Harmonies of Faith: Church Music History in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa (DRMC) and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA)

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Abstract

Although the histories of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) as well as the unification process that led to the establishment of the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa (URCSA) is well documented, the same cannot be said of the history of church music and the hymnals used in the mentioned church(es). In fact, very little is written about the development of church music in the ranks of these churches. This article examines the development and significance of church music and hymnody in the DRMC, the DRCA, and the URCSA, with particular attention to how hymnals shaped ecclesial identity, language diversity, and theological expression in the mentioned churches. The study traces the historical trajectory of key hymnals used in these churches, including *Sionsgesange* (1947), *Hosana* (1976; later editions), and *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2010), showing how these collections reflected the linguistic and cultural diversity of congregations while maintaining continuity with the broader Reformed tradition. The article further explores the influence of other ecclesial traditions on URCSA church music and highlights the role of choirs, congregational singing, and evolving musical practices in shaping worship. Methodologically, the study employs historical and textual analysis of hymnals, synodical reports and related ecclesial documents, paying particular attention to the prefaces, structures, and hymn selections of these collections. Through this analysis, the article demonstrates how hymnals functioned not only as liturgical resources but also as expressions of church identity, unity, and theological conviction. The study argues that the hymn tradition of the DRMC, the DRCA, and the URCSA reflects the dynamic interaction between faith, language, culture, and historical context, revealing how congregational song has contributed to shaping the history and self-understanding of these churches.

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As will be indicated in this article, the historic markers in the history of the mentioned churches, including resistance, change, independence, unification and various others, are also expressed in church music developments through the hymnals of the mentioned churches. It could thus be argued that developments in church music provide a particular lens through which to interpret the reformed and reforming histories of the mentioned churches.

Keywords: URCSA; hymnal; church music; *Sionsgesange*; DRMC; DRCA

Introduction

Church music in the Reformed tradition has played a pivotal role in congregational life, dogma, liturgy, and the deepening of faith for more than 500 years. This has also been the case in South Africa and, in a special way, in the history of the United Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). The URCSA came into existence in 1994, when the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) joined the largest part of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA). The DRMC was established in 1881, and the DRCA came into existence when the so-called Black mission churches united in 1963 to form a general Synod (Van Rooi 2010). To this point in time (1994), the DRMC mostly served the predominantly "Coloured" communities, and the DRCA served the various Black communities in South Africa. This was aligned to an understanding of separateness and apartheid in the Church that developed and changed over many decades (Van Rooi 2010, 12–95)

From inception, the mission churches[1] mentioned represented various language communities. The congregants of the DRMC were mostly Afrikaans speakers, with the majority of speakers coming from the Cape Provinces.[2] The so-called Black Dutch Reformed Mission Churches of the Cape, Orange Free State, Transvaal, and Natal ministered to congregants in these (former) provinces, each linked to the predominant African languages of the particular regions.[3] This is important when reflecting on the compilation of hymnals in the churches mentioned because these hymnals were often reflective of the dominant languages used in the DRCA and the DRCA congregations. As noted in this article, these hymnals are representative of various South African languages, for example, Afrikaans, Sesotho, isiXhosa, etc. In the story of the uniting

1 The mission churches are also often referred to as "daughter churches" in a historical context. This term is used to express the particular historical relationship between these churches and the so-called mother church. Although this term was used widely in the churches that made up the so-called Family of Dutch Reformed Churches, this term is in contradiction with Reformed Church polity. See Van Rooi 2010, 96–133.

2 For a history of the DRMC, see Kriel, C.J. 1981. *Die Eerste Eeu. Die Nederduitste Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika, 5 Oktober1881–5 Oktober1981*. National Press. The Cape Provinces refer to what is known currently as the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape and the Northern Cape provinces.

3 Except for the DRMC and the DRCA, the other church in the so-called Family of Dutch Reformed Churches is the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA), a church comprising predominantly Indian congregants.

church, the URCSA, the complexity and richness of language diversity in the Church, and specifically in Church music, had to be expressed in the hymnals used in this multi-cultural and multilingual Church spanning Southern Africa.

In a real sense, the compilation of hymnals in the churches played a strong part in establishing these churches, as it gave tangible expression to their Southern African protestant identity, linked to the so-called mother church (DRC), the Reformed tradition and the relationship between church (congregation) and context (society), including its language community. It also played a significant role in formalising liturgies further in the churches mentioned and indeed paved the way towards a sense of autonomy—a concept that became more important over time in the political expressions of the church in the so-called Family of Dutch Reformed Churches.[4] As such, the hymnals were more than just a compilation of hymns to be sung when the congregation met. It was an expression of *being* church. In addition, as will be indicated, this is seen clearly in the forewords of the hymnals to be discussed.

