

Embodying Belhar: Towards reforming the governance praxis of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa

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The social value of this article could be to initiate a reformation in the governance praxis of a Reformed church. Its academic value could be to suggest that an ecclesial imaginary could enrich reflection on church polity. The aim of the article was to identify weaknesses in the governance praxis of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) and to propose reforms to address them. The Belhar Confession shaped the formation of the URCSA and its Church Order (CO), but the supplementary stipulations, which contained detailed rules for the life of the church, did not reflect either the CO or Belhar. That gap between CO and stipulations has produced a number of challenges. By analysing URCSA documents, the article identified three challenges facing the church's governance 'architecture' and suggested a way of imagining authority that could more faithfully embody the CO and Belhar. The shape of God's authority in the church, as confessed in Belhar, is imagined as a circular canopy, held up by believers. That ecclesial imaginary was also employed to reconceive the relationship between the authority of church councils and broader assemblies. In conclusion, the article proposed the publication of a user-friendly manual that would contain all governance documents and enshrine Belhar and the CO at the heart of the church's life.

Contribution: The article contributes to theological reflection on Reformed church polity by suggesting the use of an ecclesial imaginary to reconceive authority. It contributes to actual church governance by proposing a collaborative process to write implementing rules for the URCSA's Church Order that flow from the Belhar Confession.

Keywords: Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa; church polity; ecclesial imaginary; authority; governance; reformation.

Introduction

This article is a proposal for reforming the governance praxis of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), with the aim of making it a more faithful embodiment of the Confession of Belhar (henceforth simply Belhar) and the 12 articles of the URCSA Church Order (CO). My approach towards these church polity questions owes much to the publications of Van Rooi (2007) and Smit (2002), in which they argued that Reformed church governance follows the logic of *bely en beliggaam* [confess-and-embody]. I hyphenate this expression to affirm the integral and mutual connection between the two. This article discusses the particular embodiment of Belhar within governance structures and processes. It reflects on the architecture and ethos of governance in a church claiming to be shaped by Belhar.

As this article is aimed at transformation, it is appropriate to use a praxis framework.¹ This requires protagonists to clarify who they are and where they are thinking *from* (agency), how they understand the context, what their sources of authority are, and the actions they discern as required to reach envisaged goals. My agency in writing this article is as an emeritus URCSA minister who was a tent-making minister of the Melodi ya Tshwane congregation, the scribe of the Northern Synod for one term, and involved in the Northern Theological Seminary in Pretoria. I taught missiology at the University of South Africa (UNISA), and have no special

1. In my understanding, praxis refers to thinking-and-acting that is multi-dimensional, communal, and aimed at transformation (see Kritzinger 2002:149–150).

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Belhar40', under the expert guidance of guest editor Prof. Christina Landman.

expertise in church polity, but recent events have convinced me that there is a need for a serious rethinking and reforming of the URCSA's governance system.

This article addresses three challenges facing the URCSA: (1) its governance 'architecture'; (2) the separation between the CO and other governance documents; and (3) the format in which those documents are published. I write as a committed member of the URCSA, deeply concerned about the present state of its governance. I do this in line with the adage *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est* [a reformed church must constantly be reformed], to which we need to add *secundum verbum Dei* [according to the Word of God], to avoid mere innovation 'at the mercy of the shifting *Zeitgeist*' (Welker 1999:137). We also need to add *pro mundi vita* [for the life of the world], to avoid mere theological reinterpretation and to develop, as an African Reformed church, culturally shaped governance patterns in solidarity with those who suffer. Duncan (2019:8) has rightly argued that this adage implies 'a dynamic process of inculturation where the gospel is incarnated in each context it encounters'.²

The governance architecture of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa

The first governance challenge facing the URCSA is misunderstanding and confusion regarding its authority structure. In a Reformed (presbyterial-synodical)³ governance system, church councils, presbyteries, synods, and the General Synod are defined as *minor* and *major* rather than lower and higher assemblies. In the actual practice of the URCSA, however, there is a range of views on these relationships, particularly regarding the role of the General Synod. During the ongoing leadership conflict in the Northern Synod, one faction has asserted that the General Synod is 'the highest decision-making structure' in the URCSA,⁴ while the other has argued that the seven regional synods and the General Synod each has its own CO, and that the General Synod does not have the authority to prescribe stipulations for (or impose stipulations on) regional synods.⁵ This paralysing contestation, in which both statements contain an element of truth, needs to be overcome by imagining anew what church authority is and how it is exercised across the church council, presbytery, regional synod, and the General Synod. This requires a reformation based on a new reading of the URCSA CO and the reformed confessions (Belhar in particular) to find a way towards a new, and unifying governance 'architecture'.

2. Referring to this adage, Koffeman (2014:61, 253) also stresses the importance of contextuality in developing church polity.

3. Koffeman (2014:56) argues that 'presbyterial-synodical' is a more adequate description of a Reformed governance system than 'presbyterial'.

4. Example 1: 'The General Synod is the highest decision-making structure [assembly] of the church. The decisions of the General Synod are binding on all regional synods, presbyteries, and congregations' (URCSA Northern Synod, Moderamen B 2024:2).

5. Example 2: '[T]he GS is a broader meeting on the same level of the URCSA-Northern Synod and cannot instruct the regional synod and can also not ignore the Church Order of the URCSA-Northern Synod' (URCSA Northern Synod, Moderamen A 2022:3).

