

A Woman's Journey with the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa: 25 Years

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Abstract

The methodological insights of autoethnography allow the author to write her story in critical-emphatical engagement with the structures and cultures within which her story unfolds. Her story as the only white woman minister of the Word in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) is told as one in which organisational, political and ethnic cultures were in constant creative conflict. An unexpected continuity of intercultural co-operation is established throughout the story of her journey with URCSA over the past 25 years of its existence. Six decisive turning points in her life are described. The first is when she was called to the ministry at the age of 15, several years before women were ordained in the local family of Reformed churches. The second was when she started studying with the liberation theologians of the 1980s. The third was being appointed as a theological professor amidst exclusively male colleagues. The fourth was working with the ill and desolate at a state hospital in preparation for a second doctorate. The fifth happened when she was ordained in a Zulu-speaking congregation in Mpumalanga. The sixth covers her experiences in the leadership of the church the past decade. Throughout, the emphasis is on the outsider-insider experience of both critically and sympathetically engaging with the Afrikaans culture in which she was born, and the black and brown cultures into which she was co-opted.

Keywords: Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA); autoethnography; women in ministry; church and culture



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Introduction: Aim and Methodology

The aim of this article is to describe the author's journey with the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (hereafter URCSA), within the methodological insights of autoethnography. This journey implies critical-emphatical engagement with the culture into which she was born, as well as with the cultures within which she ministers as an outsider-insider, the only white woman minister of the Word in URCSA. This church is the unification (in 1994) of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church that functioned during *apartheid* times as separate churches for black and brown people.

Previously, it was not possible for a woman to enhance her development by auto-narrating her journey with the church, simply because women were not allowed to develop personally in the church. For decades there was, locally, a vague discontent amongst women who suffered from the “no-name problem,” famously identified by Betty Friedan in the 1960s, because of exclusion first from ordination and later from full acceptance in leadership roles. This article is an attempt by the author to give words to both the satisfaction and the discontent of the journey, to free it from its no-name position, and to grow personally in critically engaging as outsider-insider in the cultures and artefacts of her church. Being one of only two women¹ who over time were elected to the General Synod Moderamen, both being professors, one could ask whether this is a sign of classism in the church or, indeed, an internal victory of its members over sexism and racism? Or is it a personal achievement of an individual who has, however, been forced to shift between cultures in order to survive?

To engage with these developments critically, autoethnography was chosen as methodology. According to its chief proponent, Carolyn Ellis (Ellis, Adams and Boechner 2011, 273), “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno).” The following methodological tendencies of autoethnography are recognised in this retelling of the story-of-the-self in dialogue with the author's encounters with different cultures within URCSA:

- **Outsider-insiding:** When telling one's story as an autoethnographer, it becomes possible to tell one's story not only as a participant observer, but as one who participates actively in the cultural artefacts (ceremonies and church regulations) of a specific church and the ethnic cultures of which it is composed (Ellis et al. 2011, 276). However, when one tells one's story as that of a person who entered the “troubled spaces” of poverty, illness, despair and corruption, remaining the impartial outsider to both ethnic and ecclesiastical culture is not

1 Anlené Taljaart was ordained in a congregation of URCSA as lecturer at the Theological Faculty of the University of the Free State, but has since taken demission from this congregation. The other is Professor Mary-Ann Plaatjies-Van Huffel from the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch.

an option (Denzin 2010, 257). The author will, therefore, tell her story not only as participating in a variety of cultures in the church, but also as voicing the plight of the poor and marginalised.