The hymns, as they became part of the various hymnals, also expressed something of the growing independence as well as the resistance that grew in the ranks of the DRMC and the DRCA aligned with these churches' role in the church struggle against apartheid. As such, they also played a liberative role in the ecclesial histories of these churches. As hymns were added and words changed in various versions of, for example, the *Sionsgesange*[5] hymnal (1947) of the DRMC, this voiced a growing sense of autonomy, growth and cultural expression at particular stages in the history of this church.

The hymnals, as they are used and compiled today, bring together hymns from various traditions, eras, and languages. Some of these hymns are shared with other churches and ecclesial traditions, including the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), the English church traditions in South Africa (Presbyterian, Congregational, Methodist, etc), the Rhenish Church and various other traditions. In the more recent history of the URCSA, this ecclesial influence finds particular expression currently in an informal way from more charismatic traditions.

In addition, although there are language differences, the congregations of the URCSA share very similar hymns and tunes—a deliberate expression that, when fully experienced, shares something of the aspiration towards unity in this church. This unification remains complex and imperfect, and for a church that uses various hymnals, a deliberate focus on hymns, hymnals, and church music in general is crucial, not only

4 Van Rooi (2010) argues that ecclesial autonomy should never be understood as a sense of independence but should rather express interdependence. See Van Rooi 2010, 173–194.

5 The first hymnal of the DRCM is named *Sionsgesange*, which is translated directly as "Hymns from Zion." The second hymnal was named *Nuwe Sionsgesange,* translated directly as "New Hymns from Zion."

to express a sense of unity but also to allow these hymns and hymnals to express something of the nature, identity, and history of the URCSA.

In the following sections, a brief overview will be given of the history of the hymnals of the URCSA. This paper refers to *Sionsgesange vir gebruik in die NGSK* (1947), *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2010)[6] and the *Hosana Liederebundel van die NGKA* in Xhosa (2003). It is acknowledged that there are also other hymnals used in URCSA congregations, but this article focuses on the three that have been mentioned. The hymns in these hymnals continue to express the obvious influence of other church traditions.

The author will also speak about the use of hymns as part of resistance, especially linked to the anti-apartheid struggle spearheaded by the DRCM and the DRCA. Here, the use and inclusion of "*Nkosi Sikel' iAfrika*" will be highlighted, but reference will also be made to other hymns that cross the sometimes-obvious language and man-made cultural boundaries that still affect the unity of the URCSA.

The History of the Hymnals in the DRMC, the DRCA and the URCSA

In this section, a brief overview is given of the histories of two hymnals currently used in congregations of the URCSA, namely the *Hosana*[7] and the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2003). To understand and interpret the history of the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2003) better, the original *Sionsgesange* (1947)[8] hymnal, the predecessor of the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2010), is of immense importance and, as such, special attention will be given to this hymnal, which was used in the DRMC.

It should be acknowledged that various other hymnals are also currently used in the URCSA. In addition, as will be mentioned, church music in the URCSA remains influenced by various other church traditions; however, the focus of this article is on the three hymnals mentioned, with some reference made to their influence on church music and hymns in the URCSA.

Hosana[9] (2003 edition)

The first *Hosana* was published in 1976 for use in the DRCA, and this hymnal has had seven editions since then. The compilation and use of this hymnal was seen as a remarkable achievement given the fact that, until 1976, congregations of the DRCA used hymnals from other churches and church traditions (*Hosana* 2003, v). Of note, however, is that the process to compile and publish a unique hymnal for use in the DRCA was predated by the publishing and use of the Setswana hymnal with the original

6 The first editions of the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* were printed in 1994. The author also references the Koraalboek of the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2003).

7 The first edition of the *Hosana* was printed in 1976.

8 The first *Sionsgesange* was printed in 1947.

9 The word "Hosana" on the front page of the 2003 version of the hymnal is spelt "Hosana," while in other versions the spelling used is "Hosanna."

title *Lifela tsa Sione tsa Tirelo ea Molimo mo Kereken le Sekolen.*[10] It is therefore fitting that various hymns from this hymnal were adopted into the *Hosana* (*Hosana* 2003, v).

On 17 August 1953, the first Synodical Commission for Hymns in the ranks of the so-called Black Mission Churches, which later became the DRCA, was called into being with the task to compile and publish a hymnal representative of various language communities of the church(es). In 1959, this task was referred to the then Council of Dutch Reformed Mission Churches, and thus all four of the so-called Black Mission Churches (DRMC of the Cape, DRMC of the Orange Free State, DRMC of Transvaal, DRMC of Natal) activated a Commission for Hymn Books (*Hosana* 2003, v). The then joint Hymn Book Commission of the Council of Dutch Reformed Mission Churches worked on the compilation and printing of a hymnal in Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho, Setswana, isiXhosa, and isiZulu (*Hosana* 2003, v). As mentioned, this hymnal is still used in congregations of the URCSA today.