The architecture of God's household

When Belhar¹⁶ confesses that God *gathers* the church, it brings to mind the image of a *circle*: God's scattered people drawn together from exile around a rebuilt temple, and the people of all nations gathering around Jesus as God's crucified Messiah, who draws all people to himself (Mt 8:11; Jn 12:32). Perhaps the most graphic expression of this circle is in Mark 3:34, where Jesus identifies the people sitting *around* him as his brothers, sisters and mother. This imaginary⁷ of the church as a family circle – sisters and brothers of God's gathered household [*oikos*] – is supported by the next words of Belhar 1, namely that God *protects* and *cares for* the church (eds. Plaatjies-van Huffel & Modise 2017:491). The biblical imaginary of a circle resonates with African sensibilities. Vellem (2017) comments that the circle is a trusted African image, which would make it particularly apt for imagining the architecture of an African Reformed church:

A circle is deeply symbolic in African architecture and thus in epistemological architecture, in contrast to straight lines ... at the heart of the Western ways of knowing and thinking, elimination rather than persuasion is core. (p. 7)

When Resane (2017) explains the meaning of *ubuntu*, he writes:

[T]he worldview has always been in circular conception or moods. The huts, livestock enclosures, and household designs are always circular or semi-circular. These designs were meant to enhance the closeness of the community. (p. 102)

The architecture of an African Christian community as a circle of closeness and respectful persuasion is further enhanced by the words of Vellem (2002:7): 'To build a house is to find a cosmos in a chaos', which is reminiscent of Genesis 1, where God created a solid dome or canopy [Hebrew: *raqi'a*]⁸ to repel the watery *chaos* and enable an orderly *cosmos* to emerge. The canopy⁹ represented both God's *protection* against chaos and God's *caring* authority over creation. After the flood, during which God had allowed the canopy to collapse so that the watery chaos of Genesis 1:2 briefly returned, the sign of God's covenant with the earth as the rainbow, a promise that the canopy would not collapse again. The biblical symbolism of the rainbow lies not in its colours but in its shape: it represents the canopy of God's caring, protective authority against the forces of chaos.¹⁰ If we

6. I use Belhar 1 as shorthand for 'Confession of Belhar, Article 1' and CO 2 for 'URCSA Church Order, Article 2'. The text of Belhar can be found in Plaatjies-van Huffel and Modise (2017:489–494).

7. An imaginary portrays how people imagine their world, 'how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (Taylor 2007:23). It differs from a theory because it traces the way people (not academics) imagine their social surroundings and use images or stories to express it. Since an imaginary is shared by a group of people, it has a 'shared sense of legitimacy'.

8. This Hebrew word is translated in different ways. The KJV and RSV translated it as 'firmament', following the Vulgate [Latin *firmamentum*], which was in turn based on the LXX (Greek *stereōma* = something solid). Other translations render it as 'dome' (TEV, NRSV); 'vault' (NIV) or 'expanse' (NASB). The term dome (or canopy) expresses the ancient worldview of a domed sky, which is confirmed by the rainbow imagery in Genesis 9:11–13.

9. I prefer canopy, since dome has become militarised through its use to describe air defence systems. The term 'sacred canopy' was also used to describe the role of religion by the sociologist Berger (1969).

10. In this paragraph, I have developed ideas that I used in Kritzing (2022).

interpret Belhar 1 in such African Reformed terms, we can imagine the architecture of governance in God's church as a circular canopy.

Belhar 1 goes further to say that God does this 'by Word and Spirit', which means through *human agency*, believers enlightened by the Word and inspired by the Spirit.¹¹ The women and men created on the sixth day as God's image-bearers are called to share in God's caring and protecting authority: to live under God's blessing by being a blessing. Humans are created to uphold (literally 'hold up') the canopy of God's caring authority over each other and over all that lives. The church, as a microcosm of that encompassing calling, is a gathered (and gathering) circle of sisters and brothers who hold up the canopy of God's caring and protective authority over one another. In Figure 1, the leader figures (ministers, church council members, ministry executives, Sunday school teachers, etc.) have a cross on their backs to show that they are 'first among equals' leaders.

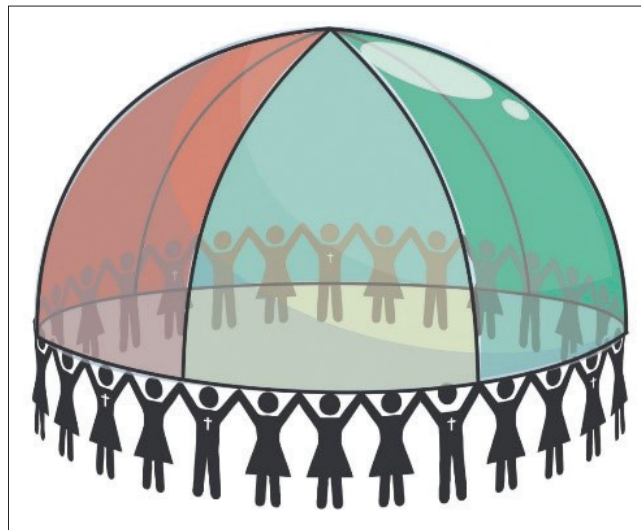
The shape of ecclesial authority

That brings us to the presbyterial-synodical governance system of the Reformed tradition, which attempts to overcome hierarchically shaped authority structures. Koffeman (2014:95) suggests that it could be called a system of 'representative eldership', which means that there are elders (presbyters) in every sphere of authority, where the term 'elder' includes both teaching elders (ordained ministers) and ruling elders. Institutional authority in this governance system is spread across four assemblies, with a relationship of subsidiarity between them. To overcome the tendency of imagining a hierarchical relationship among them, I contend that these four bodies can be best imagined as circular canopies, ranging from the smallest (church council) to the largest (general synod), in which each canopy of God's caring and protecting authority is 'held up' by a circle of mature, elected office bearers. The function and scope of these bodies differ, but the *shape* of their authority is *identical*: It is the same authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, 'the only universal bishop, and the only head of the church' (Christian Reformed Church in North America n.d.: Article 31).

