

Die Ligdraer as a Grassroots Engagement on URCSA's Church Unification and Reconciliation between 1990-1997

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Abstract

One of the pre-occupations of God's mission on earth (*missio Dei*) includes unity and reconciliation. This is well documented in the work of the catholic missiologist, Robert Schreiter (reconciliation), David J Bosch (unity) as well as the ecumenical World Mission Conferences (New Delhi, 1961; Athens, 2005). Unification processes of all the South African Churches (especially between traditionally/originally black and white race-based Churches) coincided with the transition period since 1990. The Churches, including the DRMC and the DRCA, went on a path of unification. This did not come without a wide range of "stumbling blocks." *Die Ligdraer*, as the official newspaper of the DRMC, announced the date of the founding Synod between 14-17 April 1994 using the metaphor of a 'wedding' to reflect on the union between the two separate, racially-based Churches (NGSK, 1993). From a missiological perspective, this paper deals with the case of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) in presenting the perspectives and sentiments on the 'stumbling blocks' experienced, particularly the informal conversations and discussions that are mostly presented in the Church's newspaper (*Die Ligdraer/Ligstraal*). It focuses specifically on the 1990-1997 period of the Church, where most of the letters from members of the congregations, emotions and sensitive issues on the road towards unity were discussed. The paper limits itself to the newspaper of the DRMC, with a focus on the discussions and voices from members at the grassroots but also ministers that were listening to members in congregations to reflect on the 'sacrifices', compromises, accommodation and mutual trust that was at play and the strategies of the leadership of these Churches to facilitate reconciliation.

Key words: URCSA, DRCA, DRMC, reconciliation, unity, *Die Ligdraer*, *Ligstraal*, racism, multilingualism, *missio Dei*

1. Introduction

The moderate members (1990-1997)² of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA), the Uniting Reformed Church

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² This contribution honours those moderate members: Di. Nick Apollis, James Buys, Leonardo Ap-

in Southern Africa (URCSA) were courageous through their undertaking of faith and taking enormous risks to transform the two Churches (DRCA and DRMC). The Churches were built on the basis of one ethnic and cultural tradition to embrace other cultures and traditions within the transition towards a more inclusive South African Church and society. The historic founding Synod of 1994 was followed by the different regional Synodical moderatures. It is apparent in the composition of most of these moderatures that it was inclusive of race, although not entirely gender inclusive.³ However, during the historical period under discussion, the paper will discuss an immense stretch in thinking, in cultural and ethnic accommodations, in consciousness, logistics and praxis. The author presents crucial incidents, events, and matters that posed the potential to thwart the fragile unification process, as seen from the perspectives of those at the grassroots, but also ministers that fostered a grassroots approach. The combined moderature (DRMC and DRCA) during the unification process acted in faith.

Their act of faith should be placed within the context of myriad congregations and members that opposed the idea of unification and congregations that accused the DRMC moderamen of forcing the congregations that were not matured for structural unification. This is apparent in the analysis of the personal letters written to the Church's newspaper rallying for and against the unification of the DRCA and the DRMC a few weeks before the founding Synod (Mettler & Mentor, 1994:7).⁴ However, before the founding Synod, the moderature of the DRMC was faithfully anticipating and hopeful that the DRMC Synod (the same week in which the founding Synod was scheduled) will have a two-thirds majority in order that the DRMC Church order could be amended, and Church unity would be made possible. This was indeed an act of faith – because members of the DRCA were already travelling to the scheduled Synod (with costs incurred) in Belhar, Cape Town. Nico Smith who was also previously part of unity negotiations as part of the DRCA also had his doubts, because he argued in his correspondence in *Die Ligdraer* that things could also prove to be otherwise, and therefore he argues that there are no certainties

pies, Andries Botha, Rusell Botman, Anton Doyer, Sam Buti, Nico Smith, Takatso Mofokeng, Pitkoe.

³ We note the lack of non-sexism in the constitution of these moderamen, but it did change as the URCSA developed. For instance, the inclusion of MA Plaatjies-van Huffel and Christina Landman on the URCSA General Synod.

⁴ See in particular *Die Ligdraer* of 21 March 1994 where numerous ministers motivated, clarified, and encouraged the members towards unification. In this regard, the Church's newspaper played a crucial role in the unification process. See also the list of concerns [bekommernisse] that Dr. JA Breytenbach of Touwsrivier raises that come from members on the grassroots level. He states, "Mense is bekommerd oor die belydenisskrifte in die voorgestelde kerkorde van die verenigende kerk, oor die mag wat aan 'n toekomstige algemene sinode toegeken word, oor die teologiese uitgangspunte van toekomstige opleiding van predikante, oor eiendomme en kerkgeld en oor vele meer" (Breytenbach, 1994:9).

(Smith, 1994:8) nor enormous risks involved.⁵ The moderation members of these two black Churches courageously took a leap of faith. Smith enlists numerous uncertainties, for instance, a two-third majority vote in the DRMC Synod but also cautioned that it would be *Déjà vu* – someone might come forward with an issue that the moderation has not considered – the same that happened during the previous Synod (1990). Therefore, he questioned; who will then cover the travelling costs of the delegates of the DRCA that would have been at that time halfway on their journey to Cape Town? Therefore, though he argues that he encourages the structural unification, he would recommend that the two Synods, the DRMC Synod and the founding Synod of the URCSA are not held in the same week, as there are too many uncertainties and a lot at stake. Smith argues that the Churches (DRMC and DRCA) should be careful not to cause more trauma and disappointment for both Churches (DRMC and DRCA), especially the DRCA that had to suffer disappointment previously (1990) – a similar incident would further traumatise them and might cause the fragile relationship to become irreparable.

Nevertheless, it raises the question of whether the DRMC moderation used the combination of the two Synods in the same week as a strategic step. With the DRCA representatives on their way, there would also be more pressure on the DRMC Synod to calculate the losses and the gains carefully? It also demonstrates the tenacity of the DRCA delegates that were willing to proceed with the founding Synod amidst the risks, and a range of uncertainties.