- **The construction of “truth”:** In personal narratives the author acknowledges the unavoidable subjectivity of herself—and indeed all researchers—in the presentation of one’s research. The personal narrative presented in this article becomes less controversial through inviting other voices into the narrative, and by citing from already published sources, connecting to scholarly literature (Ellis et al. 2011, 279). As autoethnographer, the author on the one hand allows the reader into her subjective world, and on the other hand claims “truth” mainly on the basis of her own credibility. Finally, it is acknowledged with Ellingson and Ellis (2008, 449) that “the practice of autoethnography presumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is constructed through symbolic (language) interaction.” The author will, therefore, tell her story as one that is socially constructed by her personal experience of interculturality, (non-)sexism and church leadership.
- **Organisational autoethnography:** Since the autoethnographer here is relating her story with the church as organisation, the three approaches of organisational autoethnography, as described by Doloriet and Sambrook (2012, 84), need to be noted: The first approach is evocatively interpretative and emotionally laden as the autoethnographer sees herself as a co-performative agent in interpreting knowledge. The second approach moves within the conventions of analytical traditions. It commits to theoretical analysis and moves beyond the self of the autoethnographer who declares her narrative visibility openly. The third approach is politically radical when the particular experiences of the autoethnographer are located in tension with the dominant discourses of ecclesiastical power. This autoethnographer will tell her story as one of (in)voluntarily shifting between three positions, that is of conserving (ethnic and ecclesiastical) culture, accommodating herself within the prevailing cultures, and identifying with and forming a contra-culture in radical opposition to the dominant discourses of both ecclesiastical and ethnic culture when and if her gendered experiences demand this.
- **Relational ethics:** It is acknowledged that writing a personal narrative makes relational ethics complicated (Ellis et al. 2011, 281). Therefore, special care has to be taken to show respect to the people implicated in this story as those who co-journeyed with the author.
- **Remembering in later life:** When telling one’s story in later life, it becomes possible for the autobiographer to tell her story in terms of “epiphanies,” which are times of existential awakening after which life was not exactly the same anymore (Ellis et al. 2011, 275).

Consequently, this article takes on the form of the deciding moments of the author’s journey, which are: 1) a calling outside a future for women’s ordination; 2) training with

the first South African liberation theologians; 3) an academic career for a woman in theology without precedent; 4) the second spiritual conversion of a liberal mind, effected by working with the poor, the traumatised and the ill; 5) ordination in a black township; and 6) integration into church leadership. While the first four “epiphanies” are used as introduction to the author’s 25-year journey with URCSA, the final point will receive, in terms of the parameters of the study, the most attention.

The story will be driven by the author’s interpretation of herself conserving, accommodating or contravening the ecclesiastical and ethnic cultures into which she was born, and to which she was exposed over the past 25 years on her journey with URCSA.

Confessing that the story is written within the constraint “subjectivity,” the author furthermore acknowledges the methodological challenges in “freezing” her voice, which is still walking.

A Calling without a Future for Women’s Ordination

I was born from Afrikaner parents on 8 February 1956, in Pretoria, the administrative capital of the *apartheid* government of South Africa. Reflecting on this period of my life, three main discourses dominating my life came to the fore. Firstly, the lives of Afrikaner girls were completely regulated by what was later identified by Elsabe Brink (1990) and Elsje Büchner (2007) as the “Volksmoeder” ideology (folk mother ideology). According to this ideology, an Afrikaner woman should sacrifice her life to the nation, provide the nation with children (preferably sons), and support the political ideologies of her husband, which were exclusively those of *apartheid*. She was to have a private life only and not have opinions of her own. Büchner (2008) indicated that, eventually, it was men who placed the issue of women’s ordination on the table of the Dutch Reformed Church family, since the women were unaccustomed to their own voices. I myself was almost 30 years old when for the first time I heard a woman speaking in public. This was Dr Rina Venter (born 1938) who became the Minister of National Health and Population Development from 1989 to 1994, South Africa’s first woman minister, albeit in the *apartheid* cabinet (Wikipedia, accessed June 19, 2019).

The second discourse that had a profound influence on my life was female puritanism, a form of romanticised bodily self-isolation expected from young girls before and even during marriage. This entails not speaking to boys/men first, and always keeping one’s distance till a young man approaches you, and then reacting with a total lack of eagerness. The presumption was that this coyness was attractive to (young) men and that it was characteristic of a lady. This resulted in strained and reserved communication with men, which at first made it difficult for me in professional life to survive in the ecclesiastical world of men only.

Finally, of course, white supremacy was simply a given at the time. I grew up in a world without black people. It was not until I went to the University of South Africa that I met

black men who were professionals; and I was almost 40 when the first professional black woman crossed my path.

One evening, when I was in Standard 9 (Grade 11), we were coming back from church. My father, who was disgruntled with the low standard of the sermon, suddenly said: “Ek dink jy moet ’n *dominee* word.” (I think you should become a pastor). This was a totally out of the blue thing to say, since women were not ordained at that stage, and would not be for a decade or two in the Dutch Reformed Church family. However, I knew that was what I wanted to do. It was a strange type of calling. At that time it meant a calling to become nothing. And, again strangely, it was possible for me to study theology precisely for the fact that girls anyway were not supposed to become something. My father was a professor at the University of Pretoria and I studied for free. So, I was free to follow my calling, to become nothing.

