

Interpreting History. Unlocking Various Phases of History in the Story of the Upington Uniting Reformed Church over Its First Hundred Years of Existence (1875–1975)

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Abstract

The Upington congregation of the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa (URCSA), established in 1875, is one of two URCSA congregations in Upington in the Northern Cape province of South Africa. The congregation has a long, interesting history entrenched in the sociopolitical realities of the “Coloured” people of the Orange River Valley in and around Upington. This article explores the history of this congregation, its origins as a mission station on the other side of the Orange River, and the complexities and perceived cultural boundaries linked to its establishment and development. Furthermore, there is the story behind the significant church schism of 1902. The article also focuses on the interesting, complex link between the former Dutch Reform Mission Church (DRMC) Upington congregation and the Dutch Reform Church (DRC) Upington over certain periods—a relationship of many phases. This is an attempt to discover new elements and perspectives on the history of the URCSA Upington, adding to current engagements and evaluations of congregational histories in eras before the so-called postcolonial era. Church and congregational records (including celebratory publications), theses linked to the establishment of churches in the 1800s in the Orange River Valley, and historical documents of the former DRMC form the basis of this study (source analysis).

Keywords: church history; church schism; Upington; URCSA

Introduction

The Upington¹ congregation of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA Upington²) has a long and interesting history, at times running against the grain of dominant South African histories. The story of the congregation is also deeply intertwined with the historical and sociopolitical developments and economic realities of the region and the town of Upington. It can be argued that the congregation still bears marks of segregation, ecclesial apartheid, and a cultural identity-based struggle that characterises many congregations of the URCSA. Here, the identity markers of language, culture, historical racial identification, and socio-economic class are some of the lenses that can be used to interpret the story of this congregation.³

The origins of this congregation are linked to cultural identities and understandings bearing the marks of segregation based on cultural markers that made sense at the time (1800s and 1900s). As such, this article refers to terms of historical significance, including the Koranna people, the so-called *Basters*,⁴ and other terms to illustrate the realities of the time and their impact on the current story of the congregation. The establishment of the congregation is linked directly to an understanding of cultural difference, segregation, and the dire effect of colonial expansion on the first nations of the region.

Given the historical nature of this article, the current URCSA Upington congregation is referred to as the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) Upington. This is to embed the reader in the history of the congregation and its link with that of the broader DRMC. Where necessary and where links are made to the current realities of the congregation, the author refers to its current name (URCSA Upington).

To reflect this interesting and complex history, this article focuses on its link to mission work, initially with the Koranna people, the “new” identity of the congregation after the historical Koranna wars with emphasis on the *Basters*, the major church schism that happened in its ranks (1902), and the historical link between this congregation and the DRC Upington.

1 Upington is a rural town in the Northern Cape province of South Africa. It is situated on the banks of the Orange River and has a population of about 90 000 people. The town has a rich history and is the economic centre of the region. For an overview of Upington, see <https://www.infosa.co.za/provinces/northern-cape/northern-cape-town-cities/upington/>. For census data on the Dawid Kruiper Municipality of which Upington is part, see <https://census.statssa.gov.za/#/province/3/2>.

2 This is currently one of two URCSA congregations in Upington (the other being the Rainbow URCSA congregation, established in 1994). Given the nature of this article, it should be noted that there are other congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) as well as a congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) in and around the town of Upington.

3 The URCSA Upington is regarded as a predominantly “Coloured” congregation that has its roots in the former DRMC.

4 Own italicisation will be used for this term throughout this article.

The history of the DRMC Upington shows similarities with other older congregations of the DRMC, especially with congregations in similar sociocultural contexts, for example, in the *platteland*.⁵ Here, the history of the URCSA congregation Carnarvon can be considered an example.⁶ Although the URCSA Upington today counts as one of the older URCSA congregations, it is uncertain exactly when this congregation became part of the DRMC, a church denomination that came into being in 1881 (Kriel 1981, 26–34).⁷ However, De Villiers (1950, 7) notes that it was only during the ministry of Ds. J. A. van Niekerk that the congregation became a DRMC congregation.⁸

It is nevertheless worth rediscovering the history of DRMC Upington and to make sense of its historical significance relative to its current social, political, and economic context. This history and the current realities of this congregation are, after all, intertwined with those of society and remain relevant within our current contextual realities (Van Rooi 2010a, 176–177).