Moreover, the two Synods and the proposed unification in 1990 and subsequently in 1994 were vehemently opposed by various DRMC congregations, members and presbyteries that wrote letters to *Die Ligdraer* to raise their concerns of what would happen to congregations that did not support the proposed unification in 1994 (NGSK, 1991:5).⁶ This sad state of affairs was also addressed in *Die Ligdraer* on 6 May 1991 (NGSK, 1991b:8).⁷ Nonetheless, there was also those congregants and ministers that presented the concerns of their members that believed otherwise. For instance, the then scribe, AJ Botha in 1986 wrote to *Die Ligdraer* that the

⁵ Smith's letter in *Die Ligdraer* on 21 March 1994 states, "Niemand kan 'n waarborg verstrek dat die sinode van die NGSK met die vereiste twee-derde meerderheid gaan besluit om die benodigde artikel vir die ontbinding van die NGSK en die gevolglike eenwording met die NGKA te aanvaar nie...wie gaan die koste van die NGKA betaal?".

⁶ In 5.5 of the minutes it states, "Die brief van die kerkraad (9/1/91) waarin hulle vra wat sal word van die gemeentes wat nie met die eenheid saamgaan nie..."

⁷ "Diegene wat nou huiwer gee hoog op oor hulle ywer vir die bybelse eise vir kerkeenheid. 'N mense vind dit derhalwe vreemd dat dit onder so 'n vaandel die weg van kerklike boikot desondanks opgegaan word, in severe as wat ringe en gemeentes nou besluit dat hulle van die ordelike proses van kerkvereniging onttrek soos wat hierdie proses deur die sinode van die NG Sendingkerk verlede jaar bepaal is en nader uitgewerk is deur die Algemene Sinodale Kommissie vroeër vanjaar" (NGSK, 1991b:8).

Church would never become unified if it sought to agree on all matters before it reconciles (Botha, 1989:241). Therefore, it is evident that there was a commitment from the leadership of these two black Reformed Churches (DRMC and DRCA), which flowed from the spirit of ‘Belhar’.⁸

Nonetheless, the article discusses the fears, the compromises, the challenges and the risks to be taken and raised by members of the Church. However, it demonstrates the courage that the two moderatures (DRCA and DRMC) showed when they went ahead with the founding Synod in 1994 (NGSK, 1993). This being stated, the URCSA was established, and the moderator, Nick Apollis also conveyed his gratitude to the members of the Churches that prayed for them during the contentious process and discussions of unification (Apollis, 1994b:6). The spirituality of the moderamen between 1990-1997 is apparent in the manner in which they facilitated such a delicate process – which the author would argue to be a “spirituality of reconciliation.”⁹ In the following sections, the author particularly focuses on the issues raised in the official newspaper of the DRMC, *Die Ligdraer*. The author argues that this is, in essence, a response from the grassroots, although the ministers of the Word mostly took it up – it was representations and presentations from their congregations, and the sentiments raised by those in the pews of the DRMC congregations.

2. Mission as Reconciliation

2.1 Church, mission and reconciliation

In the World Mission Conferences, which can be regarded as ‘ecumenical’ perspectives on issues in mission, there are at least two conferences that would assist in framing the matter of reconciliation as the mission of the Church. The first one is the first World Mission Conference in 1961 after it integrates the International Missionary Council (IMC) into the World Council of Churches (WCC), later known as the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). The New Delhi CWME conference (1961) of the WCC reiterated the issue of mission and unity. The issue of “mission and unity” should not only be seen as a theological engagement at the above-mentioned conference but also as an act of the IMC and the ecumenical body to demonstrate that such structural unity is possible.¹⁰ The conference reminded

⁸ “Die eenwording van die NGKA en die NGSK is ‘n proses. Eenheid sal nooit plaasvind as daar van die begin af ooreenstemming oor alle sake moet wees nie. Hierby word die belydenis en die kerkorde ingesluit want daarvoor moet eenstemmigheid heers.”

⁹ This is based on the notion of Robert Schreiter (1992:71) when he discusses the role of the Church and its ministers in the process of reconciliation.

¹⁰ The book of Leslie Newbigin, the last chairperson of the IMC and first chairperson of the commission concern with mission and evangelism’s book, was engendered from the process and therefore his contribution focuses particularly on mission and the Church.

the delegates of the declaration by the Evanston Assembly on intergroup relations. The declaration states, “Any form of segregation based on race, colour, or ethnic origin is contrary to the Gospel, and, is incompatible with the Christian doctrine of man, and with the nature of the Church of Christ.” It also urged them to act more resolutely than they had done before, “to renounce all segregation or discrimination and to work for their abolition within their own life and society”.¹¹

The second World Mission Conferences, within the ecumenical Church, address issues of reconciliation that took place in Athens in 2005. Robert Schreiter was one of the keynote speakers at the CWME conference, with the theme “Come, Holy Spirit, heal and reconcile – called in Christ to be reconciling and healing communities.” He presented an appropriate and relevant reflection on the role of the Church to have a “Spirituality of reconciliation.” In his book, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*, he discusses the Christian understanding of reconciliation as well as a spirituality of reconciliation that would assist the Church not only in conceptualising reconciliation but fulfilling the mission of God.

The missiologist Robert Schreiter (1992:59-62) refers to five tenets of a Christian understanding of reconciliation based on his New Testament analysis:

1. It is God who initiates and brings about reconciliation. Therefore, Schreiter argues that it will be impossible to be fully liberated victims from the ghosts of the past and to overcome completely the damage that has been done.
2. Reconciliation is not a strategy; it is a spirituality, a position in which Christians respond to God’s reconciliation. Therefore, he argues, “Reconciliation is largely discovered than received.” It becomes, therefore, something that ‘naturally’ happens through people’s active participation and acceptance of God’s forgiveness and reconciliation.
3. Reconciliation makes of both the victim and oppressor a “new creation.” It is not about only right and wrong, but it is about bringing both to a new place, where both arrive at a ‘place’ and ‘position’ where they were never before. It is not only the perpetrator that should change but also the victim.
4. The new narrative that overcomes the narrative of the lie is the story of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is in this story that the victim understands that there is victory and healing in the midst of violence and oppression.
5. Reconciliation is also a multi-dimensional reality. It is not only an activity of God, but it is also time for reflection on the otherness and the alienation that the situations of violence and oppression have created.