The notion of *human* office-bearers 'holding up' the canopy of *divine* authority in this ecclesial imaginary requires clarification. This holding up means honouring Christ's Lordship over the church, but much more than that. It requires an internalising of 'the mind of Christ' (Phlp 2:5) by each office bearer. It means believers 'working out the salvation' of the church, *because* God is at work in and through them (Phlp 2:12–13). There is a delicate correlation between God's protecting and caring authority *over* the church and our protecting and caring authority *in, with, and for* God's church.¹² This divine–human correlation is clearly expressed

11. God's action 'by Word and Spirit' clearly reaches wider than the church, but in Belhar 1 the focus is ecclesial.

12. This delicate correlation between God's gracious initiative and our faithful participation in God's work was the key structural principle of the theology of G.C. Berkouwer, a well-known Dutch systematic theologian. We do well to treasure this divine-human correlation at the heart of our theology (see De Jong 1971; Kritzing 1974).



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FIGURE 1: Holding up the canopy of God's caring authority.

in Article 30 of the Belgic Confession (Christian Reformed Church in North America n.d.):

We believe that ministers of the Word of God, elders, and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by a legitimate election of the church, with prayer in the name of the Lord, and in good order, as the Word of God teaches. So, all must be careful not to push themselves forward improperly, but must wait for God's call, so that they may be assured of their calling and be certain that they are chosen by the Lord. (Christian Reformed Church in North America n.d.: Article 30)

Office bearers need to be sure they are *chosen by the Lord*; they also need to be *chosen* to their offices by a legitimate election of *the church*. These two notions can only be held together by the praxis of a mature believing community guided by God's Word and inspired by God's Spirit. As leaders, they seek God's will for God's church by holding up the canopy of God's caring and protecting authority over the church – and over themselves.

Authority in a congregation

Smit (2002:360) has shown that the Reformed tradition has always drafted a CO primarily for a local worshipping congregation, pointing out that the earliest documents in this regard were *liturgical* in nature, conceived as 'an order for building up a lively, active confessing congregation centred around a worship service' (Smit 2002:360, [author's own translation]). The drafters of the URCSA CO followed that example. After affirming the identity, confession, and membership of the URCSA at large in CO 1–3, the following section (CO 4–7), which Smit regards as 'the heart of the church polity rules', focuses on the life of a congregation:

It deals with the congregation ... the community of believers and the fullness of the church, according to Reformed confession, gathered together in a particular place to serve God, one another, and the world, and the logical order in this triad is of key importance. (Smit 2002:366, [author's own translation])

The way in which local leadership is regulated according to CO 4–7 resonates with the imaginary of a congregation as a canopy-shaped circle. The starting point is that the *whole congregation* holds up the canopy of God's caring-protecting authority, which is specified in CO 4–5 as a set of five 'services': worship, instruction, care, service, and witness. Those five essential services are rearranged by the Integrated Ministries (IM) model into three Core and three Support Ministries, creating a six-fold ministry-cum-governance model.¹³ These six Ministries constitute the canopy that the URCSA has designed to embody its CO in a coordinated way. The IM Model is rooted in the CO: 'Confessions find their embodiment in COs which again find their embodiment in the structuring of the practical ministries of the church' (URCSA General Synod 2012:36).

To combine the IM Model with a circular canopy imaginary in this way creates a distinct vision of leadership in a congregation. Leaders in ministries do not stand above other members, but alongside them – to inspire, mobilise, and coordinate members' activities across the six Integrated Ministry fields and in their collaboration. When ward leaders or ministry leaders¹⁴ gather as a church council, they do not move up the canopy to occupy 'higher' positions but remain rooted to the ground, 'next to' the other members.¹⁵ This is based on the Reformed notion that:

[A]ll authority is vested in bodies of officers: 'no single person – not even the minister – is vested with power that can be exercised unilaterally' ... Churches are to be governed by assemblies ... on all levels, and not by individual persons. (Koffeman 2014:56)¹⁶

By superimposing the five 'services' of CO 4–5 or the six IM 'ministries' onto the 'circular canopy' imaginary (as portrayed in Figure 1), three postures of service become visible, according to the 'logical order' identified by Smit (2002:366): Serving God, one another, and the world. Firstly, we see the congregation facing *upward*, in worship, their arms raised [*orantes*]¹⁷ to praise and petition the triune God, whose gathering, protecting, and caring love 'covers' them. A governance system that does justice to this will be liturgical (Smit 2002:360) and therefore doxological. When members hold up the canopy together, they raise their arms: act for God's glory. Secondly, moved by the foundational experience of God's presence in worship, members also face *inward*, towards each other, in activities of instruction and care to

build the quality of their shared community. Thirdly, they are also moved to turn around and face *outward*, anointed by the Spirit for activities of service and witness, as they participate in the messianic mission of the Jesus movement (Lk 4:18–19, Jn 20:21, Ac 1:8). In all of this, leaders exercise authority *alongside* other members, not above them, planning and working shoulder to shoulder with them for the coming of God's reign and the building of God's household of freedom (Russell 1987).¹⁸