Congregational booklets and publications, including festival pamphlets of the DRMC Upington, are used as primary sources to reflect on the history of the congregation. As is noted, there are often differences in perspective and vantage points when these rich sources are compared. The author notes the differences, for example, in the time period, foci of the publications, the context of the congregation at the time of writing, and the reflective vantage point of the author(s), including the festival committee. In this regard, the Ebenhaeser brochure (De Villiers 1950) and the *Eeufesbrojsure* (centenary brochure) (1975) of the DRMC Upington stand as examples of the comparative differences.⁹

In the following sections the mentioned key moments in the congregational life of the DRMC Upington are highlighted and reflected on, starting with the role of Rev. Christiaan Schröder in the establishment of the DRMC Upington.¹⁰ This is to lay a

5 *Platteland* here refers to the interior of South Africa and specifically the area that today forms part of the Western, Eastern, and Northern Cape provinces.

6 See N.G. Sendingkerk Carnarvon (1972). Given the history of the DRMC Upington, it makes sense to highlight some of the similarities of these two congregations but this does not form part of the current study.

7 No mention is made of the presence of the Upington congregation in the synodical meetings of the DRMC in 1881, 1891, 1892, and 1896 (Kriel 1981, 28–37).

8 Van Niekerk was minister of the DRMC Upington from 1904 to 1906 and it seems likely that the DRMC Upington thus formally became a DRMC congregation after the church schism took place.

9 The last-mentioned brochure was compiled by a festival committee under the chairmanship of the late Rev. J. G. Smith, the first minister of colour and son of the DRMC to lead this congregation. It is therefore plausible that this had a direct impact on the nature, purpose, and content of this publication which celebrated the centenary of the congregation.

10 It is acknowledged that Schröder played an immense role at various levels in the community of Upington during his time. However, the focus of this article is on his role as missionary and minister of the DRMC.

foundational perspective to reflect further on the history of a congregation that will soon celebrate 150 years of existence.

Christiaan Schröder and the Establishment of the DRMC Upington

The mission work of Rev. Christiaan Schröder is well documented in research and work that focuses on the church history of the Orange River Valley.¹¹ His work in the region currently known as Upington¹² is recorded popularly as linked to a request from the then Koranna captain, Klaas Lukas, who, according to researchers, realised the importance of literacy for his people (Van der Linde 2009, 2).¹³

Schröder was a South African of German descent, and his father was a Rhenish missionary in Wupperthal (Van der Linde 2009, 3). Before the request to start work in what would become the Koranna Mission, he stayed in the Amandelboom¹⁴ area and, as required to take up the role in Upington, was ordained as missionary of the DRC in Worcester in 1872 (Steenkamp 1953, 43).

The original mission station was named Olyvenhoudtsdrift (Boven Korannaland) (De Villiers 1950, 5) and, as mentioned, formed part of the chieftdom of Klaas Lukas of the Korannas. Van der Linde also states that Schröder, as part of his work in Olyvenhoudtsdrift, erected a place of worship and a manse on the site allocated to him by Lukas (Van der Linde 2009, 4). The church that was built later was erected around the Koranna kraal of Lukas.

Although the congregation was established in 1875, it is clear that congregational activities were activated prior to this establishment with the first children being baptised on 25 December 1872, and the first marriage registered on 27 December 1872 (De Villiers 1950, 9).

11 Steenkamp (1953, 35) notes that the London Missionary Society (LMS) was the first to attempt mission work among the Koranna people from as early as 1801.

