

25 Years of Ministerial Formation Praxis in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa: How Belharic Have We Become?

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Abstract

Since the inception of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) in 1994, the issue of theological education has occupied a key place in the meetings of General Synod. This article analyses the development and implementation of URCSA's ministerial formation programme over the past 25 years through the lens of the Belhar Confession. It examines the extent to which not only the curriculum but also the practices of ministerial formation have become driven, guided and shaped by the commitments inherent in the Confession of Belhar. Due to space constraints, this paper uses only Article One of Belhar as an interpretive and evaluative lens and focuses only on the Northern Theological Seminary in Pretoria, hoping thereby to stimulate further reflection in a similar vein.

Keywords: Ministerial Formation; Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA); Confession of Belhar; Northern Theological Seminary

Introduction

Method

The ministerial formation process of a church is one of its core priorities, since a church's future depends on a constant flow of new ministers. This is necessary not only for maintenance (to replace the ministers who retire or pass away) but also for the sake

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of mission (to produce workers who can establish new congregations). The way in which a church “forms” or “trains” its future ministers, therefore, reveals what kind of church it is and what kind of future it has.

It is impossible to survey 25 years of ministerial formation in one paper. We limit our focus by using the Confession of Belhar as a “lens” through which to examine the praxis of ministerial formation since 1994. We do this, since the General Synod (GS) of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) has formally declared:

The Belhar Confession is at the heart of the ministerial formation process, since it nurtures a ministerial lifestyle characterised by hope, unity, reconciliation, justice and obedience. (*Ministerial Formation Manual 2014*, 9)¹

Since the Confession of Belhar is a key identity marker of URCSA, the act of exploring its “reception” or implementation is to ask: Is URCSA—in its ministerial formation—a *confessing* church or merely a church *with* a confession?² Put differently: Does URCSA, in its ministerial formation programme, live and embody this confession? How Belharic³ is URCSA’s ministerial formation process?

Two terminological clarifications are necessary. Firstly, we use the term “ministerial formation” instead of “theological education,” in line with the 2005 GS:

The process of equipping URCSA members for the ordained ministry is called “ministerial formation” to give expression to the comprehensive process that it entails. (*MF Manual 2014*, 11)

Throughout our contribution, we will return to this comprehensive intention of URCSA’s process of ministerial formation. Here it is sufficient to mention the four dimensions of this comprehensive equipping process: it intends to be encompassing, inclusive, holistic and life-long (*MF Manual 2014*, 12). The term “holistic” refers to a long list of “outcomes” relating to personal values/attitudes, theological knowledge and

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- 1 We quote General Synod (GS) decisions mainly from the *Ministerial Formation Manual* (abbreviated *MF Manual*), rather than from the GS Agendas or Actas, since the *Manual* contains all GS decisions and documents relevant to ministerial formation.
 - 2 The distinction between a “confessing church” and a “church *with* confessions” has deep roots in Reformed theology. Berkouwer (1972, 122) has described this as the difference between “confessing your faith” and “believing your confession(s).” There is a real possibility that the three traditional “confessional standards” of URCSA (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dordt)—and even the Confession of Belhar—could become a burden, which is either dragged along as baggage or jettisoned as irrelevant for the daily life of URCSA congregations. If that happens, the confessions end up having no real impact on the church’s theological and liturgical identity or its ministerial formation programme. In this article we explore only the shaping effect of the Belhar Confession; the impact (if any) of the other three Reformed confessions is a topic for another day.
 - 3 We have coined this term to describe a church (and ministerial formation programme) that *embodies* the Confession of Belhar, by being fundamentally shaped by it, theologically and practically.

ministry skills that constitute the “ministry profile” approved by GS 2005 (*MF Manual 2014*, 13–16).

Secondly, the term “praxis” in our title refers to the ongoing interaction between theory and practice, theology and ministry. It is not a mere synonym of “practice” or “action.” We reflect on praxis because we not only survey the policy decisions of GS or regional synods; we examine the actual practices of regional MFTTs⁴ and explore the relationship between those practices and Belhar⁵ or other explicit (and implicit) theologies that are at work.