At this point, the inadequacy of a circular imaginary for the whole of a congregation's life becomes clear: It can easily foster a church-centred mentality, making a congregation a club for insiders, whose 'outreach' in service and witness is little more than forays of condescending charity or superficial witness. The image of a congregation as an upward-inward-outward-facing *circle* is only one imaginary that fruitfully shapes its praxis of service and witness. It needs to be complemented with imaginaries that are both *forward*-facing (eschatological)¹⁹ and *others*-facing (liberating, reconciling, intercultural, interreligious, etc.). That requires an open image, like the semi-circular design of the *kgotla* in African communities, which creates space for interaction, dialogue, and community well-being (Resane 2017:102–103). The circle breaks open into numerous configurations of service (guided by Belhar 3–5 and CO 4.4), to gather again later as a circle for worship, *koinonia*, and decision-making.

In spite of this qualification, the image of a circular canopy is helpful in focusing this article on decision-making and the exercise of authority. One additional dimension needs to be added, however: The canopy should be imagined as transparent. Precisely because church council members act among, with, and for a whole congregation when they deliberate and make decisions on the life of the congregation, those decisions need to be communicated to the congregation. When a church council becomes a closed and secretive body that exercises leadership without transparency and accountability, it betrays the ecclesiology of the CO and Belhar. The accountability structure of a church council is clear in CO 6.4: 'Because office bearers perform a service in and to the congregation, the congregation shall decide who will fill the offices'. The authority of a church council is derived, not inherent; they are accountable to God and to those who elected them in God's name (Christian Reformed Church in North America n.d.: Article 31).

Transparency has another side to it. Gathering, caring, and protective actions are visible and tangible; they are based on trust and inherently vulnerable. The canopy should be imagined as made of glass: Both transparent and fragile. And it is wisely said that people who live in glass houses should not throw stones. Trust, like glass, is fragile. Authoritarian

13.The three Core Ministries are: Proclamation and Worship, Congregational Ministries, Service and Witness, while the Support Ministries are: Finance and Administration, Judicial Matters, Communication, Publications and Archives.

14.The question whether a church council should consist of leaders who represent geographical 'wards' (the prevailing system) or IM task teams is a key issue when considering a reform of governance in church councils.

15.This vision of leadership shows substantial agreement with the 'servant leadership' model of Greenleaf (1970) and numerous authors who have been influenced by him.

16.The quote within Koffeman's quote is from Long (2001:65).

17.A common prayer posture in early Christian art was standing with arms uplifted, described in Latin as *orans* (plural *orantes*), which means 'praying' (see Du Bourgnet 1965:24–25).

18.Russell's metaphor of the church as 'household of freedom', in which authority is viewed as 'partnership in community' and 'reality is interpreted in the form of a circle of interdependence' (Russell 1987:34) resonates deeply with my approach.

19.This eschatological dimension is explicit in Belhar 1, which confesses that God has been gathering, protecting and caring for the church from the beginning of the world 'and will do to the end'.

and insensitive actions by a church council can fracture members' trust in it and undermine its credibility. The worst that can happen to a congregation is that one person (or a group) distorts the canopy imaginary into an umbrella (with a central shaft), and holds it up by themselves, thereby usurping the authority meant to be shared by the members of God's household.

Authority in major assemblies

The best picture of the broader governance architecture of the URCSA is provided by CO 8, which indicates that the purpose of the two major assemblies (presbytery and synod) is to form a visible link between congregations. It is *congregations* that come together in *meetings*, by means of delegated *representatives*, to give visible expression to the unity of the church (God's *gathering* authority) and to serve one another (God's *protecting and caring* authority). Their purpose is 'joint consultation on matters that affect all congregations' (URCSA General Synod 2026:8). Two aspects stand out, which can be highlighted by means of the 'circular canopy' imaginary.

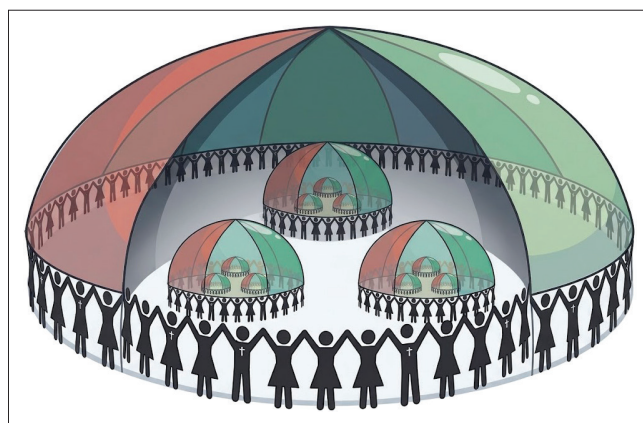
In the first place, broader assemblies are *meetings*, not permanent structures. They are intended to enhance the life and ministry of congregations and should therefore refrain from establishing themselves as centres of authority that move the 'centre of gravity' of this governance system away from local congregations. Since all the congregations jointly decide the policies and procedures in these assemblies, a presbytery or synod is not the 'head office' of an organisation making decisions for its 'branches'. The basic pattern of authority in the whole church is established in the local congregation as a circular canopy, and all broader assemblies (presbytery, regional synod, general synod) need to replicate that pattern. They all consist of congregational delegates (ministers and church council members) standing side by side in a circle to hold up God's gathering, caring, and protecting authority over that particular section of God's church for which that meeting assumes responsibility.