¹¹ International Missionary Council, The New Delhi Report. The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches, page 188

Schreiter (1992:70-73) argues that the Church can offer reconciliation through a “spirituality of reconciliation.” This involves (1) attitudes of listening and waiting, (2) attention and compassion, and (3) reconciliation as a post-exilic stance.

The Church in South Africa will, therefore, in the first instance be able to assist those that have been affected in various ways through the vicious system of apartheid when it learns to provide space and time for those affected by apartheid to reflect and share their stories. This would make sense, especially in the context of the two black Churches that also have black ministers that were hurt themselves and would become good listeners (Schreiter, 1992:71-72). However, they should simultaneously learn to wait, to allow time for reflection, which in some cultures has been a scarce commodity (time). The process of reconciliation and accepting one another would need time. It does need to appreciate the ‘empty’ spaces that are left open and not being filled with more programmes and actions to fill those voids. People that are victims should be allowed time to become comfortable with themselves as people that are hurt.

He further argues that attention to hurtful memories and events is needed for reconciliation and healing. There is a tendency to escape such memories and to focus solely on God. However, for Schreiter (1992:72), attention to hurt is also needed. He brings the notion of attention and compassion together when he states that the Church has to “walk with,” should attend to would mean to “enter into another’s suffering”.

In the third instance, Schreiter (1992:73) draws from the work of the South African theologian, Villa-Vicencio who argues that in post-apartheid South Africa, theology should be done from a ‘post-exilic’ narrative – the biblical return of the Jews to Jerusalem. He argues therefore that after liberation (from Babylon) is a time of reconstruction of the old. These three components are how Schreiter envisaged the ministry of reconciliation in the Church.

The next section would show how the racial separation and hurt of the past would make it difficult for members of the DRMC congregants and the DRCA congregants to envisage a new Church, and that this struggle was not only a struggle for the Church but ‘personal’ struggles for a vicious past and decades of apartheid and hurt. The following sections attest to how entrenched their hurt was that it was through faith in God that a new dawn was able to breakthrough.

3. The challenge of trust and distrust

It is apparent in the journey towards Church unification of the DRMC and the DRCA that it was inherently a matter of trust. However, incidents and events during the journey demonstrate that the relationship between parties oscillated between trust and distrust. This section refers to some of those instances.

It was during the critical stage in the unity process (1990-1991) that accusations were thrown back-and-forth, which made the then General Secretary Dr. Emilio Castro argue that it is not so much the confession of Belhar or the perspectives on apartheid that is the greatest challenge. As both embraced it and there seems to be more or less consensus on it as becoming part of the confessions of the URCSA this is not the issue – but mutual trust (NGSK, 1991b:1).¹²

This is substantiated through some reports in *Die Ligdraer*. For instance, it becomes apparent that a white minister of the DRCA became distrustful and questioned the intentions of the DRCA because he argued that they publicly and explicitly within the DRCA GS Synod meeting made known their animosity towards the DRC (Dick, 1991:7). His published letter in *Die Ligdraer* cast doubt and distrust about the motives and intentions of the representatives of the DRCA that is also negotiating a unification process with the DRMC. The publication of such an observation and accusation were circulated within the DRMC congregations, and this complicated the matter and caused ongoing tensions between the two black reformed Churches. It also reflects the distrust within the DRCA itself on issues of unification. Moreover, it is concerning that in the same newspaper edition, or the next, there was no reply to such a letter that would balance Dick's views.

Then, the accusation of Sakkie Mentor in *Die Ligdraer* also increased the level of distrust. He accused the DRCA and the DRMC that the members in these congregations were not so much interested in uniting with the DRC than with the unification between the DRCA and the DRMC, which did not sit well with him. Through this, Mentor demonstrates, equally with Dick, their distrust in the DRCA's intentions with the unification (Mentor, 1994:9). The insinuation that the DRC is excluded from the process would definitely raise issues in terms of the integrity of the members on the two Churches' executive structures. These instances made it challenging to develop mutual trust that was imperative for a Church and members that were separated and estranged for years and had to build a relationship of trust. These two instances reflect on the trust relationship before structural unification. However, there is ample evidence that developing a trust relationship within the new Churches was not a matter of the past.

The DRMC newspaper itself came under fire after the founding Synod in 1994, especially from the former DRCA Church members that were sensitive that the newspaper is a continuation of the newspaper of the former DRMC and serving its

¹² Die Ligdraer on 18 November 1991 reports on Castro's perspective on the relationship between the DRC and the DRMC, "Oor die verhouding met die NG Kerk het Dr. Castro gese dat hy agtergekom het dat die verhouding ten diepste geken word deur 'n gebrek aan vertroue, want basies is daar nie 'n belydenis verskil tussen die kerke nie. Die NG Kerk se dat apartheid 'n fout was, julle [NGSK] dat dit kettery is. Albei stem egter saam dat dit 'n ramp was."

former members' interests. Therefore, it was left in the hands of the editors, which were mostly from the former DRMC Church to prove it to be otherwise. The first step was to make use of the dual name *Ligdraer/Ligstraal* to demonstrate such a commitment. However, it became still an issue of trust between the former DRCA and DRMC a year after unification.

A year after the establishment of the URCSA, the *Ligdraer/Ligstraal* states:

A vast majority of congregations of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church work actively in supporting our Church paper. On the side of the former Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, there are signs of a new positive attitude that starts developing. Unfortunately here and there are still people with prejudices of the past, judging the paper without even having read it (URCSA, 1995:6).