The Confession of Belhar as “Lens”

To use a document as an interpretive lens is not a simple procedure. We, therefore, need to explain what we mean by that and how we are going to proceed. In the first place, it implies that we as authors adopt Belhar as a normative guide that shapes our way of seeing. It is an epistemological choice that shapes the nature of our attentiveness and observing. In other words, Belhar is not a formal or clinical “tool” that we use to analyse or dissect ministerial formation; our research for this paper is itself a form of praxis and we have deliberately chosen to let that praxis be shaped by Belhar.

This means, secondly, that we position ourselves as loyal members of URCSA who are doing theology in the interest of and for the benefit of the church. This paper is an internal critique of the church’s ministerial formation programme, done in solidarity with the church and shaped by its confession(s). Since all three authors have shaped (and have been shaped by) this programme in some way, it is also a self-critical exercise.

Thirdly, the whole of Belhar should be used in this process. We need to avoid the “short cut” temptation to describe Belhar as dealing only with unity, reconciliation and justice. It is of crucial importance for ministerial formation that all five the articles of Belhar are actively involved in this interpretive exercise. However, in this paper only Article 1 is used, to establish the pattern for using the other four articles in future research.

Fourthly, we need to explain how a confessional statement is used as an interpretive lens: How does one “look through” a confession? To begin with, it is important to recognise that Belhar focuses on the church. It unmaskes an ecclesiological heresy and presents a vision of how a Christian church should embody the gospel in a society shaped by racism and oppression. Belhar does not speak about an abstract or “ideal” church, hanging in the air. It articulates compelling truth that needs to be done, not merely believed or discussed. It envisages a praxis (seeing-thinking-believing-praying-planning-acting) in and for a particular society. Therefore, it:

4 The term MFTT is an abbreviation of Ministerial Formation Task Team, which has replaced the former term “curatorium” since the 2005 GS.

5 We use the term “Belhar” as shorthand for “The Confession of Belhar” for the sake of word economy.

- Makes faith statements about God: what God has done, is doing, and has promised to do.
- Reveals an understanding of South African society, sometimes explicitly and sometimes more implicitly.⁶
- Makes faith statements (on the basis of the two prior points) about what the church is and what it should be and do.

We propose an approach that considers these dimensions of praxis⁷ when using a particular article of Belhar as a lens through which to look at ministerial formation. This means asking whether URCSA’s ministerial formation programme embodies the praxis envisaged by a particular article of Belhar. As already stated, in this paper we only develop the approach and test it with Article 1. We regard this as a truthful way to read Belhar and a fruitful way to look at ministerial formation.

To conclude this section, we also need to admit that Belhar is a limiting lens. It does not enable us to ask all the important questions that should be asked about ministerial formation.⁸ As useful as we believe this exercise to be, we will also need other lenses if we want to make a more comprehensive assessment of ministerial formation in URCSA.

Our Research Procedure

As a team, we had only two face-to-face meetings to discuss the topic, and it was during those discussions that we agreed on our basic approach to use Belhar as a lens to examine the ministerial formation programme of URCSA. Subsequently, a first draft on Article 1 was circulated by email for comment and the conversation developed from there. As the paper developed, we realised that we would not be able to do justice to all five articles or to all four the formation centres, and therefore we decided to limit our focus as indicated already.

The Structure of the Paper

This paper explores the implications of Article 1 of Belhar for ministerial formation, which means that it is structured thematically, not chronologically. Some historical

6 Belhar was written *from* and *for* the South African context under apartheid, but it does not refer to the context by name. A Reformed confession is always situated in time and space, addressing a particular challenge to the life and faith of a particular church on the basis of a *status confessionis*, but it is formulated in a way that does not “over-contextualise” it, since it aims to express the catholic Christian faith and hopes to be appreciated many years later and in various other contexts.