I therefore enrolled at the University of Pretoria for the BA Admission degree, as it was called those days, together with 200 (white) men. It was during a time when (the later professor) Malan Nel went on a “Youth for Christ” tour throughout the country, convincing many young men of the Dutch Reformed Church to study for the ministry. Greek, Hebrew and Latin were required, and I finished my degree with distinctions in Greek, Hebrew and Latin, all three on third-year level, with an additional first-year course in Arabic. Although I finished top of my class—which consisted of only about 20 men left—I was not allowed in the Theological Seminary at Pretoria University to study theology. On the day of registration, a professor there simply took my application form from my hand and said: “Vroue studeer nie hier nie” (Women do not study here).

These were the years 1974–1977. I studied classical languages, fascinated by the power games of the Romans and the depth of the Greek dramas, singing in the University choir—totally oblivious of the 1976 Soweto uprising. The SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) started with TV broadcasts in 1975, but it had no Soweto content.

Till 1978, then, as a white person I had led a secluded life; as a white woman I was victim to the merciless sexism of the reigning Calvinism that kept the *apartheid* regime in power—which was as sexist as it was racist.

Training with Liberation Theologians

In 1977, I completed a two-year honours course in Classical (“Biblical”) Greek, finishing it in one year and *cum laude*, and in 1978 I enrolled at the University of South Africa for a BD,² that is, a three-year post-graduate degree in theology. The University of South Africa (Unisa) too is situated in Pretoria, but its Faculty of Theology already in those days was ecumenical—and housed several controversial liberation theologians, such as Proff. David Bosch and Adrio König. Actually, in 1980 when I finished my BD

2 Baccalaureus Divinitatis

as well as an MA in Greek (History of Antiquity), both *cum laude*, the first black professors (outside African languages) were appointed at Unisa. They were Proff. Simon Maimela and Bonganjalo Goba.

At the time, Unisa was the only university where a woman could enrol for theological training. I was encouraged to enrol there by Prof. Jimmy Loader, who was my lecturer in Hebrew at the University of Pretoria, as well as by Prof. Johan Heyns, whom I met in person only once and accidentally in front of the Theology Building at the University of Pretoria. Having heard of my unjustified exclusion from the Faculty of Theology at Pretoria, his straightforward advice to me was to enrol at Unisa.

This turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me. At Unisa I was not only honoured as student, but started working at the (then) Institute for Theological Research (with Prof. Willem Vorster). In 1980, while still doing my final BD exams, I was appointed full-time and permanently in the Department of Church History to teach early and medieval church history.

Here at Unisa was another culture of theology. My lecturers and colleagues, David Bosch and Adrio König, dragged me out of the small world of white theology into the world of ecumenical insights and contacts. Simon Maimela exposed me to the liberation theologies of blacks and women (see Landman 2010, 1–15). I went to conferences where, for the first time, I heard the voices of black theologians. In 1989, now 30 years ago, I became one of the women who founded the Circle of Women Theologians in Accra, Ghana, a Pan-African organisation that that focused on academic publications in the field of African Women’s Theologies. The late 1970s and 1980s was the time of SACLA (South African Church Leadership Assembly, 1979), the Koinonia Declaration (1980) and the Kairos Document(1985) through which we fought, also as academics, against the racist theology of the Dutch Reformed Church and the policies of the *apartheid* regime.

This was indeed a time of conversion from a secluded to a liberation culture. Those were dangerous times, positioning oneself as liberation theologian both in racial and gender terms. For me it was then still mostly an academic conversion, albeit firmly grounded in people’s grassroots experiences. For me, also, it was an identification with a new culture, both feared and attacked by the then reigning academic and church-going establishment.