The hymns in the *Hosana* (2003) are divided into the following sections: the Triune God, Church and Worship, the Word of God and the Sacraments, the Advancement of the Kingdom of God, Christian Life, Death, the Grave and Blessedness, Human Relations, Children's Hymns and Occasional Hymns (*Hosana* 2003, xii–xiii). As such, it is a comprehensive hymnal, which expresses all elements of church life.

Special mention should be made of the melodies of the hymns as these are shared with various other church traditions, including within the URCSA itself and the DRC. An outcome of this is that, even when the language(s) of the hymns are different, congregants of the URCSA recognise the hymns in *Hosana* easily.

The origins of the hymns are all indicated in the hymnal, and it is clear that some hymns originate from the hymnals used in the DRC, the Sankey,[11] the *Sionsgesange* (1947*)*, *Kopelo*[12] (Lutheran Hymnal) as well as hymns from various other church traditions (*Hosana* 2003). The hymnbook is supplemented by formulas, including an outline of the order of service, the 10 Commandments, a summary of the Law, the Lord's Prayer, as well as hymns that can be used at catechisms (*Hosana* 2003, 228–232).

10 This name and term translates to "Hymns of Zion for Church and School Worship."

11 The Sankey refers to a world-renowned hymnal, *Sacred Songs and Solos*, which continues to affect the South African hymn landscape. This hymnal is a collection of Christian hymns and gospel songs, first compiled in 1873 by American gospel singer and composer Ira D. Sankey. The hymnal became extremely popular during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with worldwide sales exceeding 50 million copies. See Sankey, I. D. 1907. *My Life and the Story of the Gospel Hymns and of Sacred Songs and Solos*. P.W. Ziegler.

12 See Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. 1999. *Moopelo wa kopelo ya Kereke ya Luthere ka Setswana and Harepa*. Sixth edition (Revised). Rustenburg, [South Africa: Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa.

***Sionsgesange* (1947)**

Before the history and content of the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2010) can be discussed, special attention must be given to the *Sionsgesange* (1947) that was compiled for use in the congregations of the DRMC. The history of this hymnal predates its compilation as various hymnals were used in the congregations of the DRMC before 1947, including hymnbooks of the DRC, the Rhenish Church, the Congregational Church, etc (*Sionsgesange* 1947, 2). As is mentioned in the introduction to this hymnal, the synodical commission for hymnals of the DRMC discovered as part of their work that the minister of the formed Rhenish congregation of Carnarvon, (a congregation which, like many other Rhenish congregations, later became part of the DRMC) Rev E Hartwig, started to compile a hymnal for the DRMC predating the *Sionsgesange* (1947) by at least 20 years (*Sionsgesange* 1947, 2). It is clear that the Hartwig hymnal was incorporated in the *Sionsgesange* (1947) and later into the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2010).

Of note is that several hymns included in the *Sionsgesange* (1946) came from the Rhenish tradition. The impact of hymns from the Rhenish Church should be understood against the backdrop of the fact that several congregations of the Rhenish Church became part of the DRCM. These include Worcester (1940), Stellenbosch (1940), Sarepta (1947), Rietfontein (1953), etc. (Crafford 1982, 186–197). Moreover, as is expressed in the foreword to the *Sionsgesange* (1947) hymnal, this inclusion of hymns from the Rhenish Church and other traditions shared something of the growing story and identity of the DRMC, which grew, at that stage, through members of other congregations joining the congregations of this church. The *Sionsgesange* (1947) hymnal could thus also be seen as a hymnal consisting of hymns that would be familiar to congregants of the DRMC who had come from various other denominations, and it was meant to express an element of unity (*Sionsgesange* 1947, 2).

The introduction of the *Sionsgesange* (1947) also highlights congratulatory remarks from other churches, including the DRC. A growing sense of autonomy in the DRMC is expressed in these. The *Sionsgesange* (1947) hymnal is thus brought into perspective by sharing other (then recent) publications and developments in the ranks of the DRMC, indicating a sense of growing autonomy from the so-called mother church (*Sionsgesange* 1947, 4–5).

However, it is perhaps the first sentence in the foreword to the *Sionsgesange* (1947) that expresses best the role and place of hymns and a hymnal in the church, especially in the DRMC:

> *Naas die woord van God is sekerlik geen boek prakties van meer belang vir 'n Christelike gemeente as die gesangboek nie. Wanneer 'n siel deur Christus met God versoek is kom die drang in hom op om te sing tot eer van sy Verlosser. 'n Lewende Kerk*

> *is ook 'n singende Kerk. Die behoefte aan 'n eie gesangboek word derhalwe lank reeds deur die Sendingkerk gevoel*[13] (*Sionsgesange* 1947, 2).