7 In other publications, seven dimensions of praxis are distinguished (see e.g. Cochrane, De Gruchy and Petersen 1994; Kritzingler and Saayman 2011), but it would have complicated this paper excessively to include all those dimensions.

8 One example of an issue not addressed by Belhar, and therefore not by this paper, is the question of African culture and spirituality. For that reason we do not address the issue of “Africanising” ministerial formation directly in this paper.

developments are explained for the sake of clarity, but the focus is synchronic rather than diachronic.⁹ We ask ourselves: Where are we now? How far have we come? To what extent has the ministerial formation programme of URCSA extricated itself from its unjust and divisive past, rooted in the DRC's race-shaped mission policy, in order to be shaped by Belhar? The question is, therefore: *How Belharic have we become?*

Within each section we do not start with a general exposition of the Belhar article and subsequently “apply” it to ministerial formation. We identify the ministerial formation issues that relate to the Belhar article and then interpret Belhar in relation to those issues. So the macro structure of the approach that we propose is shaped by the five articles of Belhar, but the micro structure within each section is shaped by ministerial formation issues.

In this paper, we do not give representative or conclusive answers to the questions we raise. To do that would have required extensive interviewing and observation of the practices and policies of all four URCSA formation centres.¹⁰ Our paper is exploratory in nature and based on documents and personal experience. Since all three of us (as co-authors) are attached to the Northern Theological Seminary (NTS) in Pretoria, our paper focuses on the life of NTS, but we hope to proceed by using the same approach to examine the other three formation centres as well, by using all five articles of Belhar.

Belhar, Article 1

How does ministerial formation look through the lens of Article 1? With only 35 words, it is the shortest of Belhar's five articles, but it is the tip of an iceberg with far-reaching implications. It reads:

We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who through Word and Spirit gathers, protects and cares for the church from the beginning of the world and will do to the end.

We identify the following dimensions of this Belhar article that are relevant to ministerial formation.

God's Initiative

The church is the ongoing work of God. This work of God is described as gathering, protecting and caring, and as happening “through Word and Spirit.” How does this shape ministerial formation? Fundamentally, it compels us to acknowledge that the church is not primarily an institution or organisation, but a movement started and sustained by God. That is why the Ecumenical Creeds guide us to “*believe* [in] one holy catholic [and apostolic] church.” The church is a gift of grace that we receive from

9 Some of this history can be found in Kritzinger (2008; 2010).

10 The four formation centres are based in Bloemfontein, Pretoria, Stellenbosch and Windhoek.

God.¹¹ For that reason, ministerial formation is also the work of God: it is God who “raises up” leaders, who *calls* prophets and disciples, who *sends* apostles. At NTS we are often surprised that there is a constant stream of people who apply to become ministers, in spite of the fact that it is a demanding occupation for which one does not get much financial reward. We are amazed that God is still at work, gathering, protecting and caring for the church by calling fallible human beings to serve and lead it.

However, the phrase “through (his)¹² Word and Spirit” clearly also implies human agency. As the Nicene Creed has it, God’s Spirit “has spoken through the prophets” (human agents) and God’s Word is encountered in the Bible, a collection of 66 books that are unthinkable without human authors, copiers, translators and printers. So when Belhar, Article 1 says that God gathers, protects and cares for the church *by Word and Spirit*, it means that God calls and equips human agents to participate in this ongoing work of serving and leading God’s people—and God does that by making the message of Scripture a compelling truth to them in the midst of a Christian community through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Does this theological framework for URCSA’s life become visible in its ministerial formation programme? The GS resolutions and documents focus mainly on the practical rules and responsibilities of the church structures that manage the formation programme. Only one theological statement in the ministerial formation policy documents explicitly reflects the language of Belhar, Article 1:

In the total experience of a congregation’s life, God’s people experience the Lordship of Jesus Christ as the One who rules the church by Word and Spirit, giving his unmerited grace that mobilizes believers into action for love, peace and justice. (*MF Manual 2014*, 9)

The relative absence of the content of Belhar, Article 1 in the ministerial formation documents may be a theological lapse, but it is more likely a result of the “operational” nature of the documents. A much more important question is whether Article 1 is embodied in the day-to-day practices of ministerial formation: Does it show in the way the regional MFTTs plan and manage the ministerial formation programme? Do our meeting procedures, planning, budgeting, reporting, and relationships with students reflect the belief that it is God who gathers, protects and cares for the church? Do we exhibit a spirituality of seeking to discern God’s will and of striving for consensus, rather than merely enforcing rules?