Academic Career for a Woman in Theology

Having been appointed in 1978 at the Institute for Theological Research as a part-time researcher, and in 1980 in the Department of Church History as a full-time and permanent lecturer, I celebrated 40 years of employment at Unisa in 2018. I taught Medieval Church History. I am in possession of a Master’s degree in Greek, and an honours degree in Latin, both obtained with distinction. I was not a so-called “affirmative action” appointment. On the contrary, it was no easy matter for a woman

to teach theology. In departments such as Systematic Theology, where Simon Maimela and Adrio König taught, ecumenism reigned and sexism was curbed. Other departments such as Church History, where I was teaching, seemed to have attracted men with ultra-sexist agendas. I can point to Prof. HOFFIE Hofmeyr as an exception here. However, since I have taken a methodological stance to write my own history as *Heilsgeschichte* and not *Unheilsgeschichte*, that is, as a history of positives and not negatives, I shall not ponder on this history. I shall conclude by pointing to the positive outcome of those colleagues who thought that women should not be allowed to teach theology. This, in some ironic way, enabled me to accept a post at the Research Institute for Theology and Religion (formerly the Institute for Theological Research where I started my career) from January 1996. This, in turn, empowered me to shift the focus of my research to gender studies, and to concentrate on oral history, that is, on the unwritten and silenced histories of recent South Africa.

In more than one way I could leave medieval thinking and cultures behind me.

Second Conversion by the Poor, Traumatized and Ill

It was as an oral historian that I got involved in Pretoria URCSA, which is situated in Eersterust, the historically brown township of Pretoria. It was the year 1994, the year in which I started my 25-year journey with URCSA. In 1997 I published, with Danny Titus, a centenary booklet on the congregation consisting of interviews with congregants. Since the congregation was at times without a minister, I started preaching there periodically at the invitation of the church council.

During the same time I got seriously involved as oral history researcher in Atteridgeville, the historically black township of Pretoria, interviewing 102 churches in the township on their histories. Of these, 53 were mainline churches and the other half were African independent churches. One day I was interviewing a woman who, after she was “interviewed” by the Security Police of the *apartheid* regime, sat in a wheelchair and was unable to have any children. The woman got extremely re-traumatized by telling her story. It then became clear to me that, because of our traumatic past, one cannot be an oral historian without having counselling skills. I therefore enrolled for a doctorate in Practical Theology at the University of South Africa. For seven years, from 2000–2007, I did my practical work on Wednesdays at Kalafong Hospital, the state hospital in Atteridgeville. Here I journeyed with about a thousand patients who were referred to me at the Outpatients (Family Clinic) of the hospital for counselling when no somatic reasons could be found for their illness. The patients were black and poor, living in sub-human conditions. Except for four patients, all of them presented their faith as a support system in their daily struggle to cope with a lack of money, with losses and loneliness.

Journeying with these patients brought about a “second conversion” in me when I converted from theological liberalism to a deep respect for the healing power of personal and societal faith, that is, faith in the goodwill of the supernatural.

This brought about a new shift, if not a conflict, in cultures. I moved from a white middle-class church culture where congregants had to be entertained on historicities of the Bible, to poor black churches which deal with faith as a matter of life and death. This also laid bare a conflict in URCSA itself about religious healing practices which are needed by our members, but which we are kept from practising by the Western nature of our Church Order and Stipulations. This brings religious practices and beliefs on healing in conflict with one another—not only inside URCSA but also between URCSA and other churches with whom URCSA is in conflict and who lure away URCSA's members through their healing practices.

Later, as Actuariarius, I often had to deal with the lack of the Africanisation of the Church Order and Stipulations. As Actuariarius I had to apply the Church Order and Stipulations, while sympathetically dealing with the realities of poor people whose only access to healing was through African rituals and practices by indigenous churches.

Ordination in a Black Township

From a secular point of view, all life-changing events in my life came through accidental co-incidence; from a faith perspective they came through predestination. In 2006, Prof. Klippiess Kritzinger, then from the Department of Missiology at Unisa and now emeritus, walked into my office at Unisa and suggested that I apply to be licensed in URCSA, which I did. The process developed me into doing a *colloquium doctum* before the (then still called) Curatorium of the Northern/Southern Synod, URCSA. On 18 November 2006 I was licensed as a *proponent* in the Groote Kerk in Bosman Street in Pretoria, previously a beacon for the state activities of the Dutch Reformed Church who used it *inter alia* for the inductions of State Presidents of the *apartheid* regime. I remember that, in my young days, I also attended the inaugural lecture of Prof. Piet van der Merwe there, who was from the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk. However, now the building belongs to URCSA Melodi ya Tshwane. Being licensed as a *proponent*, I was called by Dullstroom URCSA situated in the township Sakhelwe where I was inducted by Rev. Siphon Mokoena from Ohrigstad on 18 May 2008. I was 52 years old. It was 28 years after I had finished my six years BA Admission/BD training.