The *Sionsgesange* hymnal (1947) consists of 402 hymns of various origins, including those from Dutch, English, and German sources (*Sionsgesange* 1947, 6). It is divided into four sections, namely the Revelation of the Triune God, the Church of Christ, the Work and Impact of God's Saving Grace, and the Christian Life (*Sionsgesange* 1947, 7). The hymnal concludes with various ecclesial Formulas for use in the DRCM, including the 10 Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Formula for the Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist, etc (*Sionsgesange* 1947, 418–421). The *Sionsgesange* (1947) concludes with a full overview of the origins of the hymns included in this hymnal. Here, the links with hymns originating from various other traditions become clear, including from the DRC, the Rhenish Church, and the Sankey (*Sionsgesange* 1947, 422–433). What is of note is that some of the works and tunes in the hymnal were written and compiled by Rev E Hartwig himself, and that some of the tunes originate from the Moravian tradition (*Sionsgesange* 1947, 422–433).

Nuwe Sionsgesange (2003 edition of the *Koraalboek*[14] and the 2010 edition of the hymnal)

At the DRMC Synod of 1994, the Report of the Synodical Commission for Church Music and Song (1994) indicates that the work of this commission had been completed and that the hymnal was ready for use (Report 1994, A19/1). As such, the hymnal saw the light of day before the official unification of the DRMC and the DRCA.

The history of the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2003) is nicely captured in the preamble of the *Koraalboek* (2003). Not only is the 1947 *Sionsgesange* preamble by Hartwig included in this publication (*Sionsgesange* 1947), but a full new preamble by R. C. Herholdt, chairperson of the Synodical Commission for Church Music and Song, is added (*Nuwe Sionsgesange* 2003). This preamble, written in 1993, forms part of the second edition of the *Koraalboek* (*Nuwe Sionsgesange* 2003, i–iv).

In this edition, Herholdt notes that, although various *Sionsgesange* (1947) hymns form part of the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* hymnal, a number had been withdrawn (*Nuwe Sionsgesange* 2003, iv). This is because they were hardly sung in the congregations of the URCSA, which is confirmed in the Report of the DRMC Synodical Commission for Church Music and Song (Report 1990, 644–645). He further notes that more than 20

13 Free translation by the author: Next to the Word of God, there is surely no book of greater practical significance for a Christian congregation than the hymnal. When a soul has been reconciled to God through Christ, a deep impulse arises to sing in honour of the Redeemer. A living church is therefore also a singing church. For this reason, the Mission Church has long felt the need for a hymnal of its own.

14 The author mostly makes use of the *Koraalboek* as there is unique and valuable information found in this publication. "*Koraalboek*" is an Afrikaans term that refers to the hymnal with full musical score used by organists, music groups and bands to accompany congregational songs.

English hymns had been added, the number of Christmas hymns had increased considerably, and that some hymns were newly composed by congregants of the DRMC (*Nuwe Sionsgesange* 2003, iv). This indicates the general growth of church music in the URCSA as well as the fact that, through this hymnal, there had been a growing attempt to express the unity and language diversity in the ranks of this church.

Herholdt further acknowledges that a number of hymns, in both word and melody, are similar to those used by the DRC at the time and that some hymns come from other hymnals and traditions (*Nuwe Sionsgesange* 2003, iv). As is the case with hymns from the *Sionsgesange* (1947), it is indicated that hymns from other hymnals include, among others, hymns from the DRC (1978), *Die Halleluja* (1962), The Rhenish Hymnal, Sankey's *Sacred Songs and Solos* (1890), etc (*Nuwe Sionsgesange* 2003, iv). This indicates the link between the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2010) hymnal and the hymn traditions and history in the URCSA.

The *Nuwe Sionsgesange* hymnal (2010) is divided into five sections, namely (i) The Triune God, (ii) God the Father, (iii) God the Son, (iv) God the Holy Spirit, (v) Church and Worship Service (*Nuwe Sionsgesange* 2010, 6).[15] This is different from the structure of the *Sionsgesange* (1947). Of interest is the inclusion of English hymns and *koortjies*, as well as an increase in the number of children's hymns (Report 1990, 645).

From the *Report of the DRMC Synodical Commission for Church Music and Song* (1990), it becomes clear that it was intended to include reworked Psalms into the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2010) hymnal. However, this part of the project could not be concluded by the time the draft hymnal was shared with the Synod and congregations of the DRMC (Report 1990, 646).

In the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* hymnal *Koraalboek* (2003), the idea and ideals of church unification in the URCSA find particular expression. Of special note is the preamble to the 2003 version of the *Koraalboek*,[16] which clearly articulates that, as the process of unification of the former DRMC and the DRCA gained momentum, a discussion took place among the ranks of the DRMC Synodical Commission for Church Music and Song. As stated in the foreword of the *Koraalboek* of the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2003), some sentiments were that this process should pause to allow for new perspectives and additions, since the unification because of language differences in various congregations. However, as the commission rightly pointed out, the then still to be

15 At the back of this hymnal and for use by ministers and congregations are found liturgical sections that include the 10 Commandments, a responsive reading of the Law of the Lord, the Apostolic Confession and the Belhar Confession (*Nuwe Sionsgesange* 2010, 184–192).

finalised hymnal could be used alongside the *Hosanna* for the following years. As things stand, this is indeed the case (*Koraalboek* 2003, ii).