12 Upington is named after Sir Thomas Upington, attorney-general and then prime minister of the Cape, who established the first police station in Upington in 1879 during the second Koranna war (<https://www.upington.co.za/kalahari-oranje-museum/>).

13 Steenkamp (1953, 37–40) also notes that the DRC attempted mission work among the Koranna in the 1860s but that it was only once Lukas invited Schröder that mission work was activated.

14 This area is today known as Williston, Northern Cape.

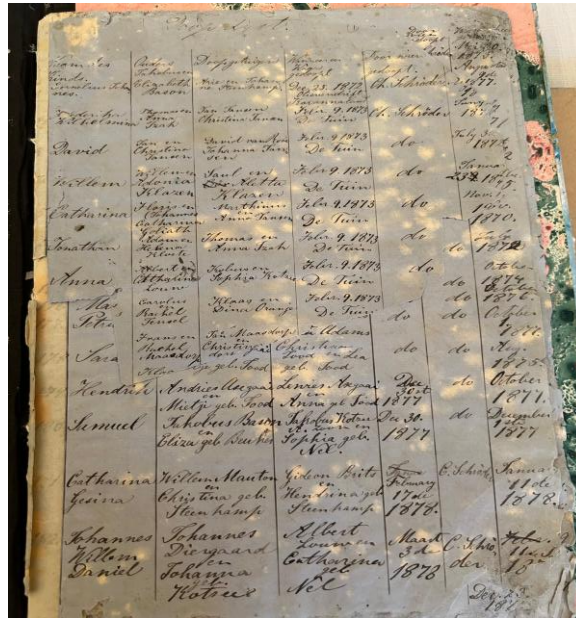


Figure 1: This photograph, taken in the church archives of the DRMC Uprising, reflects the first baptism that took place under Schröder. The baptismal register of the mentioned congregation is used with permission.

Although Schröder's work started under the Koranna people, Steenkamp (1953, 62) is of the opinion that it was not very successful and that, from early times, the *Basters* formed the core of Schröder's congregations.

Schröder is regarded as the father of the ecclesial developments in the current Uprising, both from the perspective of the DRMC (and thus URCSA) and of the DRC. He is also remembered as a person with significant influence in the church, societal life, and politics and, among others, served as a member of the old Cape Parliament (Van der Linde 2009, 8–10). However, his political views linked to the South African War (1899–1902) almost caused the end of the established congregation and got him imprisoned (Van der Linde 2009, 9–12). As noted later, this had a direct effect on the history of the DRMC Uprising.

Schröder passed on in 1912 and was buried in Uprising (Van der Linde 2009, 15). Given his role in the DRC Uprising, it is significant that he was buried in the cemetery of this congregation ('*n Eeu van God se Genade* 1993, 23).

The Koranna People and Korannaland

To understand the history and sociopolitical context of the DRMC Uprising better, it is important to understand the context of Korannaland and the story of Klaas Lukas.

Perhaps the best description of the history of what today is known as the Orange River Valley is found in Legassick (2001), who notes:

The Orange River Valley must have acted as a magnet, drawing people to its banks from the earliest times. Its first occupants were hunter-gatherers (presumably ancestors of the Bushmen), who were supplemented from about 500 AD by (Khoi) pastoralists who dispersed east and west along the Orange River. (Legassick 2001, 1)

Historically, the Koranna¹⁵ are regarded as part of the Khoisan, specific bands of people who found a home on the islands of the Orange River between the current Upington and the Augrabies falls (Ross 1975, 561). Ross describes the Koranna people as tribes “that saw little use for the ways of the Cape Colony, and avoided its agents whether government officials or missionaries” (Ross 1975, 562).