The author observes that the establishment of trust between these two black Churches that were estranged for decades would only develop if both engaged in credible actions from both parties. This would instil and develop further trust. It is therefore of paramount importance that the partners in the process should observe from each other genuine attempts and efforts by the other parties to rectify the situation. It is evident that the Churches involved in the unification did not observe from each other such credible actions taking place that would develop and establish trust between them. Therefore, the leadership of Nick Apollis, as the first moderator of the URCSA, is noteworthy when he encourages not only discussion of Synodical level negotiations but activities and engagements on the grassroots level to establish trust (Apollis, 1994:6). Nick Apollis, the moderator of the DRMC Synod (1990-1994), encouraged relationships and spaces where trust would be developed through an openness towards each other, the acceptance of one another and to help to transform the attitudes towards each other and deal with the current prejudices. He argues that when negative dispositions such as fear, prejudices, and distrust have been dealt with, it will become easier to take responsibility towards each other (Apollis, 1994:6).

There was also issues of trust and distrust and internal factions within the DRCA itself during the process and unification negotiations. There is evidence that the DRMC postponed the founding Synod of the URCSA in 1990 because of trust issues within the DRCA (NGSK/NGKA, 1990).¹³ However, after the 1994 founding Synod,

¹³ When there were doubts about the reception of Belhar by the members within the DRCA, Dr. Boesak responded during the combined meeting of the DRCA and the DRMC, "Eindelik deel Dr. Boesak die vergadering mee dat die afvaardiging van die NG Sendingkerk reeds aan die NG Kerk gese het dat die Belydenis van Belhar nie in die pad van eenwording moet staan nie. Dit se ons nou ook aan die NG Kerk in Afrika. Die getroue uitvoering van die Belydenis van Belhar impliseer reeds eenwording en daarom sal eenheid juis die Belydenis van Belhar getrou wees" (NGSK/NGKA, 1990).

there were still some of the DRCA congregations in the Phororo and Free State that accused the URCSA of insufficient consultation within the DRCA during consultations, as well as a 'forced' hand by members of the executive of the DRCA. However, it is also crucial to understand the distrust among members within the DRCA itself which distrusted each other, and suspicions and ire raised during the negotiation process between them and the DRMC. The minutes from the moderamen of the combined Synod (DRMC and DRCA) in 1991 reflect that there were insufficient consultations within the two Churches, which was the reason that the founding Synod was delayed providing sufficient time for more consultations and discussions. Despite such consultation, there were still internal factions that led to a schism within the DRCA and the later development and establishment of the DRCA within the Free State. This shows that the trust relationship between members within the DRCA itself and its ministers was not easily overcome.

Trust issues developed between members within the DRMC moderatures of 1990-1994. The extraordinary meeting of the moderamen on 15 June 1991 reflects the strong sentiments and opinion clashes between those on the executive structure of the DRMC in terms of the postponement or the execution of the decision to have the founding Synod for the establishment of the URCSA on 17-21 July 1991 (NGSK, 1991a:1-6). Between the four moderation members of the DRMC, Apollis, Botha, Botman and Buys, the scribe of the DRMC moderation, Andries Botha resigned in that meeting (NGSK, 1991d:4). It is evident that these members had their sharp differences, and that for instance, James Buys would present and oppose strongly the actions of the moderator (Nick Apollis) and the scribe, for drafting a "concept declaration" before a meeting that lead to some diverse opinions and arguments for and against the founding Synod to be held on 17-21 June 1991 (for the establishment of the URCSA). James Buys and Russel Botman were adamant that the founding Synod should continue in 1991, while Andries Botha and Nick Apollis believed that due to Church order 'issues,' there should be a postponement (NGSK, 1991a:1-6). It is also interesting that Nick Apollis and Andries Botha stated that in their personal capacity that they would continue to advise the DRMC members not to proceed with the Synod because of the risks involved for continuing with it (NGSK, 1991a:5).¹⁴ The meeting was so intense that it is noted in the extraordinary meeting of the moderator's minutes that the meeting ended abruptly. Was this such a contentious issue and tempers inflamed to such an extent that the meeting was

¹⁴ The minutes of the moderation meeting state, "Ds Apollis en Dr. Botha gee kennis dat hulle in hulle persoonlike hoedanigheid voortgaan om die kerk te adviseer om nie die risiko's te loop deur met die eenheid voort te gaan nie" (NGSK, 1991a). He stated his reasons, "Ek is oortuig dat om met die eenheid in hierdie omstandighede voort te gaan 'n kerkverdeling onafwendbaar maak wat ek ten alle koste will vermy" (NGSK, 1991a:5).

cut short? Their deliberations, among others, were the result of distrust between the two sides of the argument within the DRMC executive.

In the interim, the contentious debate between the DRMC moderation members in 1991 caused distrust when these colleagues also questioned one another's integrity and character (NGSK, 1992:3).¹⁵ In this case, it is particularly noted that Nick Apollis and the scribe, AJ Botha were reluctant to meet again with the DRCA because the moderator of the DRCA, Sam Buti said he was insidious in the unity process. Apollis took it quite personal and therefore raised his concerns to the meeting on 17 February 1992. However, the General Synodical Commission Meeting (GSC) members encouraged Apollis to have a personal conversation with Sam Buti before the next combined moderation meeting on 19 February 1992 (NGSK, 1992:3).¹⁶ This was eventually done, however, still remains uncertain as to the extent that the fragile relationship was restored.

Russel Botman also tendered his resignation during the 27 February 1992 moderation meeting, he argued that the other two moderator members, Nick Apollis and the scribe AJ Botha were not serious with unity (NGSK, 1992b:3).¹⁷ However, though Buys maintained his resignation during the moderamen meeting on 11 March 1992, Botman withdrew his resignation with a clear message that there would still be an issue of 'distrust' between him and some members of the DRMC moderation.¹⁸ Anton Doyer accepted his nomination as Actuaris, after he initially declined his nomination as the replacement of Buys as Actuaris on the moderation of the DRMC.