In the introduction I have undertaken to tell my story with URCSA by means of the methodological insights of autoethnography as a story of personal development moving between and beyond the gender and racial identifications imposed on me by ecclesiastical and ethnic cultures. How did I personally develop in critical-emphatical engagement within surrounding cultures during the 10 years that I was the minister of the Word in Dullstroom URCSA? And how did the presence of a white woman impact on the congregation and the broader society?

Race

Two hundred kilometres from Pretoria, on the N4 eastbound, the off-ramp to Belfast takes you to Dullstroom, 33 kilometres further. Dullstroom is the highest town in South

Africa and driving from Pretoria means an elevation of 700 metres. It is cold and rainy all year round. Being the minister of the Word in URCSA situated in the township Sakhelwe, I also started writing down the land stories of congregants. Ethnically they are of Pedi and Southern Ndebele descent. Their forefathers lost their land in the Sekhukhuni and Mapoch wars of the late 19th century, as well as through the Native Land Act of 1913. After the wars and the Act had left them landless, they fled to Dullstroom to work on the railways which linked Pretoria to Mozambique. From here they were forcefully removed in 1980 from Madala, the old township, to Sakhelwe to make space for a sewerage for the white town.

This more or less symbolises the relationship between the town and the township. White Dullstroom is a tourist town and those in Sakhelwe who are employed, work for a meagre salary as waiters in the 27 restaurants in Dullstroom's main street. The *Reviewed Integrated Development Plan* (IDP eMakhazeni, 2016) and the *Municipal Report* (2012, Mpumalanga) statistically reveals the desperate situation of poverty and economic isolation of the more or less 9 000 people living in Sakhelwe. There is 89 per cent unemployment and 47.2 per cent HIV infection, with restricted access to electricity and running water.

The "church" in Sakhelwe was the garage of the "*pastorie*" covered with hardboard and not resistant to rain and cold. During a joint service with the beautiful white Dutch Reformed Church, the usually boisterous URCSA congregants looked uncomfortable and even unwilling to be present and worship with people that represent another economic status than theirs and who were, in fact, their employers. On the other hand the white DRC congregants expressed their pleasant surprise that the black church, whom they apparently considered to be ancestor worshipping, wore uniforms, followed the same liturgy as theirs, and even read the Bible, copies of which they presented to them with missionary zeal. However, the white people of Dullstroom were not racist and claimed good relationships with the blacks, presenting them with clothes and other donations which they left at the entrance of the township. The unwillingness to worship together came from both sides and was based not only on class difference, but on a lack of enthusiasm and compulsion to embrace each other's liturgical expressions. This, again, can be traced back to a fear on both sides to lose one's ecclesiastical identity.

I handled—or rather I was forced to handle—this situation by shifting between liturgico-ecclesiastical identities by not only preaching differently but also dressing differently in racially different congregations. In a black congregation I would dress in the CWM (Christian Women Ministries) uniform with the minister's gown and preach on empowerment; in a brown congregation I would wear black and white clothes with a hat under the minister's gown, and preach mainly how a personal relationship with Jesus Christ touches and changes the person's heart and behaviour. On the rare occasions that I was invited to preach in a white congregation, I would wear black and white although I could actually wear anything, even long trousers, and preach about how the Bible came into being.

While I was the minister of the Word in Dullstroom, the *konsolent* (caretaker minister) in Emtonjeni, the township of Machadodorp, and alternatively the scribe and chair of the Presbytery of Lydenburg from 2008–2018, I cannot recall a single incident when the fact that I was physically white was held against me. On the contrary, when I had to preside over liturgies, especially funerals that were heavily culture-laden, the elders would assist, guide and train me, thus allowing great personal development on my side. However, I bemoan the fact that I was forced to shift identity between racially different congregations and audiences because of the lack of racial integration in URCSA and the DRC, a field in which there is almost no development in the church(es).