Of interest is that reference is made in the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* hymnal (2010) to hymns and hymn numbers in this hymn book that correlate with those in the *Hosanna* (*Nuwe Sionsgesange* 2010, 181–182). This shows an expression of church unity and strengthens an earlier suggestion that, although the hymn languages may differ, this is not always the case when it comes to the musical tunes of the hymns in the various hymnbooks of the URCSA.

Influences from Other Church Traditions, An Ongoing Impact

The impact of hymns on the URCSA from other ecclesial traditions is acknowledged and celebrated mostly in its church music. This is expressed clearly in both its historic and current hymnals. As mentioned, it links the history of the URCSA with that of the DRC, but it further links with the relation between congregations of the URCSA in relation to other congregations/churches in various local communities. This is further expanded given the impact of church music shared through the internet from international contexts that impacts on churches locally and abroad.

This process is not static and, as such, at a congregational level, the church music of the URCSA remains influenced by that of other traditions. In a real sense, the influence of charismatic traditions, in particular, influences the use of hymns of the URCSA. In this regard, especially the Afrikaans congregations of the URCSA have seen a rise in the use of *koortjies*[17] For this reason, when the DRMC compiled what would become the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2010), *koortjies* were added to the hymnal. Today it is clear that *koortjies*[18] are used freely in various URCSA congregations, not only as part of the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* hymnal but also informally as part of praise and worship in Sunday services.

Perhaps the increasing use of less formal hymns, music and *koortjies* can also be attributed to the absence of trained organists or music experts, musicians and even choirs in congregations of the URCSA, especially in the South African platteland.[19] In future, the URCSA should specifically focus on collaborating with community-based role-

17 The direct translation of the term *koortjies* is "choruses." However, the term "*koortjie(s)"* is used in this article. For an overview of the origins, use and impact of *koortjies*, especially in evangelical churches in South Africa, see Engelbrecht, I.A. 2023. *Die Koortjie Undercommons.* Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Stellenbosch. See also https://herri.org.za/9/inge-engelbrecht-0/

18 The author once asked a minister of the URCSA how congregants learn *koortjies,* and he believed this occurs when congregants visit other congregations on special occasions or during inter-denominational services. During this conversation, he indicated that this learning and sharing of hymns and especially *koortjies* occurred when congregants of the URCSA and other churches attend funerals held in other churches.

19 The author notes with sadness that organists, just like fully serviced church organs, are becoming less used in the ranks of the URCSA. In some cases, bands are used to accompany congregations when they sing, and this often leads to fewer hymns and more *koortjies* being used.

players like schools and universities to find ways to bridge this growing gap—especially in rural settings. In this context, especially choirs can help congregations and congregants to use the full array of hymns through the reading of sheet music, thus not only adding to the congregation's life but also delving into the rich history of hymns and hymnals of the URCSA.

Hymns, Language Diversity, and Faith

Hymnals are designed to be expressions of a particular church tradition, of its faith and liturgy. In addition, as is noted in the sections focusing on the three particular hymnals, it is no different in the story and histories of the URCSA. In this regard, the hymnals follow a typical overview of the seasons of the church, and as indicated, express faith aligned with the Confessions of Faith of the church. As the Synodical Commission for Church Music and Song highlights in its report to the DRMC Synod (1990), hymns should also express the reformed character of this church (Report 1990, 643).

As mentioned in the previous sections, language diversity in the URCSA is a complex, rich and true expression of the diversity of this church. This language diversity is often best expressed in joint services of the URCSA, which bring together congregations and hymns of the former DRMC and DRCA. Examples of these joint services include the licensing of theological students and joint services linked to special occasions, e.g., the end of the Week of Prayer or a joint presbyterial Pentecost service, as well as funerals.

A particular example of this is found in the service that accompanied the first Synod meeting of the newly established URCSA in 1994. This service took place in the URCSA SA Gestig[20] congregation in Belhar and brought together synodical delegates of the former DRMC and the DRCA. In the hymn booklet for the founding Synod of the unifying church between the DRMC and the DRCA, hymns from both the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2010) and the *Hosana* (2003) are used (*Sangbundel* 1994). Given the selection of hymns, it is clear that attention was given to add hymns with similar tunes that would be well-known for congregants of both the DRMC and the DRCA (*Sangbundel* 1994). As is to be expected, "*Nkosi Sikelel' i Afrika*" forms part of the collection of hymns in this booklet (*Sangbundel* 1994, 3).