If this fundamental vision is lost, broader assemblies are tempted to operate like political or business entities, in which authority is vested in individual leaders who get elected on the basis of popular support or financial influence. As a result, ambitious ministers canvass support, and their supporters lobby for the election of a 'slate' of preferred candidates. When that happens, the concerns of congregations are overshadowed (or replaced) by power games among individuals and interest groups. The URCSA has fallen prey to this temptation, as evidenced by the tensions during the Moderamen elections at the 2022 General Synod.²⁰ To my mind, this reveals not merely a

20. At the 2022 General Synod in Stellenbosch, the delegates of the Cape regional synod tabled an order motion for the Moderamen election to be 'redone' when it became clear that the first three names on the 'slate' that had circulated on social media before the meeting were indeed elected by the meeting. Their reasons were: 'The elections lack integrity due to slate politicisation [*sic*] the church. 2. Delegates have clearly elected not by the guidance of the Spirit of God but by political interests. ... 4. We fear that factional interests have capture [*sic*] the church to the detriment of the real interests and future of our church' (URCSA GS Acta 2022:51).

problem of ambitious individuals but a systemic governance problem, with the following dimensions: (1) there is a hierarchy between the assemblies, with General Synod at the apex; (2) the moderator of General Synod therefore attains an aura of 'head of the church'; (3) a synod starts resembling a parliament, with contesting groups vying for power; and (4) the divisions that were endemic in the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) (the exclusion of women from leadership positions and racialised 'coloured' and 'African' identities) resurface as causes for grievance and bases for divisive mobilisation. Such a politicised governance system needs to be urgently reformed towards a more faithful embodiment of Belhar and the CO, before mutual trust erodes to the point that the fragile canopy cracks. This article contends that the required reformation will be assisted if each major assembly's authority is imagined as canopy-shaped, *identical in nature* to that of a church council, except that it has a *wider scope*, since its delegates hold up a larger, more encompassing canopy (Figure 2).

The implications of this governance architecture need to be explained further. Firstly, the major assemblies of the URCSA have the same authority canopy-shaped authority, but different functions. Those functions are governed by the principle of subsidiarity, which means that 'decisions have to be taken on the lowest possible level' and that 'major assemblies only decide on issues that minor assemblies cannot handle or that are common to all congregations represented on this specific level' (Koffeman 2014:57). In other words, it is misleading to say simply that the General Synod is the 'highest decision-making body' in the URCSA. It all depends on the issue at hand. The matters that properly belong on the table of the General Synod are listed in CO 11. On those issues, the General Synod has the final word – which means that its decisions are binding on all members, congregations, and broader assemblies – but on the vast majority of governance decisions, presbyteries and regional synods have the final word when acting in accordance with the supplementary stipulations of regional synods.



Source: Image created jointly by J.N. Kritzing and C. Peter, Lenasia, South Africa, February 2026. Used with permission. No unauthorised duplication allowed

FIGURE 2: Canopies within canopies.

Secondly, it must be possible to appeal to a broader assembly against an adverse ruling by a minor assembly, in line with Belhar 4 (to avoid power abuse and victimisation), but allowing major assemblies to become 'courts of appeal' is contrary to the governance ethos suggested in this article. To my mind, the Support Ministry for Judicial Matters (SMJM) in each congregation, presbytery, and synod should be reimagined as a Core Ministry for Just Governance (CMJG), which: (1) develops the governance system; (2) trains church council members for their governance responsibilities; and (3) trains expert mediation teams to function among the congregations of that particular broader assembly. Since ongoing conflicts pose a serious threat to the URCSA's well-being, this ministry should be a Core, not a Support, Ministry.²¹ When a mediation team fails to facilitate a just resolution to a conflict, it may recommend remedial (or disciplinary) action to the assembly in which it operates, but no broader assembly should be expected to act as a 'jury' consisting of 30-odd (or 150-odd) members to hear cases and deliver judgements. In line with Belhar 4 and CO 6.2, the justice sought by this Core Ministry will not be *judicial* in a narrow, punitive sense but *just* in a compassionate, empowering, and restorative sense.²²

Thirdly, there is equality among the delegates attending major assemblies, since they are all church council members. There is no higher office in the URCSA. Church Order 6.2 says that 'the offices of teaching and managing elder and of deacon may be used' to lead the five 'universal services' mentioned in CO 4-5, but adds that 'other offices' may be developed, considering the particular circumstances of a congregation. This suggests that there is no hierarchy among the offices of minister, elder, and deacon, nor among any other offices a congregation may develop. All church council members have the same status in a church council, *and* when they attend a presbytery, regional synod, or General Synod as delegates. They stay firmly on the ground, while holding up the canopy of God's authority together with all the other delegates at that particular broader assembly.

