamins which are flushed into waste water treatment plants and leach into groundwater and flow into waterways.¹²

In order to live and survive, every person must receive a basic supply of clean water (30–50 litres a day), regardless of the means they have to pay for it. Fresh water is essential for all life and has rich cultural, ecological, and spiritual dimensions. However, fresh water and oceans are threatened by over-consumption, pollution, and privatisation. URCSA critiqued, amongst others, water privatisation.¹³ The URCSA agrees that since the gaining, processing and distribution of clean water involves costs, this does not mean that drinking water could, in principle, be made available without charge. The price must, however, be appropriate.¹⁴ In some cases, the poor in South Africa cannot pay the price of water. As a result, water is turned off by the local government or people in the case of non-payment and is even ejected from their homes. Water privatisation in South Africa makes the situation for the poor worse. In most cases, the poor inevitably have to consume polluted water simply because they cannot afford clean water. The proposition of URCSA is that the privatisation of water supplies should be rejected because the government wants to supply the poor with healthy water, yet it wants to make a profit out of it. For that reason, it makes water unavailable for the poor.¹⁵

The URCSA also critique the installation of the so-called “prepaid water meters”. This means you can only get water if you have paid for it. The “prepaid water meters” contradict the basic idea that no one should be prevented access to clean water because of lack of financial means. This system is impossible for the poor to maintain.¹⁶ The premise of URCSA is that wherever possible, more water should not be drawn off than can be regenerated from the ground levels. Careful dealing with the water resources also involves avoiding its pollution, especially through poisons from agriculture and industry.¹⁷

The access to clean water is a human right. In November 2002, the United Nations Committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Human Rights approved the “General Commentary No. 15” on the right to water. In March 2008, the Human Rights Council of the United Nations (UN) approved a resolution on the right to drinking water and sanitary facilities. The URCSA and ERC jointly emphasised that these steps are to be welcomed and should be enforced.¹⁸

During 2004, the URCSA sent a delegate to the Partnership Festival of the Lippe Church held at Haus Stapelage, Germany, on 2 to 4 July 2004. About 150 Christian delegates from 14 nations went to celebrate a three-day ecumenical partnership conference at Haus Stapelage which culminated in a church service held appropriately at Bad Saltzflun. They came from countries such as South Africa, Ghana, Romania, Hungary, Japan, Hong Kong, Lithuania, India and Britain. The theme for the conference was “He leads me beside still waters” (Psalm 23:2). All delegates brought a bottle of water from their countries and poured it into a large jug. This was to symbolise that as different as the conditions of our lives are in reality – all of us depend on water. Without water there is no life. The partners therefore noted that: “We cannot accept that a fifth of mankind does not have access to sufficient, clean and affordable drinking water; growing water consumption and increasing water pollution threatens the necessary good. Water is so scarce in many regions of the world that conflicts get critical around the precious fluid. Privatisation of drinking and sewage water supply leads, in most cases, to new problems and burdens the poorer population even more.”¹⁹ Water is a precious gift from God. The General Synod of URCSA 2005 took note of the resolutions of the conference, namely to give the scarce resource (water) more attention. The Synod were challenged to consider the topic of water theologically in a more comprehensive way and to discover new rituals in attentive handling of water and to stand up in church and

¹¹ *Dreaming a different world*. Edited by Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali. 2010:74.

¹² Rev. Dr Lukas Vischer is professor of ecumenical theology at the University of Bern, Switzerland, and director of the Ecumenical Commission of the Swiss Protestant Church Federation. *Giver of Life – Sustain your Creation! Lukas Vischer* The Ecumenical Review Volume 42, Issue 2, 143–149, April 1991.

¹³ *Dreaming a different world* Edited by Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali 2010:61.

¹⁴ *Dreaming a different world* Edited by Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali 2010:20.

¹⁵ *Dreaming a different world* Edited by Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali 2010:61.

¹⁶ *Dreaming a different world* Edited by Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali 2010:21.

¹⁷ *Dreaming a different world* Edited by Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali 2010:25.

¹⁸ *Dreaming a different world* Edited by Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali 2010:25.