11 Clearly, we do not believe (in) the church in the same way that we believe in the triune God, and yet it is not just one social organisation among others.

12 The original Afrikaans text of Belhar reads “deur sy Woord en Gees” but the revised English translation that was approved by GS in 2008 removed all the explicitly masculine pronouns referring to God (URCSA 2008, 55). Nevertheless it is clear that “by Word and Spirit” means “by God’s Word and God’s Spirit.”

A specific set of questions in this regard concerns the procedures for screening and selecting students for admission to the ministerial formation programme: How do we discern whether someone has been called by God (through Word and Spirit) to be equipped for participation in God’s gathering, protecting and caring work as ordained ministers? Should psychometric testing be used? Is one page in which an applicant explains her/his sense of calling sufficient? Is it adequate to receive one-page recommendations from a church council, minister and presbytery?¹³

How does a regional MFTT sharpen its ability to discern whether applicants have been “called” by God to the ordained ministry? And how does it encourage, broaden and deepen that calling during their formation journey? If “by Word and Spirit” is God’s way of gathering, protecting and caring, then the key criteria for the church’s way of discernment would have to be clear evidence that a student’s life is shaped and controlled by God’s Word and Spirit. This would entail evidence of a growing expertise in interpreting the Word, but above all a growing love for the Bible and its liberating message and an increasing desire (and skill) to communicate it clearly to others.

It would also involve discerning evidence of the Spirit’s transformative and sanctifying work in students’ lives, creating growing spiritual maturity and personal wisdom in all their relationships. This will require close personal mentoring from the side of ministers who have been equipped to give such guidance and have committed themselves to invest time and energy to nurture a new generation of church leaders.¹⁴ It is in the context of such caring scrutiny and close accompaniment (and only in such a context) that a mentor or a church committee could consider asking a student—if significant evidence of spiritual and personal growth is absent—whether they are where God wants them to be and whether they should redirect their journey towards another calling.¹⁵

Article 1 of Belhar forces us to stop and ask whether our curriculum, with all the structures and processes we have erected around it, may have become an end in itself, a

13 The present practice is that an aspirant ministry student needs to complete a prescribed four-page application form (*MF Manual 2014*, 34–37) and submit it (with a number of supporting documents) to the MFTT. The form contains one page for the church council and another for the presbytery to recommend the application. The MFTT (or an Assessment Committee appointed by it) then interviews the applicant and the MFTT formally accepts her/him as a ministry student of URCSA.

14 URCSA’s GS has taken clear decisions on the mentoring of students. For example, the GS Rule (clause 9.1.4) refers to “The network of URCSA congregations and ministers who will act as mentors for theological students during their years of study” (*MF Manual 2014*, 5). Regional MFTTs have different programmes in place to facilitate and monitor this mentoring process.

15 In terms of a theological understanding of vocation, it is important to insist that not only ordained ministers have a calling from God, so that a decision to discontinue your ministry studies to pursue another career is not necessarily “losing your calling.” When discerned wisely and caringly it could amount to “finding your true calling.” It is not clear, though, whether ministry students (or URCSA at large) have this understanding of their “calling.” This is an important issue for further research and reflection.

bureaucratic system that runs on its own rails, independent of the triune God¹⁶ whose church this is and in whose gathering-protecting-caring work we have been called to participate.