However, hymnals as expressions of faith in context should also express something of the contextual character of the church in a particular time and place. In this instance, the Report of the Synodical Commission for Church Music and Song prepared the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2010) hymnal as an expression of church music that allows what was deemed the traditional style of song as found in the DRMC (Report 1990, 643). This is

20 For a brief overview of the very special history of this congregation, see South African History Online. (2020, January 27). Slave Church Museum. https://sahistory.org.za/place/slave-church-museum

believed, because "the members of the Mission Church are people of Africa who experiences the emotions linked to song and singing" (Report 1990, 643).[21]

The Role and Influence of Church Choirs in the URCSA

Although it is not the focus of this paper, it should be mentioned that the role of church choirs should not be underestimated in guiding congregations to sing in accordance with the sheet music and musical scores, to learn new hymns and to appreciate the value and impact of the various hymns on the identity of the URCSA. Presbytery circuit choir competitions have a strong history in the URCSA and still occur to this very day. Often, when congregational choirs participate in competitions in, for example, their respective presbyteries, they are expected to learn and sing hymns that are perhaps less known and therefore less often sung in the congregations. In this way, choirs help congregations to use a larger diversity of hymns in the congregations of the URCSA, adding to the value and rich impact of the hymnals.

As indicated in this section, the histories of the various hymnals are well documented in and through their preambles, the content of the hymnals, including the texts and bibliographies, as well as through some synodical decisions through the work of church/synodical commissions. Texts, personal notes, and reflective letters in particular linked to the hymnals themselves are a remarkable way to share the stories and histories with the users and should be acknowledged and celebrated. In the following section, the focus falls on hymns as songs of protest and of resistance and, in this way, the history of the URCSA is linked to its hymnals and hymns.

Hymns and Resistance

In the history of the Protestant churches, hymns are often used as ways to express a set of beliefs linked to confessions. They are also used as ways to express an understanding of what should be, which is aligned with biblical interpretations. As such, hymns and other church-based songs and prayers are also often used to protest against what is believed to be unjust.

This is the case in the Reformed Church tradition in Southern African and especially also in the URCSA, since various hymns and *koortjies* that express something of a sense of resistance are used at times. This links to the role of the URCSA in the anti-apartheid struggle, particularly as expressed in declaring apartheid a heresy and in adopting the Belhar Confession.[22] In this regard, congregants of the URCSA would sing hymns and

21 Free translation of the following text: *Tog het die kommissie hom laat lei deur die tradisionele sangstyl van die Sendingkerk. Die kommissie het van die standpunt uitgegaan dat die lidmate van die sendingkerk in groot mate Afrika-mense is, wat hul sang emosioneel beleef en ervaar* (Report 1990, 643).

22 See in this regard Cloete, Gerhard D, and Dirkie J. Smit. 1984. *A Moment of Truth. The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church*. WB Eerdmans Pub. Co.

prayers like "*Senzeni Na*?,"[23] "*Thuma Mina*,"[24] "We Shall Overcome,"[25] among others, especially at funeral services. All three of these hymns/prayers hold a powerful place in South Africa's ecclesial, cultural, and political histories; they are both laments and protest songs that have echoed through the country's most painful and transformative periods. As is pointed out by Kloppers, they continue to make a lasting impact on the political and communal landscape of South Africa (Kloppers 2021).

Although this is not unique to the URCSA, the use of the hymns links the histories of the URCSA with other denominations that also often took part actively in the church's struggle against apartheid. In a sense, they also express something of the language diversity that crosses congregational boundaries in the ranks of the URCSA. However, the use of these hymns in the official hymnal of the DRMC and the URCSA, as well as their general use in congregations, especially during apartheid, was not without debate and, at times, controversy. An example is found in the Report of the DRMCs Synodical Commission on Church Music and Song (1990), where it seems that neither the DRMC Synod (1986) nor the commission of Church Music and Song (1990) could reach consensus on whether the Afrikaans translation ("*Jesus is die Koning*") of the hymn "We Shall Overcome" (Report 1990, 645) should be included in the *Nuwe Sionsgesange*. However, the hymn was indeed included in the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2010) hymnal.

Perhaps the most prominent of anti-apartheid influenced hymns added to the hymnal of the URCSA is that of a particular version of "*Nkosi Sikelel' i Africa*." This well-known hymn and prayer is found in both Afrikaans (translation) and isiZulu (*Nuwe*

23 "*Senzeni Na*?" is isiZulu and isiXhosa for "What have we done?" or "What wrong have we done?" The phrase is both a question and a cry – expressing pain, confusion and protest in the face of oppression, injustice and violence.