¹⁹ *URCSA General Synod Agenda*. 2005:97.

society to handle water carefully and to protect it from profit maximisation. The Synod also emphasised that all human beings must have access to this essential natural resource.²⁰

URCSA's response to the response to genetic modification of food

In a world facing global food crisis, the URCSA remembers the vision of abundant life, life in fullness for all God's people and for all creation. Taking note that many live in undignified circumstances, undernourishment and malnourishment, where millions die of hunger, and the challenges of food security, the URCSA emphasised the right of the poor to choose the product that best suits their needs and to participate in decisions which affect their lives. Therefore, at the General Synod 2005, the delegates were introduced to the discourse on genetically modified (GM) crops.²¹ In 2002, South Africans became the first people in the world to eat genetically engineered white maize. South Africa was one of the few countries worldwide that had accepted genetically engineered food. South Africa brazenly authorised the import of genetically modified (GM) maize, and soya beans from Argentina and United States. The General Synod 2005 took note that Namibia, for example, in a bid to protect its beef market, has sent back South African yellow maize, for fear of it being genetically modified. Zimbabwe has banned the importation of GMOs or genetic engineered (GE) products without the approval of its Biosafety Board. Botswana too has taken a precautionary approach to the introduction of GM crops. The General Synod 2005 also took note that South Africa continues to be the most popular destination of GM seeds.²² The General Synod 2005 adopted the WARC Accra 2004 resolution on genetic modified organisms:

- a) We encourage churches to engage in discernment and action related to developments in biotechnology in medicine and agriculture and to draw upon work being done in some of our churches.
- b) We encourage WARC to place emerging issues in biotechnology on the agenda of its future work.²³

The Synod noted the inadequacy of South African legislation, Act 15 of 1997 (GMO Act), to control genetic engineering (GE) applied to agriculture and food production.²⁴ The General Synod 2005 took cognizance of the SACC and WARC statements on biotechnology (BT). The first GM crop, BT cotton, was approved for commercial release in 1997. In 2003, South Africa grew (1%) of the global transgenic crops. Thousands of hectares of the country are now planted with genetic engineered crops. Permits have been granted for field trials and experiments with cotton, maize, soybeans, apple, canola, wheat, potatoes, sugar cane, eucalyptus trees, grapes, and a host of micro-organisms. About 28% of cotton and 6% of maize planted in South Africa are genetically engineered. A transgenic version of white maize – the staple food of the poor in South Africa – is commercially available for human consumption – the world's first. While Bt yellow maize, which is used primarily for animal feed, was first grown commercially in 1998, South Africa became the first country to allow the introduction of a GM food staple when production of Bt white maize began in 2001.²⁵ The 2005 General Synod of URCSA took note of the controversies surrounding GM foods and crops commonly focused on human and environmental safety, labelling and consumer choice, intellectual property rights, ethics, food security, food safety and food sovereignty, poverty reduction, and environmental conservation. **The General Synod** appealed to the government to comply with the Bio-safety Protocol and bring its bio-safety legislation in line with the

²⁰ *URCSA General Synod Acts. 2005:245-255.* The General Synod commissioned Rev Dr MA Plaatjies van Huffel to do research on the matter and to issue a fully-fledged report thereon on the General Synod 2005.

²¹ Genetic modification is a special set of technologies that alter the genetic makeup of living organisms as animals, plants, or bacteria. Many thousands of hectares in South Africa have been planted with genetically modified (GM) crops. South Africa has no proper labelling of foodstuffs. Therefore South Africans do not know if the food they consume daily has been contaminated by genetic manipulation. Big companies have been allowed to put GM foods on the market long before adequate scientific monitoring of the long-term consequences has been carried out.

²² *URCSA General Synod Acts. 2005:247-255*

²³ *URCSA General Synod Agenda. 2005:247.*

²⁴ The GMO Act and the Regulations of the GMO Act issued by the Department of Agriculture in 1999, do not offer any protection for farmers or consumers with respect to negative livelihood, environmental or health consequences. In May 2001, the Department of Arts, Science and Technology (DACST) published a National Biotechnology Strategy, and proposed a R182 million annual budget towards its implementation. The thrust of the Biotechnology Strategy is that modern biotechnology will deliver major benefits for agriculture, rural development and job creation. The Synod took also cognizance of the fact that South Africa acceded the Cartagena Protocol on Bio-safety (1999) on the 11 November 2003. This agreement is the only international agreement regulating genetic engineering. From 11 November 2003 the provisions in the protocol are binding on the SA. The Cartagena Protocol on Bio-safety (1999) seeks to protect biological diversity from the potential risks posed by GMOs, the risks to biological diversity, taking also into account risks to human health. However the South African government has to date, failed to implement the Cartagena Protocol on Bio-safety (1999). Instead, it has preferred to conduct its trade and growing of in genetically modified crops. This was done under the Genetically Modified Organisms Act (No 15 of 1997) without proper biosafety oversight.