The Role of the Church in Ministerial Formation

Underlying URCSA's ministerial formation programme is the short and clear statement in Article 4 of the Rule (*Reglement*) for Ministerial Formation (entitled Responsibility): "The formation of ministers of the Word is the responsibility of URCSA" (*MF Manual 2014*, 3). This clause is a positive affirmation of the dignity of URCSA as a church in its own right to produce its own ministers, but it also contains two negative dimensions:

URCSA and DRC

Firstly, ministerial formation is not the responsibility of the Dutch Reformed Church (henceforth DRC), as it used to be in the past. From the establishment of the Stofberg Gedenkskool in 1908 until the early 1990s, the DRC dominated the training of ministers of the DRMC and DRCA through the provision of extensive funding, lecturers, administrative staff and a whole infrastructure of buildings and administration.¹⁷ The DRC spent a huge amount of money to establish and sustain the Stofberg Gedenkskool at Viljoensdrift in the Free State (1908–1959) and (after the arrival of Group Areas) the network of ethnic (homeland-based) seminaries in line with "grand apartheid" at Bellville, Decoligny, Dingaansat, Lefika and Turfloop (1960–1990).¹⁸ By 1993, however, only Bellville (for DRMC students) and Turfloop (for DRCA students) remained functional, but the situations at these two centres were very different. In the Cape, the DRMC had sold the seminary properties in Bellville to the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in 1999, invested the money and used it to establish a loan scheme to support students' tuition and accommodation fees. Since the theology lecturers were appointed by the UWC, their salaries were paid by the government, so the DRMC curatorium received no further financial support from the DRC.

In Turfloop, the DRCA curatorium felt compelled to close the Stofberg Seminary in 1993, out of concern for the safety of the white lecturers and their families who were living on the seminary premises, in the uncertain political transition period before the election of 1994. After the birth of URCSA in 1994, a group of URCSA theologians

16 Article 1 of Belhar has a clear trinitarian stamp, but we cannot explore the implications of that for ministerial formation here. However, we emphasise the need to rethink trinitarian doctrine in African cultural and political terms for the church's worship, catechesis and ministerial formation. The NTS logo, which contains trinitarian symbolism and the words "African Reformed praxis," is (only) a symbolic move in the right direction.

17 A brief history of this DRC initiative was presented to the 2008 GS to mark the 100th anniversary of the Stofberg Gedenkskool (Kritzinger 2008), but it requires detailed further research.

18 The DRC handed over the management and control of these seminaries to the DRMC and DRCA respectively during the course of the 1980s, but the finances were still provided by the DRC. The gradual scaling down of DRC financial support during the course of the 1980s, the factors that brought it about, and the step-by-step closure of the Stofberg Seminaries still need to be thoroughly researched.

under the leadership of Professor Takatso Mofokeng (and with overseas financial support) established the Turfloop Theological Seminary. It was opened in 1995 and two full-time lecturers were appointed, Rev. S. Nchabeleng and Rev. L.J. Bookholane. So when URCSA's GS of 1997 made the policy statement: "Die opleiding van sy bedienaars van die Woord is die verantwoordelikheid van die Verenigde Gereformeerde Kerk"¹⁹ (VGKSA Agenda en Handeling 1997, 154), it must be understood, in part, as a declaration of dignity and self-sufficiency *over against* the DRC.

Church, University, Seminary

Secondly, the statement that the formation of ministers of the Word is "the responsibility of URCSA" affirms that it is not the responsibility of a *university*. However much one trusts a faculty or department of theology at a university, the primary responsibility for the formation of ministers rests with the church itself. URCSA enters into cooperation agreements with universities, but may never "outsource" ministerial formation to any of them. The relationship between church and university is a complex matter. The different formation centres have had different experiences in this regard and adopted different positions, but two questions can focus the relationship: a) What kind of agreement should a regional MFTT have with a university? b) Should a regional MFTT establish a seminary to nurture the dimensions of spiritual formation and ministry skills that cannot be provided by a university? As mentioned above, there were five seminaries for the black churches in the DRC "family" during the 1970s and 1980s, while at the same time the apartheid government was busy establishing racially-ethnically-based "homeland" universities (with faculties of theology) alongside them to serve the needs of the DRC mission by teaching theology to aspirant ministers of its "daughter" churches.²⁰ Thus DRC-funded seminaries co-existed and collaborated with the government-funded ethnic universities until the 1990s, when the four regions started developing in different directions. In the rest of this paper, we focus on the activities of the formation centre of the Northern and Southern Synods.