Gender

URCSA has less than 40 women ministers of the Word nationally of whom, I have said, I am the only white one. Again, I experienced acceptance as woman minister in the congregation in Sakhelwe, although I detected a growing fear amongst the men that women in the church, and in society at large, were becoming too strong. I interviewed (with consent) 60 women and 50 men in Sakhelwe to try to determine their views on women's space in the church (Landman 2013). From the results it appeared that men gave politically correct answers in accepting female leadership, but dreaded the idea of this leadership subduing them or putting ideas in women's heads to be leaders in personal relationships. In short, I found myself being accepted as a woman minister of the Word, while female leadership was not acceptable on the ground. Again, the socio-economic position of the township—where cultural patriarchal values were undermined not because of the acceptance of gender equality but because of poverty and women being the only ones to acquire jobs as waitresses and cleaners—complicated gender relationships. While Rosina, for instance, was able to negotiate power in her relationship—and decided to become a pastor too—Ida remained in a relationship in which she was beaten and eventually died of AIDS-related illnesses, remaining loyal to her abusive husband “because this is how our people do it.”

As woman pastor, then, my example and influence in bringing gender equality was presumably limited—and probably complicated other women's lives.

Empowering Skills

My own development during this time of ministering in Sakhelwe in Dullstroom—which again was the 10 years from 2008 till 2018—was pronouncedly in the field of skills development; skills that were not part of my personal or professional arsenal and were not taught to me during any time of my theological training, pre- or post-graduate. Since black people could not own land during *apartheid* times, the land had to be transferred from the municipality. With no funds in the congregation to pay legal costs and a municipality that itself lacks in capacity, it took seven years before the land was registered in the name of the congregation. Fundraising had to be done to build a church. Apart from registering the congregation as an NPO (Non-Profit Organisation), another organisation, Dullcare, was established to receive funds. Eventually the funds were lost

through a local builder's non-compliance and a lack of funds to take him to court. Again it was a question of township people who, because of a previous political compensation, lacked basic educational skills, being dependent on local jobs and, therefore, scared to take legal action against white defrauders. However, my last service and demission ceremony at Dullstroom on 18 October 2018 was held in the newly-built church.

Accidental Leadership

After I was inducted as a minister of the Word in Dullstroom URCSA in May 2008, I attended my first (Regional) Synod in October 2010. This was the four-yearly synod of the Northern Synod (previously known as the Synod of Northern Transvaal) and it was held in Mokopane (previously PaulPietersburg), 30 kilometres south of Polokwane (previously Pietersburg).

Here I was elected as Actuarius of the Northern Synod. The Moderamen (leadership) of the synod consists of four members, the moderator, assessor, scribe and Actuarius, the latter dealing with the amendments to and the application of the Church Order and Stipulations, with all ensuing church orderly matters and appeals. The moderator was Prof. ST Kgatla.

I was re-elected Actuarius at the Northern Synod of 2014, four years later, the same year that Prof. Kgatla retired. According to the Church Order and Stipulations, one may only serve two terms in a position on the Moderamen. My two terms as Actuarius of the Northern Synod then ended in 2018, the same year in which I was elected Actuarius of the General Synod.

In terms of a woman's personal development on her intra-cultural journey in URCSA's leadership, the following can be noted:

1. Being elected unexpectedly as Actuarius of the Northern Synod in 2010 filled me with an energy and enthusiasm based on ignorance of the challenges of this position. If I had known how dangerous and difficult this job was, I probably would not have attempted what subsequently happened. In 2010, the Church Order and Stipulations were not accepted by Synod; eight months after my election as Actuarius the Stipulations were reviewed and approved by an Extraordinary Synodical Commission meeting, and finally by a Special Synod where they were accepted by 264 votes to 4. We became the first Regional Synod to publish its Church Order and Stipulations.
2. Under the leadership of Prof. Kgatla, the Moderamen visited 18 (of the 20) Presbyteries to improve communication and co-operation. For me it offered the opportunity to engage with church members on grassroots level—and visit historical church buildings. This was extremely exciting, not only for me as Actuarius meeting people, but also as church historian. Not only engaging but also celebrating the Lord's Supper with church members all over the Northern

Synod, brought worlds in which I have found myself together: white instigated missionary churches that have turned into indigenous congregations of URCSA. I saw it; I was allowed to celebrate it.