Ross notes the following:

Major colonial expeditions were sent against the !Kora of the middle Orange three times during the nineteenth century in order to suppress their widespread and dangerous raids against colonial life and property. Until they were finally crushed in 1879, the !Kora formed the most significant non-“Bantu” adversaries of white expansion. They were able to do so because they occupied one of the strongest natural fortresses¹⁶ in Southern Africa. (Ross 1975, 562)

Van der Linde agrees with Ross, indicating that the Koranna people moved from the Cape to the Orange River Valley mainly because of pressure from white people who also moved in the same direction (Van der Linde 2009, 1). And, as the colonial border shifted, it also meant that both the *Basters* and the white farmers encroached on Koranna areas (Legassick 2001, 16–18).

Historically, two so-called Koranna wars are widely acknowledged and identified, namely between 1868 and 1869 and between 1879 and 1880 (Legassick 2001, 16). The wars were brought about after the colonial government decided to bring an end to the strife and raiding of animals, apparently caused by the Korannas mainly against the white settlers (Legassick 2001, 16–18).

Not only did these wars have a detrimental effect on the livelihood of the Koranna people, then dispersed, and whose land was more and more used by the *Basters* (Steenkamp 1953, 10), but Legassick also reminds us that, after the wars, Koranna and African people of the region lost their land and became farmworkers and “squatters” (Legassick 2001, 18). This had a lasting impact on missionary work in the area and on

15 Many variations of this name exist, including Corrana, Korana, and the term used by Ross, namely !Kora (Ross 1975, 561). This article uses the term Koranna.

16 Here, Ross refers to natural vegetation found on the various islands in the Orange River between Upington and Augrabies.

the establishing years of the DRMC. It was after the last war that a *Baster*¹⁷ settlement was established in the area formerly ruled by Lukas (Legassick 2001, 31). As pointed out later, this led to a change in the dynamics and focus on the mission work and established DRMC congregation of Upington.

Klaas Lukas

In historical church records linked to mission work along the Orange River, the name Captain Klaas Lukas stands out. Lukas (also known as Kouriep) was mostly regarded as a cooperative chief (Ross 1975, 570). He is acknowledged as the only Koranna chief who gave protection to white colonists who settled on his land (Legassick 2001, 16). Legassick also points out that the *Basters* who moved north during the reign of Lukas were also acknowledged by him (Legassick 2001, 17). Van der Linde reminds us that the *Basters* were present at the start of Schröder's work, a group of people who moved with their sheep and cattle from the Victoria West and Carnarvon districts (Van der Linde 2009, 4). As such, even before white settlement in the area, the land of Klaas Lukas was culturally rich in diversity. But, linked to shifting borders, a growing sense of oppression and the need to survive an agrarian lifestyle brought new societal pressures to the Koranna people, who shared their land more and more with others (Legassick 2001, 16–18).

Of significance is that the Dutch Reformed mission station on the banks of the Orange River in the current Upington was established outside the kraal of Lukas (Ross 1975). According to Ross (1975, 574), this shows the pressure exerted on the !Kora by the colonists. There are also other interpretations, which bring together the complexity of rediscovering activities of a bygone era.

17 Own italicisation throughout the text when the word *Baster* is used. This is because of historical and current sensitivities linked to the term.



Figure 2: This photograph is taken from the stoep/veranda of the Schröder manse built in 1871 and was taken by the author. The manse forms part of the Kalahari-Oranje Museum in Upington. According to the Museum, the Koranna kraal was found in the area depicted here, closer to where the current bridge is over the Orange River.

Given the nature of this study, it is important to mention two significant details linked to the Koranna people and the captaincy of Klaas Lukas.

The first is linked to the establishment of the mission station by Schröder on the banks of the Orange River. It was not empty land without people at the time, since it is well recorded that this was the land of the Koranna people and that it was Klaas Lukas, according to popular history, who requested that Schröder start his mission work in the area.

The second significant link to the Koranna people is found in the impact of the Koranna wars. Through violence enacted against them, the Koranna people lost their hold on the area that they shared ever more with the *Baster* and, especially after the wars, when white settlers moved to the area.