Northern Theological Seminary

In September 2002 the joint curatorium of the Northern Transvaal and Southern Transvaal Synods recommended to the two Synodical Commissions the establishment of the Northern Theological Seminary (NTS) in Pretoria to revive the work of Turfloop Theological Seminary, which had been closed by the curatorium in April 1999.²¹ The

19 This means "The education of ministers of the Word is the responsibility of the Uniting Reformed Church."

20 The most prominent examples of universities with faculties of theology that were established by the government alongside DRC seminaries, were UWC in Bellville (for "coloureds"), UNIN in Pietersburg (for Bapedi) and a UNIN branch at Witsieshoek (for Basotho). The University of Durban-Westville (UDW) (for Indians) was also given a Faculty of Theology to serve the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA), i.e. the DRC mission in the Indian community.

21 The history of Turfloop Theological Seminary (1995–1999) still needs to be written.

location of NTS in Pretoria implied a move away from the seminary properties at Turfloop, which had been used for training ministers since 1960, but to which the DRCA (or URCSA) only had right of occupation, no property rights.²² The proposal approved by the two synodical commissions in September 2002 envisaged that students would do the first three academic years at the University of South Africa (Unisa) (to obtain a BTh) and the last three years at the University of Pretoria (UP) (BTh Hons and MDiv). The role of NTS as a seminary in all this would be to provide a residential community life, academic tutoring and spiritual support for students. The curatorium at the time had a clear conviction that they could not rely completely on either UP or Unisa to provide the comprehensive formation required for church ministry.²³

However, the establishment of NTS in Pretoria was controversial on two fronts: On the one hand, some URCSA ministers were upset that their traditional campus at Turfloop, which involved so many good memories, was being abandoned. The main reason for the move to Pretoria, however, was the fact that the University of the North (UNIN) suddenly closed its Faculty of Theology in February 2002, so that the group of URCSA students still living on the premises no longer had any theology courses to attend. In the light of that development, the curatorium judged it unwise to let them stay at Turfloop.

The other group that was upset about the establishment of NTS in Pretoria was the DRC. They had hoped that URCSA would simply bring all its students directly to UP, which one DRC office bearer called “the normal theological education” in Pretoria.²⁴ They were upset first of all that we were establishing a seminary in Pretoria and secondly that it had links with Unisa.²⁵ They called an emergency meeting with the curatorium of URCSA, and in the discussion we expressed our surprise that the DRC had a problem with an URCSA seminary in Pretoria, whereas they had never complained about the

22 The ownership and management of the Turfloop Seminary properties since 1999 involve a complex history, which included numerous meetings of church committees, court cases, attempted invasions of the property by members of the surrounding community, and so forth. At the moment of writing, URCSA still does not have the title deeds to the property, but it has won court verdicts instructing the ownership transfer to take place. A joint committee of the Southern and Northern Synods are in charge of administering the property and renting it out to students of the University of Limpopo. This history must also still be written.

23 There were complex reasons for this conviction of the curatorium, as revealed in its report to the two Synodical Commissions in September 2002. In the case of Unisa it had to do with the ecumenical composition of its staff and curriculum, which did not provide a specifically Reformed theological formation, even though there were a number of URCSA theologians working at Unisa. In the case of UP it had to do with the absence of URCSA theologians among the staff and a curriculum that was not focused on African realities.

24 A good example of this expectation from the side of the DRC was the article of Dr A.S. van Niekerk, who had been the last rector of the Stoffberg Seminary at Turfloop before its closure in 1993. His paper was entitled: “Die Gesamentlike Teologiese Oplossing: ’n Wonderwerk wat Moet Werk” (Van Niekerk 2000).