²⁵ C:\Users\mapvanhuffel\Documents\2010 a\wcc\AgBioForum 10(3) Assessing the Prospects for the Adoption of Biofortified Crops in South Africa.mht (assessed 11 March 2013).

international safety standards established by the Bio-safety Protocol and implement its Precautionary Principle. The General Synod also called on the state to radically restrict the experimentation with GMO's until the ecological and social viability of these experiments have been proven beyond all doubt. In this approach, the cautionary principle must be upheld at all times. **The General Synod** urged the government to see that GM products reaching the market have been adequately tested and that these products are being monitored to ensure safety and to identify problems as soon as they emerge.²⁶

The Synod also took cognizance of the fact that transnational companies have acquired the right to patent seeds that they have been able to modify genetically. Patents provide an instrument to control markets and maximise profits.²⁷ Patenting undermines the right to food security. The URCSA's opinion is that the patenting of foods should be rejected as immoral. Food is not just commodity or product like any other, it is fundamental to life itself. Genetic engineering forever compromises the rights of future generations to a safe, healthy and diverse environment. The URCSA called on the relevant government authorities to ensure that monopolistic control of seed reproduction and distribution by transnational biotech companies is prevented. The URCSA also called on the relevant government authorities to ensure full transparency regarding applications and permits for GMO's.²⁸

The existence of GMOs raises the issue of the right to informed choice. Everyone has the right to choose what to eat, and therefore, to know what is contained in the foods offered for sale. In South Africa, foods that have been genetically engineered are available on the supermarket shelves together with other products, with no distinguishing label. Most processed food imported from USA and Europe contains genetically engineered ingredients, mainly soya oil, lecithin, canola and corn syrup. It should be noted that milk on South African shelves may contain genetically modified bovine growth hormone known to cause cancer in humans and mastitis in animals. Labelling is not mandatory in South Africa. Without labelling, consumers lose their freedom to choose what they will eat and feed to their families. The people of South Africa have become guinea pigs in a highly controversial and dangerous experiment. GM products are not being thoroughly tested before they arrive on the grocery shelves; they are being tested on people. International agro-chemical companies adamantly oppose the labelling of GE foods on the grounds that this will scare off people from buying them. The URCSA General Synod 2005, in line with the decisions of the SACC, therefore called on the relevant government authorities to adopt the precautionary principle and prohibit the introduction of GMOs until their safety for future generations is certain.²⁹ The moderation of URCSA was mandated to take up this issue directly with government. The General Synod 2005 urged local congregations to follow up the recommendations of the Public Issues Committee of WARC on economic justice and ecological issues. Furthermore, the General Synod called on local congregations to take up the issue of the right to food security seriously and to co-own the issue of GMO as an issue of justice. The General Synod also encouraged local congregations and theological seminaries to theologically reflect on food security, food safety and food sovereignty.³⁰

URCSA's response to the challenge of globalism

The URCSA General Synod 2005 held in Upington, Northern Cape, made the historic decision to accept the Accra Confession and embark hence on into a process of confessing in the midst of economic injustice and degradation of the earth. The WARC General Council in 2004 adopted the so-called "ACCRA Confession" in the process of confession (*processus confessionis*).³¹ In response to the urgent call of the Accra Confession, the

²⁶ URCSA General Synod Acts. 2005:254.

²⁷ In 1985, the US Patent & Trademark Office allowed genetically modified plants, seeds and plant tissue to be patented. Currently 80% of the patents on GM foods are owned by just 13 trans-national corporations. Such rights have traditionally been associated with non-living inventions in industrialised and market-based economies. Today, a handful of 'Gene Giants'- Monsanto, Aventis, DuPont, and Syngenta (a merger of Astra Zeneca and Novartis) - dominate the market. Between them, the 'Gene Giants' account for nearly two-thirds of the \$3 billion global pesticide market, almost one-quarter of the \$30 billion commercial seed market, and virtually the entire GE seed market. Increasingly, these companies are merging with the \$300 billion pharmaceutical industry. The principle beneficiaries of agricultural biotechnology are agro-chemical multinational companies which hold the patents of GM seeds. Acquisitions by Monsanto of two South African seed companies, Carnia and Sensako, have allowed the company's complete domination of the South African market for GE seed.