24 The South African hymn "*Thuma Mina*" (which means "Send Me" in isiZulu and isiXhosa) has a rich and layered history that bridges Christian worship, anti-apartheid activism and post-apartheid civic renewal. "*Thuma Mina*" originated as a Christian hymn in the South African mission church tradition. It is most widely known through its version in the Zulu and Xhosa hymnals of the Methodist, Anglican, and Lutheran churches. See in this regard Bobetsky, Victor V. 2014. "The Complex Ancestry of 'We Shall Overcome.'" *The Choral Journal* 54(7): 26–36. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23646403. "*Thuma Mina*" has also been added in the *Liedboek van die Kerk* and, in this hymnal used by die DRC, it is available in Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa and Sesotho. See *Liedboek van die Kerk*. 2001. 866.

25 "We Shall Overcome," while not originally South African, became one of the most powerful international songs of hope and resistance adopted in South Africa during the anti-apartheid struggle. Its history weaves together threads of African American spirituals, Christian worship, and global liberation movements, all of which resonated deeply with South Africans fighting against racial oppression. During the 1960s and 1970s, "We Shall Overcome" began to circulate in South African liberation circles, brought in through church networks linked to global ecumenical organisations (like the World Council of Churches), student movements, especially those influenced by the American Civil Rights Movement, and cultural exchange with African American activists, artists and clergy.

Sionsgesange 2010, 166–167).[26] Written by Enoch Sontonga,[27] it was translated and added to the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* hymnal of the URCSA. As is to be expected, there is a history to adding this hymn to the hymnal, namely the fact that "*Nkosi Sikelel' i Africa*," like the other hymns and prayers mentioned above, was sung at many funerals and gatherings across South Africa, especially gatherings and funerals linked to the anti-apartheid struggle. As such, this hymn, which later became part of the current national anthem[28] of South Africa, was sung and used before it was formally added to the hymnal.

Its use and addition to the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* hymnal was controversial. In his biography, Franklin Sonn (2024) refers to a particular moment in the history of the DRMC Kakamas when a funeral was held in this congregation after children were brutally murdered by the police (1988). Sonn (2024) notes the following:

> *Ek het gesê die doodskiet van ons kinders moet einde kry. Die brutale manier waarop Rosaline en Michael doodgemaak is, raak nie net die gemeenskap van Kakamas nie, maar al die onderdruktes in ons land. En ons van die KPO[29] was daar om ons solidariteit te toon. Die wit predikant het geweier dat ek die huldeblyk toon. Die kerkraad het hul vir die eerste keer in die kerk se geskiedenis verset en by die graf is "Nkosi, Sikekel iAfrika" gesing, wat toe nog deur die regering as 'n verbode proteslied gesien is.*[30] (Sonn 2024, 90)[31]

In a real sense, this overview by Sonn (2024) highlights not only the complex history but perhaps also the necessity to use this hymn in the history of the DRMC. It is thus also linked to the URCSA rejection of apartheid and this church's part in the anti-

26 The tune of "*Nkosi Sikelel' i Afrika*" is also found in a translated version of this hymn in one of the musical publications used in the DRC, namely *Flam*. See in this regard https://missio.org.za/songs/flam-92/

27 For an overview of the history and impact of Enoch Sontonga, see South African History Online. (2011, February 17). Enoch Mankayi Sontonga. South African History Online. https://sahistory.org.za/people/enoch-mankayi-sontonga

28 See https://www.gov.za/about-sa/national-anthem-0

29 *Kaaplandse Profesionele Onderwysersverening* (KPO) refers to the teachers' union, namely Cape Teachers' Professional Association (CTPA).

30 Free translation by the author: I said that the shooting of our children must come to an end. The brutal manner in which Rosaline and Michael were killed affects not only the community of Kakamas but all the oppressed people in our country. And we from the KPO were there to show our solidarity. The white minister refused to allow me to deliver the tribute. For the first time in the church's history, the church council resisted, and at the graveside "*Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*" was sung, which at that time was still regarded by the government as a banned protest song.

31 This section highlights something of the complex history of the DRMC, especially at the time (mid-1980s). In this text, Sonn highlighted the often-complex relationship between white ministers and Coloured church councils in a particular era in the history of the DRMC. He also highlights the call to sing what was a forbidden protest song at the time at a funeral linked to the murder of two children by the 10 South African Police Force – a song that was sung many times over at similar painful church gatherings, especially at funerals.

apartheid struggle.[32] The inclusion of these powerful pieces in the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* (2010) hymnal—despite debates, controversies, and even moments of defiance, as poignantly recounted in Franklin Sonn's Karooseun van Vosburg (2024) at the graveside in Kakamas—underscores how worship became an act of theological and political courage. These hymns bridged linguistic and denominational divides, linked the URCSA's struggle to broader ecumenical and global liberation movements, and transformed funerals and gatherings into spaces of solidarity and protest. Ultimately, this legacy invites ongoing reflection: in singing these songs today, the church not only honours its past but continues to sound the sacred in the public sphere, reminding worshippers that faith demands active resistance to injustice and a persistent commitment to justice, reconciliation, and the flourishing of all God's people in a still-healing nation.