25 The DRC had made numerous official statements criticising theological views expressed by some Unisa lecturers over the years. Consequently, theology degrees from Unisa were not recognised for admission to the ministry in the DRC.

seminary at Turfloop since 1960. We also asked them what was “normal” about theological formation at UP for a URCSA student, since the Faculty of Theology had only one black staff member,²⁶ not a single URCSA lecturer, and a significant number of lecturers of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHKA), which at the time still had an Article in their “Kerkwet” stating that it was a church for white people only.²⁷ In short, the curatorium was not convinced in 2002 that it would be wise to make UP its sole academic partner in Pretoria.

As a result of this tension with the DRC curatorium, they turned down our request to endorse a fund-raising letter for sending to DRC congregations.²⁸ It meant that we had to fend for ourselves financially and had to build up NTS from the ground, by depending solely on the support of URCSA congregations. Had it not been for the timely intervention of the “Kerkinactie” (Global Ministries) department of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN), NTS would have struggled to survive. Mr Bert Kling, who was the Southern African representative of Kerkinactie at the time, made contact with us and offered helpful advice as well as financial support. Their substantial support in the first two years of our existence gave us the breathing space to start mobilising financial support from URCSA congregations, ministries and individuals.²⁹

To conclude this section, it is important to emphasise the role that NTS as a seminary has played in the past 16 years. It has provided a residential community in which full-time students can live, eat, study and worship together, discuss theology in their first language(s),³⁰ and develop their leadership skills through an elected student representative committee. It also provides an infrastructure (with a principal, an administrator and an office) through which relationships with a larger group of non-residential students (who study part-time by distance learning at Unisa) can be sustained, and regular contact sessions can be arranged.

26 He was Prof M.A. Masango of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA), teaching practical theology.

27 For a discussion of the history of the inclusion of Article 3 in the NHKA church order, written from the perspective of its black “sister church” (now called the Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ, MRCC), see Banda (1996).

28 In fairness, it must be said that it was not customary in the DRC at the time to send letters with financial requests to their congregations. It must also be acknowledged that the Eastern Synod of the DRC contributed an amount of over R160 000 in 2002 to settle the outstanding debts of URCSA students at the University of the North, thus enabling them to receive their academic records and to transfer their enrolment to Unisa or another university to complete their studies during 2003.

29 In subsequent years, up to the present, Kerkinactie (later in collaboration with ICCO) kept on supporting NTS, but at a lower level.

30 The importance of language in ministerial formation can hardly be overemphasised, but in the UP Faculty of Theology black students were regarded as “English-speaking” and (until recently) taught in separate English medium lectures, which duplicated the Afrikaans medium lectures in each module.

Gather, Protect and Care

After this brief survey of church-university-seminary relationships in the different regional synods, we return to the wording of Belhar, Article 1, particularly its threefold description of God's work of gathering, protecting and caring. Since it is *by Word* that God does this threefold work, ministerial formation should equip students with the vision, passion and skills to use God's Word to gather, protect and care for God's people. This means that a key priority of ministerial formation is to equip students with sound exegetical and hermeneutical skills to interpret Scripture contextually and to communicate it with impact and relevance. This includes preaching, but goes much wider; it also involves the responsible and liberating use of Scripture in other aspects of ministry, like group Bible study, social media, catechism, Sunday school, and pastoral counselling. How Word-centred and Word-driven is our ministerial formation programme?

Since it is by Word *and Spirit* that God does the threefold work in (and on) the church, ministerial formation should equip students to be men and women of the Spirit, who are genuine disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose lives the fruit and the gifts of the Spirit are visible and tangible. The Reformed tradition that came to South Africa from the Netherlands is not particularly known for an emphasis on the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, contemplation, personal discipleship and spiritual direction. When one reflects on the marriage conflicts, power abuse and alcohol dependency that occur among some URCSA ministers, alarm bells start ringing. What have we done wrong in our ministerial formation programme that has caused so many of our ministers to live un-Belharic lives—unable to genuinely gather, protect and care for God's people?