Fourthly, delegates at a broader assembly do not 'represent' the congregations to which they belong in the sense that they are expected to campaign for the interests of that congregation or that the church council can bind their conscience to vote in a particular way on an issue. Janssen (2000) argues that:

[M]embers of greater assemblies do not represent the interests of the lesser assemblies ... [O]fficebearers [*sic*] represent Christ, and the authority they exercise comes not from 'below' but from the One who calls them to the office. (p. 19)

Likewise, delegates who attend General Synod are delegated by presbyteries but do not represent presbyteries in the sense

21. It seems that the authors of the IM model classed as Core ministries those that embodied the five 'services' of CO 4-5, while the other three (judicial, finance, communication) were judged to be supportive. Whether the distinction was intended to allocate importance or not, Judicial Matters reshaped as mediation-focused Just Governance must certainly be a Core Ministry.

22. For reflections on the relationship between Belhar 4 and compassionate, empowering, restorative justice, see Koopman (2007), Boesak (2008:160-162) and Naudé (2010:201-210).

that they campaign for the interests of that presbytery or that the presbytery can bind their conscience to vote in a particular way on an issue. The participants who gather as a General Synod are no more (and no less) than church council members of local congregations. While they stand in a circle to hold up the canopy of God's gathering, caring, protecting authority over *all* the congregations of the URCSA, they imagine the members of their congregations 'back home' standing alongside them to keep their feet on the ground.

The worst that can happen to a presbytery or synod is that one person (or a small group) distorts the canopy imaginary into an umbrella with a central shaft, and competes with other contenders (even using court cases) to hold it up by themselves, thereby usurping the authority that is to be shared by all the members of God's household. Measures that could prevent such actions include drafting a code of conduct for leaders of broader assemblies to hold them accountable to a strict set of values. As passages such as Luke 12:48, 1 Corinthians 4:2, and James 3:1 suggest that church leaders have to be judged with greater strictness, a set of rules to govern their specific conduct as leaders would be fully justified, given the huge damage it does when they disrespect the rules and the difficulty of holding them accountable.²³

To conclude this section on the exercise of authority by major assemblies, the role of theological teachers and researchers in church governance should also be mentioned. Each church member with a rational (thinking) faith is a theologian in their own right, without formal theological training. But academically equipped theologians have a special responsibility to contribute to the depth, integrity, and effectiveness of the Core and Support Ministries, standing alongside other members to hold up the minor and major canopies of God's gathering-caring-protecting authority. It is their specific obligation to inform, inspire, and equip God's people by being deeply involved in the diverse ministries that build God's church

The relationship between the Church Order and other governance documents

Another challenge facing the governance praxis of the URCSA is the lack of clarity on the relationship between the CO and the other governance documents that appear with the CO in the '2022 Church Order' of the General Synod (URCSA General Synod 2026),²⁴ namely stipulations, regulations, agreements, memoranda of agreement, and constitutions. To approach this issue, it helps to look at the nature and origin of the CO and its relationship to Belhar.

23. In the present stipulations, when a synodical office bearer acts irresponsibly, the only remedy available is to lodge a complaint with the presbytery where they reside. But expecting a presbytery to adjudicate the leadership performance of a leader in the sphere of synod puts undue stress on the system. Given the culturally shaped respect for senior leaders, it simply does not happen. An expert mediation team appointed by a synod (see above) would be an appropriate body to receive a complaint against a leader's performance, adjudicating it in terms of a code of conduct signed by all synodical office bearers at their election.

24. This publication is 7 years old, but still contains the official position of the URCSA, since the General Synod has not published an update of its governance documents.

This is necessary for interpreting Belhar, as Tshaka (2010) has argued:

The Belhar Confession is usually interpreted without taking the new CO into account. This interpretation creates the impression that the issues which are discussed in the Confession are abstract issues. (p. 178)

The origin and nature of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa church order

As COs go, the URCSA CO is remarkably short. It has only 12 articles and consists of a little more than 2300 words. It was drafted by a *Gesamentlike Gesprekskommissie* [Joint Discussion Commission] of delegates from the DRMC and the DRCA, which met regularly between 1988 and 1990 to develop a CO and make recommendations for the administration and theological training of the new church. The task team for the CO agreed early on that they could not merely put together the COs of the DRCA and DRMC, as both were based on ecclesial visions that were theologically unacceptable (Smit 2002:366). They argued that the united church would not be genuinely new if its CO merely replicated (or duplicated!) the governance patterns of the former churches. They decided to develop a CO from the ground, based on Belhar and the other Reformed confessions, taking their cue from the words in Belhar 2.6 that ‘unity can take form only in freedom and not under constraint’, which they took to mean that CO provisions:

[S]hould not be overly rigorous, top-down, prescriptive, or too detailed, but instead flexible, spontaneous, supple, leaving enough room for believers, congregations, and major assemblies to make arrangements in ways they find meaningful for themselves in their concrete situations and for their specific needs. (Smit 2002:367)

This statement reveals the commission’s excitement at having the opportunity to craft a Belhar-shaped CO that would set in motion ongoing church polity development to overcome the imposed racist divisions of the past. The formative influence of Belhar is evident throughout the CO, but it is not the purpose of this article to trace that influence. My purpose is to ask whether the hope of the CO’s drafters to initiate a movement of ongoing Belhar-driven church polity formation has been realised.

Indeed, the formative influence of Belhar is evident throughout the Church Order, as Smit (2002:367–368) and van Rooi (2007) have demonstrated. The Church Order also resonates with African values and practices, as Modise (2020) pointed out in his creative reading of it through the lenses of community, *ubuntu* and *ujamaa*. However, the purpose of this paper is not to trace the connection between the CO and Belhar or African culture; it is to ask whether the expectation of the CO’s drafters that it would set in motion an ongoing movement of Belhar-driven church polity formation has been realised in the URCSA.