The Future of Hymnals in the URCSA

As mentioned, the hymns and tunes sung in the congregations of the URCSA continue to be influenced by various ecclesial traditions, including but not limited to the Protestant churches. It is projected that this will continue, but it remains to be seen whether the URCSA will continue to compile and publish new hymnals. It must be acknowledged that this is a complex and expensive process—it was the case in the past and will also be the case in the future.[33] Given the history of the URCSA, should be inclusive and give further expression to the identity of this church—a Reformed Church in the context of Southern Africa with various histories and representative of various languages communities.

Given the history and language diversity of the URCSA, future hymnals will have to express this diversity in language, tradition, text, and music. For this to happen, the URCSA will have to be deliberate in its church commissions for hymns and church music and, where possible, draw in congregational expertise and input in such a way that the hymns and possible future hymnals align with congregational life, singing, and ministry. It would indeed be a pity if the URCSA did not see new editions of its hymnals as a way to bring together congregations, histories and faith expressions across cultural and language "borders." Indeed, (a) new hymnal(s) could give further expression of the unity that URCSA would like to express—a unity aligned with the Belhar Confession. It is further foreseen that, should URCSA compile new hymnals, that these, like the music currently sung during Sunday services and more, will continue to be influenced

32 For an overview of the anti-apartheid struggle in the ranks of the URCSA and other churches, see De Gruchy, John W., and Steve De Gruchy. 2004. *The Church Struggle in South Africa*: 25th Anniversary Edition. SCM.

33 From the report of the DRMC Synodical Commission for Church Music and Song (1990), it becomes clear that cost-cutting measures were put in place to make the *Nuwe Sionsgesange* hymnal more affordable. This included limiting the foreword and, ultimately, not adding Psalms to the hymnal (Report 1990, 646).

by context specific realties—a reality that has marked the histories of hymnals in the mentioned church(es) up to now.

It should also be noted that the use of the organ and the piano seem to have become outdated, with church bands increasingly being used to accompany congregations. With this comes a freer style of music that often leads to the use of less formal hymns and *koortjies*. As such, it is not only important to invest in new hymnals but for URCSA to, with other churches and community-based organisation e.g. schools and universities, focus on ways to express its hymns through music as, without musical accompaniment, congregations will not be able to learn new hymns. And as an outcome, the use of a freer style of music might be encouraged, which could indeed have the effect that the rich history of hymns and hymnals in the URCSA is lost.

Closing Remarks

The DRMA, DRCA, and URCSA have a rich history of church music that developed over many decades and found shape in various hymnals. Hymns and hymnals have played a pivotal part in the identities and histories of the URCSA, and they continue to do so. Essentially, the use of hymns and the histories of the hymnals in the church represents the ecclesial identity, history, and interrelatedness of the URCSA, especially with the other churches in the Protestant and Reformed Church traditions.

As further noted in this article, this history shares the same strands of the broader church history of the mentioned churches, with markers linked to identity, change, and its reformed character clearly visible. Further to this, the history of church music in the ranks of the mentioned churches reveals that congregational song has functioned as far more than a liturgical accompaniment to worship. Rather, hymnody and musical practice have served as powerful expressions of faith, identity, and communal resilience within a changing and often oppressive socio-political context. From the early reliance on Dutch Reformed hymn traditions to the emergence of hymnals, such as *Hosana*, *Sionsgesange*, and *Nuwe Sionsgesange*, church music developed alongside the historical and contextual experiences of the congregations that sang these hymns.

During the apartheid era, music became a particularly significant space in which theological conviction and social consciousness converged. Hymns and choral traditions enabled congregations to articulate hope, sustain solidarity, and embody a counter-narrative to racial segregation. In this way, church music participated in the broader theological witness of the DRMC, which culminated in confessional commitments such as the Belhar Confession that emphasise unity, reconciliation, and justice. As is true in the Protestant tradition, hymns often express faith against injustice, and this finds expression in the URCSA with the inclusion of the anti-apartheid anthem "*Nkosi Sikekel' i Afrika*."

It is important to note that these books, hymns, and words are not static. Hymnals change, based on further reflection, expansion, diversification, and theological

interpretation. It remains to be seen to what extent new hymnals will see the light of day in the diverse context of the URCSA and, if published, to what extent they will express the histories, identities, heritage, expressions of faith, and unity/unification in the URCSA. In the post-1994 context, the musical life of URCSA reflects increasing diversity and openness to contextually local influences—also from other churches and church traditions. This evolving musical heritage demonstrates how worship practices continue to shape the church's identity, preserving memory while also enabling new expressions of faith within a transforming Southern African society.

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