However, the contrasting views did not only transpire between the four moderation members, they also brought about factions within the DRMC during the period 1990-1994; those that support the postponement and those that would call for an early Synod (1991). This resulted in spats in *Die Ligdraer* between ministers such

¹⁵ The minutes state, "Na 'n lang en soms driftige debat waarby ander sake wat wantroue en misverstande veroorsaak het en mekaar se integriteit teenoor mekaar te sprake gebring het, ook genoem word, word van die saak afgestap" (NGSK, 1992:3).

¹⁶ The minutes' state on point 4, "Ds Apollis spreek sy persoonlike onvergenoegdheid uit om aan die volgende ontmoeting met die NGKA deel te neem in die lig van die beskuldiging dat die voorsitter en die skriba volgens Ds Buti, verraderlik opgetree het in die eenwordingsproses" (NGSK, 1992:3).

¹⁷ In the moderator meeting, the minutes in point 4.4.4. state, "Botman maak nou bekend da thy van mening is dat die optrede van die moderator en skriba net vertolk kan word dat hulle teen die eenheid is. Hy bedank ook omdat hy sy misnoe uitspreek oor die mislukte eenwordingsproseses sedert die sinode van 1990" (NGSK, 1992b:3).

¹⁸ Botman states his reason for withdrawal of his resignation, "Desnieteenstaande, trek ek my bedanking terug en bevestig my onderwerping aan die roeping waartoe ek my geroepe ag en my lojaliteit aan die kerk wat my in hierdie amp vertrou het. Op hierdie weg begeef ek my nou verder met die absolute sekerheid dat die moderatuur [Apollis en Botha] self nie die mate van vertroue van my kan verwag nie. Roeping stel in hierdie saak veel hoer en pynlike eise" (NGSK, 1992a:2).

as Johan Valentyn (Valentyn, 1993:11) and Isak Mentor and JFF Mettler (Mentor & Mettler, 1993). Valentyn argued that although certain things need to be attended to (Church orderly), it would be imperative to proceed with the founding Synod since the DRCA did accept the Belhar confession, and therefore he encouraged the two Churches not to delay.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the tensions resulted in also congregations and ministers distrusting each other.

The unification process that was underway between the DRCA and the DRMC was also questioned because some members believed that the DRC was left out of the loop, which created suspicion and distrust. The discussions and presentations in *Die Ligdraer* reveal that there should have been a degree of distrust between the DRMC and the DRC (DRCA and DRMC). Nonetheless, the editorial of the DRMC newspaper itself reveals the ‘distrust’ of some within the DRMC and that there are doubts about the DRC and its commitment to unification since it allows and does not strongly act against the protest of members of the Conservative Party as well as members that espouse a “volk” [nation] theology in their Church (NGSK, 1991b:8).

Irrespective of the issues of trust between the DRCA and the DRMC, the Churches together were intentional and deliberate to ensure that during the election of the first URCSA moderation there should be equal representation from both the DRCA and the DRMC during the founding Synod in 1994 (NGSK, 1991:5). This was one of the strategies of the two moderations (DRMC and DRCA) to ensure that parties and factions would develop credibility and trust within the Church unity process.

4. The challenge of properties and pensions

The matter of properties and pension of ministers should also not be underestimated. It seems that the reason for the postponement of the founding Synod in 1990 was because the moderator, Nick Apollis and the scribe AJ Botha supported the view of the legal advisors that argued it would be better to build in a “dissolution” resolution [ontbindings-klausule] before the unification. This is to ensure that congregations that would not support the unification and become part of the new Church would not be able to be entitled to the buildings and other properties of the Church (NGSK, 1991d:8).

It seems that property was for the DRMC a consideration during the unity discussions (Kuyler, 1991:5). It was only when the issues of pensions of the ministers and a resolution on the properties could be clarified that the GSC of the DRMC decided

¹⁹ “Ek besef dat daar sake is wat nog afgehandel moet word, soos die verenigingsklausule, maar nou ja... waarom nie ’n vervroegde sinode nie? Wie weet miskien vind die wederkoms nog plaas voor ons uitvoering kan gee aan ons Belydenis. Nee, hoe vroeër die sinode hoe beter. Ons is dit aan die Here en die samelewing verskuldig. Die eenwording met die NGKA is ’n goddelike opdrag” (Valentyn, 1993:11).

to continue with the founding Synod of the URCSA (NGSK, 1991e:9).²⁰ Therefore, in November 1993, WJ Matthys wrote about his observation on the challenge with unity between the DRCA and the DRMC and his observation that this has to do with the concern of the DRMC members about their property instead of fulfilling the commandment of Christ for unity (Matthys, 1993:11).²¹ He argues that it might be because the properties of the DRMC are better equipped and the structures are more resourceful than those of the DRCA, and this might be the reason for the fears to unite that they might 'lose' those properties.²² He argues that the leadership should explain this in simplistic terms to members on the grassroots level, in congregations, to deal with their fears and uncertainty. This seems to also be the concerns of the congregations and presbyteries that Di. Mentor and Mettler are addressing in their concerns raised on those that do not want to be part of the unification but will eventually lose their properties to the new Church – properties that they worked for and that the URCSA would repossess just like the apartheid government did (Mentor & Mettler, 1993:11).²³ It causes a person to wonder whether all properties and one's assets do not belong to God. It is evident in the newspaper that the DRMC members showed their vulnerabilities. However, has the little that they have been blessed with become their greatest sacrifice? One marvels whether the issue about Church properties was on the 'principle' of the Church order, or as one brother testifies a few days before the General Synod meeting in 1990, that unity is a commandment of the Lord?²⁴ The issue of pensions, on the other hand, and subsistence received from the DRCA congregations were eventually cited as some of the reasons why other DRCA congregations did not become part of the URCSA (Apollis, 1995:6). The members are said to be "verknog" [clinging on]

²⁰ "Een van die vernaamste struikelblokke wat ondervind is was die gevaar dat die eiendom van die NG Sendingkerk in gedrang sou kom indien gemeentes van die kerk nie met die vereniging wou saamgaan nie, en daarop aanspraak maak om NG Sendingkerk te bly. Sulke gemeentes kon dan moontlik beslag le op die besittings van die kerk, aangesien die kerke van die NG Sendingkerk nie voorsiening maak vir vereniging met 'n ander kerk nie" (NGSK, 1991e:9).