Church polity developments, 1994–2026

The CO drafted by the joint DRCA–DRMC commission was approved by the first General Synod of the URCSA in 1994

and has not been amended in the past 32 years, but numerous additional documents have accumulated around it due to the various challenges facing the new church. The most recent publication of those documents is the 2022 CO (URCSA General Synod 2026), which contains the following governance documents:

- Chapter 1: The CO (URCSA General Synod 2026:6–11).
- Chapters 2–5: 100 ‘stipulations’, which contain rules for the functioning of all congregations, presbyteries, and regional synods (URCSA General Synod 2026:12–77).
- Chapter 6: A section entitled ‘Procedure of meetings’, which contains: (1) rules for the functioning of General Synod; (2) decision-making procedures for all meetings (URCSA General Synod 2026:78–87).
- Chapter 7: 14 ‘Regulations’²⁵ that contain rules for: (1) General Synodical Commission and General Secretary; (2) ‘statutes’ of Ministers of the Word, ministerial formation, ‘integrated ministries’ model, and church unification (URCSA General Synod 2026:88–136).
- Chapters 8–9: Various agreements and church unity documents (URCSA General Synod 2026:137–159).
- Chapter 10: Constitutions of the ‘special ministries’ (guilds), such as the Christian Women’s Ministries, Christian Men’s Ministry, etc. (URCSA General Synod 2026:160–243).

List of important resolutions (URCSA General Synod 2026:244–260).

This governance terrain is complex and a bit confusing, as there is no introduction that explains the relationship between all the documents. In this article, I only discuss the relationship between the CO and the stipulations that regulate everyday life in congregations, which are contained in Chapters 2–5 of this General Synod publication and in the supplementary stipulations published by regional synods.²⁶

Many church members are unaware of the CO’s existence. When they ask ‘What does the CO say?’ they are referring to the supplementary stipulations, where they can find the specific rules for what they need to do. If the supplementary stipulations had been shaped by (and developed from) the CO, that would not have been a problem, since there would have been synchrony. But sadly, there is no evidence in the stipulations of any impact from the CO or Belhar. They were not developed out of the CO, as its drafters had hoped. Apart from some terminological adjustments, the supplementary stipulations currently in use contain substantially the same rules as those used by the two separate churches before 1994. The challenges facing the newly united church left no time or

25.This use of the term ‘Rule’ or ‘Regulation’ in the singular is confusing. It is a translation of the Afrikaans word *reglement*, which refers to a set of rules or regulations. Each document in Chapter 7 should rather be called ‘Regulations for (or regarding) ...’.

26.In this article, I refer only to church polity publications of the Northern Synod (URCSA Northern Synod 2011, 2019), where I reside. Each regional synod faces its own governance challenges, which cannot be adequately addressed by one author or in one academic paper, but I believe that the approach proposed in this paper addresses fundamental issues in all regional synods.

energy to develop a new set of stipulations, so the old ones were retained for pragmatic reasons.²⁷

The General Synod did, however, initiate a process in 2008 to lay down a 'common set of stipulations' for the whole church, to minimise differences between regional synods.²⁸ The content of that common set was arrived at by 'aligning' the stipulations that were then being used by the URCSA regional synods at the time, which were the ones inherited from the former DRMC and DRCA (URCSA GS Agenda 2008:17). In other words, the common set did not emerge from the CO or Belhar. The present situation is that each regional synod has its own 'CO' that includes a set of regional supplementary stipulations, which 'incorporated' the common set approved by General Synod (URCSA GS Acta 2016:138). However, the relationship between the common set of stipulations and the 'COs' of regional synods is unclear and has contributed to division.²⁹

This lack of clarity needs to be resolved to ensure that every member understands very clearly that the URCSA has *only one* CO, with twelve articles, which expresses the fundamental calling and nature of the church's life. And to understand that speaking of 'the CO of a regional synod' – as if each regional synod has its own unique CO – is confusing and simply wrong. The full title of this publication of the Northern Synod is *CO and Supplementary Stipulations of the Northern Synod 2019*, but it seems that the words 'and supplementary stipulations' are not noticed – or not understood. The sad result is that the real CO gets ignored and that the supplementary stipulations become the *de facto* 'CO' of a regional synod.

Finally, before moving to some constructive suggestions, the fact that the General Synod publication (URCSA GS 2026) bears the title '2022 CO' seems to suggest that the entire book contains the CO of the URCSA. The actual CO, which takes up only five pages at the beginning, is thereby marginalised into one document among many others, even though its five pages contain the only 'entrenched' clauses in the book, which can only be amended through a lengthy process.³⁰

A proposal to remedy the situation

This paper proposes a systemic reformation of the governance system of the URCSA to remedy some of the weaknesses identified in the previous sections. Firstly, it

27. It should be clear that the Joint Discussion Commission, which drafted the Church Order, was not responsible for this gap. It was successive URCSA General Synods after 1994 that took this pragmatic direction.

28. The history of that development cannot be described in detail here but can be traced from URCSA Agenda (2001:82), URCSA GS Agenda (2008:16–17), URCSA GS Acta (2012:86, 220) and URCSA GS Acta (2016:138).

29. As an example, the question whether a regional synod has a permanent Commission of Order (stipulated in the common set of the General Synod, but not explicitly in the Northern Synod 'Church Order') was one of the key issues in the conflict that divided the Northern Synod.