²⁸ URCSA General Synod Agenda. 2005: 247.

²⁹ URCSA General Synod Agenda. 2005: 117.

³⁰ URCSA General Synod Acts. 2005:362-263; URCSA General Synod Acts. 2008:192.

³¹ At Accra, "Globalization as a challenge to the churches" was irrevocably taken up as an urgent focus of a confessing process (a *processus confessionis*) within the WARC 2004 – following through on earlier initiatives at Kitwe (1995) and Debrecen (1997). The decision for a *processus confessionis* at Debrecen on the issue of justice in the economy and for the earth eventually brought the WARC General Council at Accra to "covenant for justice in the economy and the earth. From July 30th to the 12th August 2004, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) held its 24th General Council in Accra, Ghana. In partnership with the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and regional ecumenical organizations, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has engaged in consultations in all regions of the world, from Seoul/Bangkok (1999) to Stony Point (2004). Additional consultations took place with churches from the South in Buenos Aires (2003) and with churches from South and North in London Colney (2004). Additional consultations took place with churches from the South in Buenos Aires (2003) and with churches from South and

URCSA entered into a process of recognition, education, and confession (*processus confessionis*). This debate and discernment led to two resolutions in URCSA. The first was for the church to undertake formal theological study and engagement with the confession. This process was to be led and/or facilitated by one of the foremost black theologians, Dr Allan Aubrey Boesak, Vice-Chairperson of URCSA. The study group comprised theologians, economists, social scientists, church leaders and lay participants. It harnessed dialogical processes and multidisciplinary understandings and dealings with the Accra Confession. The second was to engage in a north-south dialogue on the confession, globalisation and empire with Reformed German churches as part of dialogical ecumenical approaches to discerning, living out, and solidarity with regard to covenanting for justice in the economy and ecology. This decision of URCSA has its historical references in the Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church in Germany (1934), in the Ottawa declaration on the apartheid system by the WARC General Council (Ottawa 1982), and in the Belhar Confession (Cape Town 1986).

Two churches, the Evangelical Reformed Church (ERC) in Germany and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), took the call for this engagement with the Accra Confession and its consequences for the churches.³² The ERC in 2006 requested URCSA, on the basis of an existing partnership agreement between them, since 1998 that the two churches would simultaneously focus on the challenges posed by the Accra declaration, in a north-south dialogue. The URCSA Executive Committee approved, during 2006, the request and the “globalisation project” was agreed upon between the role-players. This was a joint project of the ERC and the URCSA. The matters of ecological justice received attention in URCSA through the globalisation project. An agreement with the Beyers Naude Centre (BNS) was made that these two churches from north and south should embark on reflecting on the ACCRA declaration in 2007. Funding was secured through donor partners in Germany and Dr Allan Boesak was appointed to coordinate the globalisation project. The standing URCSA members of the globalisation project were Prof Nico Koopman, professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics, Stellenbosch University, Director of the Beyers Naude Centre for Public Theology and Chairperson of the project’s SA management team; Prof Dirkie Smit, professor of Systematic Theology, Stellenbosch University and Chairperson of the Beyers Naude Centre for Public Theology; Prof Christo Lombard, professor of Theology, University of the Western Cape; Prof Danny Titus, expert in international Human Rights Law, Dr Johan Botha, Rev Averell Rust, Rev Malcolm Damon, Ms Anlene Taljaard, candidate of ministry and Manager of the Beyers Naude Centre for Public Theology; and Prof Allan Boesak, theologian, extra-ordinary professor in the Department of Systematic Theology, University of Stellenbosch, the project coordinator. The German facilitation team consisted of delegated members of the ERC under the leadership of the Vice-President of ERC, Dr Johann Weusmann, who interacts with leading academics and experts of other disciplines in civil society abroad.