²¹ Matthys states, "'n Aspek wat ek reken in 'n groot mate onsekering en huiwering by lidmate veroorsaak het, is kerkeiendomme. Ons het so gewoon en verknog geraak aan ons kerkeiendomme, veral binne die NG Sendingkerk, dat ons nie die weg kan oopsien vir werklike eenwording nie. Wie se eiendomme is dit egter?"

²² "Die Sendingkerk se eiendomme is in meeste gevalle baie beter toegegerus as die van die NGKA; miskien vandaar die vrees dat die eiendomme 'verlore' sal gaan" (Matthys, 1993:11).

²³ They assert in Die Ligdraer 8 November 1993, "Hierdie bepaling kom daarop neer dat die nuwe kerk gemagtig word om beslag te le op gemeentelike bates waarvoor hy nie gewerk of enige iets bygedra het nie. Dit laat 'n mens dink aan die tye toe vorige nasionale regerings ingevolge die berugte groepsgebiedwet, beslag gele het op eiendomme van mense wat na die oordeel van die owerheid in "verkeerde gebiede" gewoon het. Die kerk wil dus vat wat nie aan hom behoort nie!"

²⁴ The brother stated, "Ek het voorheen probleme gehad met kerkeenheid. Ek het duidelikheid gekry. Dinge is opgelos. Dis mos 'n opdrag van die Here."

to their properties. This reflects an attitude of selfishness and the myopic vision of some members in the congregations at the time. However, it also demonstrates the argument of Schreiter that these members were so living from the apartheid narrative – comparing the loss of properties with the land dispossession of the apartheid government – that it was difficult to reconcile with their brothers and sisters and see a new future together.

5. The allegations of racism

During the discussion on unity, there were also accusations of racism – especially emanating from members of the DRCA towards the moderator and the scribe of the DRMC moderation, Nick Apollis and AJ Botha because of the postponement of the Synod in July 1990 (Botman, 1991:8). This has also been stated as the reason Andries Botha left the GSC meeting on 17-18 July 1991. However, this was repudiated by Andries Botha and Nick Apollis that explained that it had nothing to do with ‘racism’ but a decision to accept the advice given by their legal advisors. This demonstrates the sensitivities between the two former ‘racial’²⁵ constructed Churches and members. It is also interesting to observe that the subsequent regional Synod elections brought about the diversity in terms of ‘racial’ composition of the moderation – that included white, ‘coloured’, and African blacks as moderator of the subsequent regional Synods of the URCSA after its founding Synod in April 1994.²⁶ Whether this was intentional is evident, and did indeed reflect efforts of the URCSA to transform the image and representation of the Church as non-racial. These collective efforts through Synod elections should not be mistaken for sincere and genuine attempts for reconciliation.

One remains flabbergasted that the URCSA ministers who were strongly worded against apartheid and the support of the DRC of apartheid, would still become a member of such a Church and in another instance, a URCSA minister would be instrumental in the unification between a white DRC Church and the URCSA with a combined church Council?²⁷ Could this indeed be signs of their non-racialism stance? Though there might be an issue raised against racism, there could also be issues raised against non-racialism.

²⁵ The author places the word racial in parenthesis because he based his racial theory on the basis that race is socially constructed. However, in the context of the paper, it places it within the context of the ideology of apartheid and its racial classification to show that the Church has not been able to move beyond the racial classifications.

²⁶ For instance, a white moderator was elected for the Cape Synod, C Oosthuizen, a ‘coloured’ for Phoro-ro Synod, H van Schalkwyk, and an African black minister in the Northern Synod.

²⁷ We are reminded of the first Moderator of URCSA, Nick Apollis that become during his retirement a member of the DRC Audensberg congregation? We also remember James Buys that was part of a combined Church (DRC and URCSA) till his death?

6. The allegations of political influence

It is evident in the newspaper that some of the moderation members of the DRCA were often accused of being politically inclined and showed their close alliance with the African National Congress (ANC) and that this serves as the basis and motivation for the DRCA to unite with the DRMC. This is raised as part of a letter published by *Die Ligdraer*. The Church, with its Reformed tradition, is, therefore, cautioned not to become engaged in an apparent 'political agenda' (Dick, 1991:7).²⁸ It also becomes evident in the *Ligdraer/Ligstraal's* report in November 1993, of the relationship that is made between the first democratic elections and founding Synod in the same month (April) in 1994. It is also apparent in Chris Loff's article in *Die Ligdraer* a few weeks before the founding Synod in 1994 to defend any accusation or belief from the DRMC congregations that the motive for unity was being forced by a political party (Loff, 1994:7).²⁹

Nevertheless, the notion of 'political inclinations' is also because of the sentiments and perceptions that Sam Buti's vision includes black people in positions of power. In the articulation of Dick, from feedback provided in 1991 about the DRCA GS Synod, the ideas of the conference concur with the ideas of Stephen Bantu Biko.³⁰ This is evident Buti's words, which indicate that when black people are in power, they will be able to *help* the DRC (Dick, 1991:7).³¹ The publishing of this letter functions to caution the Church to withdraw from the political ideologies in South Africa at the time – especially the black consciousness movement. This also suggests there were some similar views within the DRMC and the fears from members that the Church will become too 'political.' In light of this, it should be said that racial composition was never a discussion or an issue during the election of the moderation of the URCSA at its founding Synod. However, it seems also evident that since the resignation of Andries Botha as a white person on the moderation, there were at least two white people serving on the moderation in later elections, namely Dawid Kuyler (Scribe) and Christina Landman (Actuaris). However, it was consistently stated by the then moderator of the DRMC, Nick Apollis that the URCSA

²⁸ Rev. Dick reports in *Die Ligdraer* of 16 September 1991, "Die NGK is dikwels daarvan beskuldig dat hy hom met die nasionale party se beleid vereenselwig. Ds Dick se die gevaar dat die NGKA dieselfde doen tenopsigte van die ANC is wesenlik. Volgens hom het die moderatuur hulle met die politieke doelwitte van die ANC vereenselwig en hulle verbind om aksies te insiseer om die doelwitte te bereik."