So, what started as a congregation for the Koranna people evolved into one mostly serving the growing *Baster* population in the area, and one that provided refuge for the first white congregants of the to-be-established DRC. As such, the movement of people, war, and strife had a dramatic influence on the nature and purpose of the DRMC in Upington.

The life of Captain Klaas Lukas ended sadly. At the end of the second Koranna war, he was captured near the current border with Namibia (*'n Eeu van God se Genade* 1993,

8).¹⁸ Along with other Koranna leaders, Lukas was taken to Robben Island, where he died in 1880 (Legassick 2001, 18).

And the *Basters*?

Literature linked to the history of ecclesial and specifically mission activities in the Upington region often makes mention of the term *Basters*.¹⁹ Ross defines the *Basters* as those who were not accepted in the Boer community because of their colour, but who considered themselves under the authority of the Cape Colony and accepted its mores.

As mentioned, mission work in the area around the current Upington was initially seen as mission work among the Koranna people (Korannaland). This essentially came to an end after the Koranna wars, and thereafter the mission work of the DRC was focused on the *Basters*.²⁰ Regarding this period of time, Legassick reminds us that, although most of the inhabitants in the settlement that today is Upington were *Basters*, there were also a few white people, remnants of !Kora,²¹ Bushman, and some Xhosa (Legassick 2001, 35). However, when it comes to the history of the DRMC, its association was first with the Koranna people and later specifically with the *Baster* people. But the general history of the *Baster* people of the region is perhaps easily forgotten and is therefore briefly noted in this section.²²

In 1921, the *Baster* people brought a petition to parliament demanding restitution of the whole of their land, but they were offered two “coloured reserves” (Legassick 2001, 301). This meant that the *Basters*, henceforth, had to be known as coloureds (Legassick 2001, 301). Not only was this a great loss for the *Basters*, but it also showed the way for the first signs of pre-apartheid segregation, as promoted by the South African Party (SAP) (Legassick 2001, 301). Throughout the history of Upington, the cultural differentiation between *Basters*, coloureds, and natives played a strong role in sensemaking, livelihood in an apartheid-based system of identity, and identification (Legassick 2001, 317–380).

18 It is of interest that this source refers to the DRMC Upington after the Koranna wars as the *Basterkerk* (*'n Eeu van God se Genade* 1993).

19 There are variations on this term, including *baaster* and *basterd*. The term is seen as derogatory and is therefore not generally used and definitely not used without a contextual framing. As such, the author writes the term in italics. In a historical perspective, there are indications that the term was used also as a way to distinguish a cultural and economic group (also by the people who would associate with the group). See also a description by Legassick (2001, 5), who uses the term *Oorlam* as synonym for *Baster*.

20 In this regard, the centenary publication of the DRC Upington refers to the mission congregation as the *Baster NG Sendingkerk* (*'n Eeu van God se Genade* 1993, 20).

21 This term refers to the Koranna people.

22 A general history of the *Baster* people is linked to the history of Rehoboth in Namibia with very few sources depicting the history of this community of people and its link with what is known today as the Northern Cape province of South Africa.

It should also be noted that the establishment of *Baster* communities in congregations in Namibia, especially linked to the town of Rehoboth,²³ is coupled directly with the history of this region.²⁴ The story of strife, oppression, and a sense of identity indeed played a direct role in *Basters* moving to various northern regions of South African and Namibia (Legassick 2001, 17). Remnants of the history of the Koranna and *Baster* era in the Upington region are reflected over various periods of time and are mostly linked to historical realities. In this regard, historical church records of the DRMC can be cited especially, for example, wedding records where the “race” of individuals, categories now completely disregarded and rejected, are indicated (see Figure 3). Given the apartheid-related town planning of Upington, Legassick notes historical areas where the *Basters* stayed (Legassick 2001).²⁵

Figure 3: This photograph from the church records of the DRMC Upington depicts historical racial classification in a wedding record of 1924. It is of interest that racial classification is not asked for or found in the wedding records of the 1800s and early 1900s.²⁶ The marriage register of the mentioned congregation is used with permission.