An important correction needs to be made to everything we have said so far in this section. Why is it that we primarily and automatically think of *ordained ministers* when we consider how God uses human agents to participate in God's work of gathering, protecting and caring? Surely Belhar regards a whole congregation as God's instruments; not only the ordained ministers. But how is it possible that we require an ordained minister to have five years of academic formation, while the majority of the leaders in our congregations—elders, deacons, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders and (above all) parents—are not given any formation for their respective ministries? This is not only unreformed and unbiblical; it is also unwise—if not foolish—for any self-respecting church. It is not as if we have ignored this issue in our decisions, though. In 2008 the GS accepted a report of the GS MFTT entitled “Addressing the ministry crisis in URCSA” (*MF Manual 2014*, 29–33) in which a key emphasis was the equipping of all church members for ministry. It emphasised that ministry is the responsibility and privilege of the whole Body of Christ and that a “broad training process” is necessary to equip church council members and other congregation members in URCSA for their collective work of ministry. The report pointed out that such a shift in focus would require ordained ministers to become “trainers and equippers of members, in addition to their roles as preachers, pastors and teachers.” Consequently, the ministerial

formation process would have to “focus increasingly on producing ministry trainers, not merely on producing ministers” (*MF Manual 2014*, 30). This report on the “ministry crisis” in URCSA presents a Belharic vision, but how far have we come in embodying this vision in our ministerial formation programme?

Mission?

It is interesting that Belhar, Article 1 does not speak of God as *sending* the church. It only says that God gathers, protects and cares for the church. Is this a weakness in Belhar? We do not think so. At the time of writing the Confession of Belhar (1982) the DRMC (and DRCA) were under such pressure (politically, economically and spiritually) just to make sense of being Christians in a country claiming to be Christian, but where black Christians (Reformed and otherwise) were being consistently and systemically oppressed by white Reformed Christians, that it is understandable that the emphasis of Belhar would not be on “going out to preach the gospel” to those who were not yet Christians.

The urgent mission priority of the church at the time was to *gather* God’s people who were being *scattered* (teargased, detained, forcibly removed, shot) by the apartheid government. Its urgent mission priority was to *protect* God’s people who were being constantly *attacked* and *harassed* by personal and structural acts of racism (humiliated, threatened, excluded, impoverished). Its urgent mission priority was to *care for* the broken-hearted people of God who were mourning their loss of dignity and land, burying their children, and living in fear. That *was* the *mission* of God’s church in the 1980s in South Africa, according to Belhar, Article 1: Not to invite new believers into the Christian fold, but to try and keep church members in the Christian fold, calling on them not to give up their faith as a result of the suffering and uncertainty facing them.

In South Africa, much has changed since 1982, but sadly much has not. The critical question facing ministerial formation today is: To what extent do we succeed in producing ministers who are equipped to participate in God’s mission among God’s people who are still in so many ways scattered, harassed and broken-hearted?

Hope and Courage

That brings us to the closing words of Belhar, Article 1, which affirm that God gathers, protects and cares for the church “from the beginning of the world and will do to the end.” This phrase has led some interpreters to say that the main emphasis of Article 1 is on *hope* (e.g. Kritzinger 2017, 336).³¹ The affirmation that God will remain faithful to the church until the end does indeed inspire courage, gratitude and hope. The church is not “our organisation,” which stands and falls with *our* faithfulness. Belhar, Article 1 gives us a sound eschatological orientation that can sustain and encourage us, even in

31 A study guide on Belhar that was produced by the Reformed Church in America (2006, 47–50) identifies the thrust of Article 1 as an “affirmation of hope” (see Kritzinger 2017, 337).

times of deep trouble and uncertainty. But have we succeeded in instilling this hope and courage in the students who are shaped by our ministerial formation programme? And have we equipped them to instil such hope and courage in the congregations they will serve?

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