²⁹ Chris Loff states, "Dit het nie oor eiendomme of geld gegaan nie, ook nie oor gehoorsaamheid aan 'n politieke party nie. Ons het saam so besluit omdat ons toe geglo het dat dit die wil van God is."

³⁰ See his addresses in the book *I write what I like* (1978) in which his ideas of the black agency are articulated.

³¹ "Die skepping van 'n nuwe kerk bied die geleentheid om mag te bekom. 'I hope in future when we are in power, we will help the NGK,' het die moderator [Sam Buti] gese."

should be a 'non-racial' Church (Apollis, 1991:6).³² Dick would accuse the DRCA in 1991 that it seems that there were no signs and reasons to believe that the DRCA is interested in reconciling with the DRC (Dick, 1991:7).³³ A critical analysis of Dick suggests that the DRCA follow the cue of Biko to breakaway from all-white liberals and follow the agenda of the black consciousness movement.

7. The challenge of multilingualism

These two black Churches (DRMC and DRCA) were based on different languages as medium of communication. The DRMC was essentially an Afrikaans-speaking Church, while the DRCA had a range of various other African languages (Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, et cetera). The fears from members of the DRMC congregations that their Church language (Afrikaans) would become obsolete, as well as a fear that their language would be discriminated against (Peterson, 1993:1) was evident in the newspaper's reports. The compromise would be to migrate from all those languages to English as the official language of the URCSA, particularly in Synod meetings and combined services and activities. However, it is apparent that the official language within the Church was discussed, but there were concerns raised within the URCSA a year after its establishment by a member of one of the congregations in Worcester (Western Cape) on the future conservation of Afrikaans as a language of the new Church. He refers to the possibility of sacrificing their Afrikaans language as the medium of communication for 'coloured' people in the DRMC as a matter of the heart [*sielskwessies*].

In response, the editors of *Die Ligdraer* assure the members that there is a principled decision made by the founding Synod that English and Afrikaans would serve as languages of choice during combined meetings. However, it is interesting that the brother would argue that Afrikaans cannot make room for a *vreemde* [*strange*] language because Afrikaans should also be an integral part of the new Church (Phillips, 1995:13).³⁴ Does this attest to the limited exposure of the members to other languages, other than their own that they would refer to it as a *vreemde* [*strange*] language? There are also some insecurities and fears evident in some members who believed that they would have to sacrifice their Church's mother tongue. In another letter in *Die Ligdraer*, a member of the URCSA would immediately after the unification (post-1994) raise the alarm against— what he perceived as the eroding

³² This he mentions in his piece *Die Uurglas* with the title "Loop die eenheidspad saam vorentoe." He talks about a "Verenigde, nie-rassige kerk [united non-racial Church] (Apollis, 1991b:8)."

³³ Dick states in the *Ligdraer* of 16 September 1991 and his reflection of the Moderature of the DRCA, "Dit raak al hoe meer duidelik dat daar nie 'n werklike begeerte is om met die NGK te verenig nie".

³⁴ His letter is to inquire what the decision was on Afrikaans as a medium of communication in the URCSA, and secondly, to find out if the DRMC congregations were part of such a decision-making process.

of Afrikaans. His letter creates the impression that Afrikaans does not receive attention, and there are insufficient ministers and people within the URCSA that fight or fought for the language. He calls for activism to preserve and keep alive Afrikaans as a medium of communication of the URCSA (Barendse, 1995:8). However, it is not certain how committed the members mentioned above are equally towards the use and activism of other African languages. Nevertheless, the newspaper itself demonstrates its compromise in language after the unification, where it was an exclusively Afrikaans newsletter before unification and serving the particular interest of 'coloured' members of the DRMC. It became a dual-medium (English/Afrikaans) newspaper, with a dual name, *Ligdraer/Ligstraal* (URCSA, 1995:6).³⁵

However, the editors of the *Ligdraer/Ligstraal* hinted to the sensitivity of language (URCSA, 1995:6).³⁶ Though it might be taken lightly or perceived as sarcasm, the words of Siphon Mtawana reflect on this (language) challenge in the Church, as reported in *Die Ligdraer/Ligstraal* on 28 August 1995, "Why do we not translate everything in Xhosa – that is so easy, even babies understand it?" (URCSA, 1995a:1). In a letter written to the editors of the *Ligdraer/Ligstraal*, another minister would also request for articles to be published in Zulu (URCSA, 1995a:1). One could quite easily detect the tension between other language speakers and Afrikaans speakers in the newspaper itself. One could also detect the struggle and challenge of the newspaper where it would continue to provide preference to Afrikaans speakers (content-based in Afrikaans) and the lack of sufficient articles and reports in other African languages. For example, a former DRCA member, Mrs Ndlovu wrote to the newspaper:

I am writing this letter to thank you very much for sending me your paper every month. Secondly, your paper is mostly in Afrikaans, which we hardly understand. Can you please rather write it in English or Zulu, which I think everybody can easily read or write (URCSA, 1995a:1).

The editor responded through explaining the language challenges, but also the efforts of the newspaper to offer a format that will be acceptable and inclusive to most of its readership. This includes the strategies to keep the local congregations' news in its vernacular, to publish an article in the language of the intended readers, but also to continue to publish some articles in Afrikaans, as some elderly people in the Eastern Cape would be more conversant in Afrikaans than English. Unlike

³⁵ The name of the DRMC's newspaper *Die Ligdraer* was combined with the name of the newsletter of the DRCA, *Die Ligstraal*.