Work actually got started in 2007. Since 2007 to 2010, general progress reports by the globalisation project coordinator were annually tabled at General Synodical Commission of URCSA’s meetings. Five research conferences, which involved both the SA and German contexts, took place from 2008 to 2009. The first in May 2008 and the third in February 2009 were hosted by the BNC in Stellenbosch. The second was hosted by the ERC in August 2008 at Arnoldshain in Germany. A fourth was hosted by the ERC in September 2009 at Emden in Germany. A final conference to wrap up the research and finalise the report to the involved German and RSA church structures as well as the WARC Council meeting in Grand Rapids in June 2009, was hosted by the BNC at Stellenbosch in February 2009. The globalisation project ultimately led to the production of a booklet, *Dreaming a different world globalization and justice for humanity and the earth the challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches*, edited by Allan Boesak (Vice-Moderator of URCSA), Johann Weusmann (Vice-President of the Evangelical Reformed Church, Leer), Charles Amjad-Ali (Professor for Justice and Christian Community, Martin Luther King Seminary, St Paul, Minnesota). The objective was to interrogate the issues emanating from the Accra Confession, share their experiences from within their different historical, social, economic, political and theological contexts, and to seek common understanding of the complexities of the challenges confronting the church, amongst others, with regard to ecology and justice. This then led to the August 2009 reception conference on ACCRA at Wellington in South Africa. The reception conference also logically followed a number of research conferences within which various aspects of the challenges that globalisation poses were addressed.

The URCSA also sent delegates to a consultation on the Accra Confession of the Reformed family in Africa which met in Pretoria, South Africa from 18 to 21 April 2008. The URCSA’s delegations played a pivotal role in the deliberations and presentations at the consultations.³³ A draft of the globalisation project was tabled at the consultation. Furthermore, the ERC and the URCSA issued, during 2010, a joint statement, *A joint declaration of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the Evangelical Reformed Church*,

North in London Colney (2004). *Dreaming A Different World*. Edited by Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali. 2010:25

³² LenkaBula, P. 2009. *Choose life, act I hope. African Churches Living out the Accra Confession*. p116. Bangalore: Executive Print Group.

³³ LenkaBula, P. 2009. *Choose life, act I hope*. 118

Germany. The research done by ERC and the URCSA was tabled at the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, during June 2010. The URCSA and ERC expressed, in the joint statement, prophetic criticism with regard to the negative consequences of globalisation and ecology for the most vulnerable ones in the world, for example, children, women, oppressed racial groups, poor people and exploited workers.³⁴ This research was presented to the WARC Global Consultation on Economic and Ecological Justice on 5 September 2010 in Kempton Park by Johann Weusmann (ERC), Johan Botha (URCSA), Nico Koopman and Allan Boesak (BNC).

Recommendations were made during URCSA's General Synodical Commission (GSC) meeting in December 2004, which were adopted by the URCSA General Synod in October 2005.³⁵ The General Synod basically requested that a sermon booklet on liturgical guidelines and booklet with sermon outlines based on sections of the Accra Confession should be published, which would clarify, amongst others, the nature of confession and the history of the Accra Confession. Furthermore, the General Synod 2005 approved that the Accra Confession should be translated into four languages, as was done with the publication of the Belhar Confession for wide distribution and optimum impact in the URCSA. At the General Synod 2005, it was suggested that this message on ecology and justice should be brought home to members and congregations. Two Sundays were suggested for worship services that would focus on ecology and economy respectively. The publishing of a sermon booklet to empower ministers to preach more frequently on ecology and economy as well as a booklet with sermon outlines based on sections of the Accra Confession was approved.³⁶ The aim of these publications was to raise the insight and conscientiousness of congregants, congregations and local communities about the nature of the challenges facing humankind with regard to economic and ecological injustices, to learn from them and to provide them with tools to develop a better understanding of and ability to respond to and to address those challenges more efficiently in their lives. The developing of useful material was embarked upon with the practical involvement and assistance by the ERC, who provided the project with ERC pastors within the ERC's existing partnership with the Lavender Hill URCSA congregation in Cape Town. One of the developments was 50 sermons by ministers of URCSA and ERC Liturgical material was also developed and is available. General Synod of URCSA 2010 expressed their appreciation to the committee and persons that worked on the development of liturgical material. These publications are not published yet. At a conference in 2010 in Mamelodi, Pretoria, a draft copy of the publication of the sermon booklet was distributed to the delegates.