3. As far as the Church Order and Stipulations are concerned, I aimed at fulfilling two aims in particular. Firstly, it was for me as Actuarium important to use the Church Order Stipulations in a wise and life-giving way. The second aim was to attend to the Africanisation of the Church Order and Stipulations. The latter I addressed in workshops. I also introduced a mediation process to the church that would precede (and not replace) the appeal process. This has been coming a long way. Already on 24 March 2014 I gave an academic paper on “Incorporating a mediation process into the Church Order and Stipulations, URCSA” at the Second International Conference on Protestant Church Polity: “Good Governance in Church and Society Today” which was held at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. In October 2014 I presented this at the Northern Synod meeting and in October 2016 at the General Synod meeting. The General Synod instructed me to start training ministers in mediation, which I did. This is an exciting way of incorporating trained caregivers in Presbyteries to assist members who are in conflict with one another, to solve problems quickly and inexpensively.
4. Secondly, the Africanisation of the Church Order and Stipulations stood near to my heart. The areas in which the Church Order and Stipulations need to be Africanised, are reflected in the themes dealt with at a seminar on “Africanity and the church” which I organised with Prof. Rothney Tshaka at the Mamelodi Service Centre in Pretoria on 7 and 8 August 2015. Prof. (then still reverend) Tumi Senokoane introduced the first topic on “What are the African faces of marriage today?” and Prof. Leepo Modise, then the Actuarium of the General Synod, spoke on “How should Ministers of the Word get involved in politics?” reflecting on the history of URCSA when its theologians were in the front line of fighting *apartheid*. Rev. Moganetsi Makulubele spoke on “Unification between the Uniting Reformed Church and the Dutch Reformed Church” and found unification a fruitless road for URCSA to follow and a stumbling block on the road to Africanisation. I myself addressed the healing practices of URCSA as prescribed in the Church Order and Stipulations and argued that the latter should accommodate African insights and practices on religious healing. Prof. Rothney Tshaka concluded by introducing the topic of “Africanity and being Reformed” with a relevant attack on the Western heritage of our present Church Order and Stipulations.
5. I had experiences vis-à-vis sexism and racism in the leadership of the church that were different from those I experienced amongst the congregants and delegates who had elected me to those leadership positions. It may be in the nature of leadership itself that leaders watch each other’s “popularity”—especially when elections approach. However, the sexist and racist-based challenges I experienced from individuals after Kgatla had left the leadership

of the church, will not be recorded here, simply because I refuse to make it part of the main discourse of my journey with URCSA. Actually, sexism against women in leadership positions by threatened individuals who covertly believe that male privilege allows them to project either their pain or their ambition on women, has been curbed by URCSA itself. Up to now, Prof. Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and I had been the only two women who were elected to the national leadership of URCSA. At a seminar “URCSA25 years” held on 12–13 April 2019 at the University of the Free State as part of the 25-year celebrations of URCSA, both Landman and Plaatjies-Van Huffel presented their journey with the church as an interplay of gender discrimination with the liberatory ethos of URCSA. The individual occurrence of gender (and race and class) discrimination in URCSA is overshadowed by the ethos of Belhar, that is, the ethos of equality, justice and unity.

Conclusion

Autoethnography allows the author to describe her journey with URCSA over the past 25 years as one of personal development between a variety of ecclesiastical and ethnic cultures. In summary, this personal development manifested itself in the following:

1. URCSA has empowered the author to develop from the restricting “Volksmoeder” ideal of a single nation to positions in ministering and leadership where she could move beyond gender. However, although gender for her became an irrelevant category for self-identification, it may not as yet be the case in the church itself, in spite of its ethos of equality between genders.
2. URCSA has enabled the author to move from the racial identification of whiteness to racial inclusiveness, while the church at the same time upheld a variety of ethnic expressions in church life and practice.
3. The journey with URCSA has sensitised the author to move from a position of “a woman’s soul is too pure for politics” to become part of the prophetic voice of the church in its relationship with the state.
4. The author chose to move away from a solely academic culture of historical criticism to theologies that were based on grassroots expressions of faith.
5. Whereas the author was—as a young woman—stylised into wearing a hat to church as a token of subordination, in URCSA she now leads liturgies in a variety of cultures, wearing a church uniform as identification with congregants.
6. From being a young woman who was not allowed to own property, she could develop into a minister who built a church with the men and women of an URCSA congregation.
7. For many years she was excluded by the Church Order and Stipulations from becoming a minister of the Word. Eventually the Church Order and Stipulations

were placed in her hands as Actuarius of the Northern and the General Synod as its custodian.

Without this journey with the church over the past 25 years, this development would not have been possible.

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