³⁶ The editors of *Die Ligdraer/Ligstraal* state, "In the running of the newspaper, we had to grapple with some of the typical problems the country on a wider scale has to cope with, not least of them the sensitive issue of language" (URCSA, 1995:6).

the young people, that is university students, they would therefore become more conversant in English (URCSA, 1995a:1). This reflects the kind of compromises and sacrifices that the newspaper had to make in terms of the multilingual nature of the URCSA. However, one wonders that just as in the case of the 'sacrifice' of properties, that it was also a time of 'sacrificing' the ideal to receive the Church's newsletter only in one's own language?³⁷ In the first URCSA, moderation of the Northern Transvaal agreed a compromise was made to settle for English and Afrikaans as its official medium of communication during Synodical meetings. At the same time, it acknowledges that even these languages are not at home with members that speak some of the other five languages in the Synod (URCSA, 1995b:12).

8. The cultural challenges

The members of the two Churches (DRMC and DRCA) were indeed afraid of the cultural accommodations that had to be made when the two Churches unite. There was a particular concern that the cultural differences would result in a schism (NGSK, 1993).³⁸ Nevertheless, a fraction more than a year after the unification (28 August 1995) of the two Churches, the newspaper continued to underscore the cultural differences as a challenge (URCSA, 1995:6). This is still a challenge within the URCSA even after twenty-six years of existence. These include especially congregations that became integrated with members of the former DRCA and the former DRMC that struggled to function at a congregational level to overcome the cultural challenges that the unification of the URCSA poses.

9. The socio-economic challenges

The discussion on unification also brought the issue of the socio-economic conditions – especially of members of the DRCA to the forefront. It is also evident that the costs of a founding Synod were also a challenge (NGSK, 1992c). This was raised by the chairperson, Nick Apollis in the context of an early Synod in 1992 to establish the unity between the Churches. However, Russel Botman argued that funds should be solicited from other sources if the moderation was serious about unity.³⁹

³⁷ The editor argues that in the current situation and the challenges (that include the financial constraints), his fellow brothers and sisters should heed to biblical sacrifice. "Oh yes, we must admit that there are still brothers and sisters among ourselves who do not properly grasp the gospel's challenge to sacrifice in this respect. We do, therefore read that the 'loss of language' was one of the complaints of the 'concerned group' in the Free State, which held a rebel synod" (Fourie, 1995:6).

³⁸ "Waarheen is die kerk oppad, ...sal die kultuurverskille in die twee kerke lei tot 'n dinamiese verskeidenheid binne die eenheid, of sal dit dalks lei tot verdeeldheid" (NGSK, 1993).

³⁹ It is interesting to note that Botman and Buys give shape and form of the covenant between the DRMC/URCSA Wynberg with Danie Nel at the DRC Wynberg. This was done even in the absence of momentum of the unity process between the DRMC/URCSA and the DRC on the Synodical level.

The issue of ‘socio-economic’ conditions and the ‘poor’ in the Church also featured when the newspaper suddenly had to increase its distribution of the paper among its additional (DRCA) members. This caused the editors of the *Ligdraer/Ligstraal* to discuss at great length its financial difficulty. It is apparent in the report of the editorial of 28 August 1995 that this was a concern for the survival of the newspaper (URCSA, 1995:6). It is significant to see the articulation of the ‘socio-economic’ conditions of the members of the Church.⁴⁰ However, this would also be the beginning of various intervals of the distribution of the newspaper that also later became *URCSA News*. For various reasons, other than financial, the newspaper still – however, manages to publish each year.

10. The Mission of the URCSA in unity and reconciliation

The unification was possible because of both Churches’ acceptance of the confession of Belhar that calls for unity based on John 17:20-23. The Belhar confession states:

Church unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the Church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16); that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the Church and must be resisted.

However, these issues required the Church to act out of a “spirituality of reconciliation.” The mere consultation, accommodations and compassion with one another showcases the mission praxis of the URCSA during unification and post-unification. It attests to the fact that through confessing in Belhar that reconciliation is biblical, the Church through its listening, attention to the hurt of its members and faithfully guiding its members to unite with its brothers and sisters showed God’s mission of reconciliation in their praxis.

11. Conclusion

Both Churches (DRCA and DRMC) had to make costly sacrifices, especially in terms of the issues and challenges discussed above. The notion of ‘sacrifice’ also re-

⁴⁰ “This is a context with all the inherited differences of language, culture, and socio-economic levels, made worse by the suspicion and other negative elements which are the trademarks of the apartheid legacy” (URCSA, 1995:6).

ceived attention in the first sermon of the newly established Synod of the URCSA in Phororo. Hennie van Schalkwyk would use Gen 22:8 to state that the path for the Church is one of the sacrifices (URCSA, 1995b:4). This is evident from the tensions within the road toward unity and reconciliation between the DRCA and the DRMC.

Nevertheless, it seems that the experience of the unity process between the DRCA and the DRMC sharpened the pastoral approach of the URCSA members, which gave rise to the on-going facilitation and continued efforts to reach out to the DRC and other Churches within the DRC family⁴¹ until their death.⁴² Nick Apollis, therefore, encouraged also the members of the URCSA that they should never “let go their hand” of their brothers and sisters in the Lord (Apollis, 1995:6). However, *Die Ligdraer* reports that some of the letters before the 1990 DRMC Synod assume that the challenge in the Church unity process was also the lack of trust in God? (NGSK, 1994:6). Therefore, the author argues that the challenges mentioned in this paper are mainly a distrust in God at times. However, the moderatures were able through their faith in God to facilitate unity and reconciliation against all the odds.

The article demonstrates that the reconciliation process in the URCSA was and still is God’s tangible mission present within the Church. His work of reconciliation in the form of internal unity. The Church should continue to allow God to work and produce reconciliation of a Church that is still fragile, to build bridges, and embrace each other irrespective of the concrete realities and apparent obstacles. The paper serves as a caution but also a guide for the future processes of unification between the URCSA and the rest of the other Churches that form part of the DRC family.

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⁴¹ . This ‘family’ is much wider than DRMC, DRCA, DRC & RCA and includes the NHKA, GKSA, HKSA (now MRCC) with whom URCSA is currently in unity ‘talks’ or ‘process’.

⁴² This is to be seen in the consultations and efforts of Nick Apollis, and James Buys until their respective deaths.

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