30. Article 11.2 of the Church Order determines that any amendment to the Church Order may only be made 'after two-thirds of the Regional synods have approved the change and the General synod has decided in favour thereof with a two-thirds majority' (URCSA General Synod 2026:9).

requires a shared journey of a committed group of minister-theologians and church members to draft a new 'common set' of stipulations based directly on the CO and Belhar. The new set should not be a mere adaptation of the existing stipulations, but the creative formulation of a Belhar-shaped way of being church in the broken South African society. Each CO article should be examined systematically to identify constructive ways to implement it in congregations and major assemblies. The circular canopy architecture proposed earlier could be a helpful framework for conceiving the new rules. Since the term *supplementary* suggests that something needs to be *added* to the CO, it is advisable to use a term such as 'implementing rules' instead, to emphasise that the CO needs to be *implemented*, not *supplemented*.

Secondly, in terms of process, the drafting of these rules should be endorsed by the General Synod and, ideally, be completed within 4 years for approval by the following General Synod. A central task team should be appointed by the General Synod to arrange in-depth discussions with SMJM-assisted task teams in all regional synods, presbyteries and congregations to ensure optimal collaboration and buy-in from church members as part of a communal discernment journey. To use the circular canopy imaginary, this is not an administrative or bureaucratic review of existing rules; it is a divine [*semper reformanda*] calling to hold up the gathering-caring-protecting authority of the triune God over the whole of the URCSA, which requires wisdom, humility, and patience. It will require a multidimensional praxis journey, as explained at the beginning of the paper. Coertzen (1998) has commented as follows on such a journey:

The drawing up of a CO, compiling rules for the life of the church, is an enormous responsibility born of a great deal of prayer, study of the Scriptures, and dependence on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (p. 57)

This is a huge challenge, but it need not take longer than 4 years – from one General Synod to the next – to produce the first draft. Once the General Synod has approved the new rules, each regional synod should pass a formal resolution to discontinue the use (and further publication) of their separate supplementary stipulations, and commit themselves to implementing the new system.

In this regard, the macro architecture of the URCSA needs to alter the relationship between regional synods and the General Synod. The present arrangement is that regional synods meet within 18 months of a General Synod, and – even if it is not stated – the implication is that regional synods must note (and implement) the new policies and procedures approved by the General Synod. This is necessary, but it establishes a one-way relationship that does no justice to the 'canopies among canopies' governance system proposed above. It seems necessary for regional synods to meet every 2 years: a year after one General Synod and a year before the next, so that mutuality and a healthy

Relevant Bible passages	Relevant extracts from Belhar, other Reformed confessions, and church orders	Article of Church Order	Implementing rules	Advice, examples, precedents, court cases, references to literature, prayers, and blessings
	Ministry challenges or problems	African proverbs and cultural perspectives		

FIGURE 3: Proposed format for a governance manual.

feedback loop can develop between these major assemblies, for the sake of the well-being of all the congregations. Digital media now make it possible to hold more regular meetings of a regional synod without incurring huge costs.

Conclusion

A new governance publication

One of the negative consequences of the eclipsing of the CO, as explained above, was that the supplementary stipulations began functioning independently, as if they alone constituted the church's legal constitution. The Northern Synod attempted to bridge this gap by not printing the entire CO at the beginning, but spreading its 12 articles throughout the publication, each article serving as an introduction to a new set of stipulations (URCSA Northern Synod 2011, 2019). That makes a positive difference, because the reader looking for a Stipulation reads the wording of the CO, but no explanation is given on the relative authority of the statements or the nature of their relationship.

What the URCSA needs is a new CO publication, ideally a Governance Manual, with clear operating instructions. The two focal points of the manual should be the CO and the Implementing Rules, but the key resources used in the formulation of the Implementing Rules must be added as supporting information. This is necessary to reveal the theology and the governance culture in which the Rules are embedded and out of which they emerged (see Figure 3).

When the manual depicted in Figure 3 lies open before a reader, all the relevant sources should be visible at a glance.³¹ The focal point on the left-hand page will be the CO article being implemented, along with key background sources that were used to draft the implementing rules. Those sources would be the Bible, the Reformed confessions, COs of other Reformed churches, church polity publications, African proverbs and other cultural resources, interviews, and consultations with URCSA members.

The focal point of the right-hand page will be the implementing rules that have been formulated on the basis of the specific CO article, illustrated with practical advice, examples, precedents, information on court cases (where relevant), references for further reading, and prayers for

³¹The Governance Manual should ideally be published in a ring-bound A4 format, so that it opens easily and presents an A3-size picture to the reader when opened.

God's guidance when consulting the manual to address a particular ministry situation.

The Governance Manual drafted and printed in this format will ensure that the implementing rules are not reduced to the legal 'constitution' of a religious club, but be read as a set of ecclesial rules that are an integral part of a whole constellation of documents guiding the life of the URCSA – and that cannot be read apart from them in the practice of ministry or in court cases. The purpose is also to ensure that the CO and its implementing rules are not consulted only when there is a 'problem', but are read as a manual for day-to-day ministry. Its intention is to enlighten and empower church members to hold up the canopy of God's gathering-caring-protecting authority over that part of the URCSA for which they have been made responsible. A CMJG will be responsible for organising training workshops to equip as many members as possible to use such a resource faithfully and fruitfully.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Johannes N. Kritzinger: Conceptualisation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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