URCSA's response to hydraulic fracturing

During 2012, local congregations of URCSA engaged in the issue hydraulic fracturing in the Karoo. The presbytery of Graaff Reinett issued a proposal to the General Synod 2012 on the issue of hydraulic fracturing. The presbytery, being children of the Belhar Confession, took note that mining, oil and gas exploitation, and logging threaten the well-being of ecosystems and local and worldwide communities. The Presbytery of Graaf Reinett took heed on the call of the General Synod of URCSA that members and congregations of URCSA should engage with issues on ecology and justice on local level. At the General Synod of URCSA 2012, a motion on hydraulic fracturing was passed. The Synod, mindful of who the owner of the earth is and mindful of what might be the possible health damage to people, animals and the whole environment as a result of hydraulic fracturing in the area of the Karoo, resolved as follows:

- a) To actively take up the issue of hydraulic fracturing and other environmental issues on the basis of our Biblical understanding of responsibility for the earth.
- b) To applaud the public prophetic leadership exemplified by the Presbytery of Graaff Reinett.
- c) To support their stance on hydraulic fracturing as stated in their press release, issued during their annual Presbytery meeting.
- d) To share in their concerns for a catastrophic impact on the environment.
- e) To express their deep concern that the hydraulic fracturing may have the same or worse effects on the environment that it had in other parts of the world.
- f) To mandate the Executive and the Core Ministry for Service and Witness to make a comprehensive Biblical and scientific study of the issue of hydraulic fracturing and other environmental issues, on the basis of which the URCSA can witness publicly and disseminate information to the broader church. Since this issue is urgent, Synod calls on the Executive and CMSW to try and complete this study before the end of 2012.

³⁴ *Dreaming A Different World*. Edited by Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali. 2010:76.

³⁵ *URCSA General Synod Agenda*. 2005:369; *URCSA General Synod Acts*. 2008:201.

³⁶ *URCSA General Synod Agenda*. 2008:342-345.

- g) To mandate the Executive and the Core Ministry for Service and Witness on General Synodical as well as Regional Synod level (Cape), to stay in touch with the Presbytery of Graaff Reinett in order to monitor the developments in the situation and to witness together.
- h) To call on every member of URCSA and its institutions to witness constantly and boldly for environmental justice in Southern Africa and the world.
- i) To release this motion after adoption as a press release and to attach the statement of the Presbytery of Graaff Reinett to it.³⁷

The connection between ecology and justice

The URCSA has a history of participating and leading advocacy campaigns – for instance, the hydraulic fracturing, environmental justice, climate change, global warming, earth keeping, water crisis, genetic modification of food and globalism. The response of URCSA to all these issues has something in common with the fundamental base in the confessions of URCSA and the understanding of justice as a Biblical imperative. Justice is a matter of faith. In so doing, the URCSA translates the confession in concrete actions both regionally and locally. The URCSA's premises are to work for justice in the economy and on the earth. Ecology and justice are concepts that have not been traditionally held together. However, the ERC and the URCSA share a rich history of naming, engaging and confronting the worldly powers of separation and estrangement, conflict and alienation, dehumanisation and injustice and the holding of these two concepts together.³⁸ During the past decade, the ERC and URCSA joined hands in the quest for compassionate justice. They work with the premise that the church, belonging to the God of compassionate justice, is called to stand where God stands, namely against all forms of injustice and with the wronged. Their guiding principle is the notion of God's preferential option for the downtrodden (*Belhar Confession* article 4). These two churches are standing in solidarity with persons who are suffering and struggling. The two churches's presumption is that the integrity of the Gospel and their faith is challenged by the frightening realities of globalisation and ecology, especially in their impacts on the most vulnerable persons and communities in the world. The premises of URCSA are that although God has given humankind dominion and responsibility over creation, God has not given humankind the right to misuse and exploit the earth for selfish purposes or the endangerment of the creation. The church therefore confesses their and humanity's constant misunderstandings of the privilege and responsibility to the creation.

As reformed Christians, the URCSA believe in the sovereignty of God over the whole created order. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Psalm 24.1). God's sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God's just rule. Active commitment to justice for the whole creation is a fundamental demand of the reformed faith. Nothing in creation is independent of God. All of God's creation therefore deserves to be treated with appropriate care and concern. God is the creator of the universe and the earth. The duty of human beings is to take care of the earth and to ensure that our natural resources are conserved for future generations. Such responsibility must be considered in the context of the full-time span of creation. It must be carried out with deep respect for life and the complexity of ecological relationships among varieties of life forms, humankind, and the environment. The URCSA, together with ERC and other ecumenical partners, affirms the integrity of creation and calls upon its congregations to do the same.

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³⁷ URCSA General Synod Minutes. 2012:219-220.

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