It is important to take these matters into account when reflecting on the congregational schism that took place at the turn of the century. As pointed out in the next section, this

23 See also Legassick (2001).

24 For an overview of the use and interpretation of the term *baster* in an ecclesial context, see Brendell and Prill (2019).

25 A recent local publication of short stories by Wilma Paulse (2023) make reflective sense of the stories connected to the lives lived in one of Upington’s historical neighbourhoods, Blikkies. The stories of the *Basters* and *Korannas* are often jokingly highlighted in this rich publication of short stories.

26 The author acknowledges the use of racist terminology as depicted in the document.

schism had a direct effect on relationships between members and former members as well as between the DRMC Upington and the DRC Upington.

The Church Schism (1901): A New Phase in Ecclesial Developments in the Upington Region

Perhaps the most studied and documented part of the history of the DRMC Upington is the church schism that almost led to the end of this congregation. To understand the significant occurrence better, the author makes use of various sources that mainly share two perspectives: that of the DRMC and the DRC on the one hand, and that of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) on the other. Although the general similarities are clear, there are also understandable, nuanced differences that will be highlighted in the text.

There are many perspectives on this significant church schism of the then young DRMC congregation of Schröder and the establishment of the Independent Church²⁷ (the current UCCSA Upington). Perhaps the most plausible of these are linked to the South African War²⁸ (1899–1902). At the start of the war, Schröder, then a parliamentarian, and others, were imprisoned, given his support of the Boers' Free State Commando. This left the congregants in a position of uncertainty (Van der Linde 2013, 4–5).²⁹ Taking external advice, the majority of the congregation decided to become an Independent Church with its own minister (De Villiers 1950, 6).

Van der Linde (2009), a church historian and a Congregational minister who served the UCCSA Upington from 1952 to 1954, is of the opinion that the DRMC Upington church council approached David Mudie, an agent of the London Missionary Society (LMS) with a request for a minister from this society (Van der Linde 2009, 12). Mudie referred this request to the Congregational Union of South Africa (CUSA) who, according to Van der Linde, “acted cautiously since it was neither his denomination’s policy nor its *modus operandi* to interfere in the work of another denomination” (Van der Linde 2009, 12). But the congregation decided to break ties with the church of Schröder, the later DRMC Upington, with relevant resolutions passed on the first Sunday of April 1901 (Van der Linde 2009, 13–14).

It is not clear exactly how many members of the DRMC remained after the schism, but sources point out that at least seven members are noted as individuals who remained

27 The name Independent Church is of historical importance dating back to the eighteenth century Free Church movement in England (Van der Linde 2009, 20). The mentioned congregation remained known as the Independent Church until the 1940s when the term “Congregational” became more popular, whereafter this congregation formally joined the ranks of the then Congregation Union of South Africa (CUSA) (Van der Linde 2009, 20–21).

28 Also known as the Anglo-Boer War.

29 Of interest is that Van der Linde (2013) is of the opinion that the *Baster* people of Upington were also asked by the Free State Commando to join their cause.

part of the mentioned congregation (De Villiers 1950, 6). De Villiers notes that they experienced ridicule and that they worshipped with the members of the DRC Upington until they regained ownership of their building (De Villiers 1950, 6). However, the number of congregants grew steadily in periods thereafter.³⁰

Van der Linde notes the following:

After the termination of the Anglo-Boer War, the DRC, the Inland Commission, returned to Upington and resumed its work among the faithful remnants. The problem was that the church building was now used by the Congregational or Independent group as they were then referred to. A request to Rev. Stewart³¹ and his Church Council to vacate the premises was not heeded since they believed that the property was vested in the local church. (Van der Linde 2009, 16)

After the Inland Commission of the DRC realised that the DRMC congregation had not terminated, a court interdict was granted and the congregation could indeed regain access to their manse and church building in 1902 (De Villiers 1950, 6–7). Van der Linde notes that the members of the Independent congregation then had to make some significant decisions:

The Congregational Church members then held their first service after vacating the church building on a plot under peach trees. After the service Rev. Stewart explained to the congregation how the court ruling, and its implementation affected them. The choice the people had was either to return to the church where they had worshipped before, but it would have meant returning to the Dutch Reformed Church [*sic*], or alternatively stay out. After some discussion a senior member of the congregation proposed that they stay out or start afresh. This the meeting enthusiastically endorsed. (Van der Linde 2009, 18–19)

Congregants of the Independent Church started to erect new church buildings in Upington, Keimoes, and Kenhardt with the current church building in Upington completed in 1904 (Van der Linde 2009, 19).

30 De Villiers (1950, 9) shares the following in terms of congregants over the 75 years of the history of the congregation: Baptised—6781, Married—1161 couples, Confirmation—3820.

31 Rev. Alex Stuart was the minister of the Upington Congregational Church (at the time with congregants in Upington, Keimoes, and Kenhardt) from 1902 to 1917. The UCCSA Keimoes is named after him.



Figure 4: This photograph depicts the cornerstone of the current church building of the Uppington Congregational Church and refers to the establishment of the then Independent Church, later the UCCSA Uppington. Although the congregation was established in 1902, the schism took place in 1901. The photo was taken by the author.

Van der Linde points out that one should take into account that, despite the painful nature of a congregational schism, the Congregational Union never interfered in the work of the DRC in the region and that the ministers of the Independent Church kept good relationships with the ministers of the DRMC, including Schröder (Van der Linde 2009, 19–20).

The current realities of the two congregations point towards a positive, sister congregation-based relation. Given that the two congregations are deeply imbedded in two separate church systems (Reformed and Congregational), it should also be acknowledged that, although they share a history and a very similar sociopolitical context, their identities and ecclesial outlooks are different, and as such reunification is not considered. However this may be, the schism is remembered in the history of both congregations

The Link between the “Daughter” and “Mother” Church—A Historical Perspective

Of further interest is that the relationship between the DRMC Uppington and DRC Uppington indeed runs counter to the “mother and daughter”³² church relations that

32 The terms “mother” and “daughter” church are used to depict some of the historically skewed and challenged realities of especially the churches depicted in this article. It is a term that does not have legitimacy within the ranks of the Reformed Church and as such should particularly be understood within a sociopolitical frame that is, as is the case here, often linked with irony. See in this regard Van Rooi (2010b).

characterise the history of the “family” of Dutch Reformed Churches.³³ As will be indicated, this is expressed in relations between the two congregations since the establishment of the DRMC Upington around 1875 as well as during the first phases in its history.

To better understand the link between the former DRMC Upington and the DRC Upington, this section provides a brief overview of various phases in the histories of these congregations. This is to show the unique relationship between the two congregations as well as the anomaly of their historical relationship which, when interpreted from the vantage point of current realities, goes against the grain of a general history characterised by church separation and ecclesial apartheid,³⁴ especially as it played out in the context of the “family” of Dutch Reformed Churches.

The First Phase—From Joint Church Services in the Mission Church to the Establishment of the Dutch Reformed Congregation Upington

As already indicated, the DRMC Upington congregation was established prior to the DRC Upington.³⁵ What is not always known or remembered is that the “mother” congregation, in a real way, grew from the “daughter” church.³⁶ Not only was the DRMC congregation established first, but the DRC congregants worshipped in the building of the DRMC congregation and were served by the minister of the then DRMC.³⁷

In this regard, Steenkamp is correct when he notes that, in the context of Upington, unlike the general context of the Cape, the “mission” came before the “white” congregation³⁸ (Steenkamp 1953, 191–192). Or, as Rev. D. P. Botha notes in his foreword to the centenary brochure of the DRMC Upington: “*Die Sendinggemeente van Upington is in der waarheid die ‘moedergemeente’ van al die gemeentes van die NG Kerk en die NG Sendingkerk*”³⁹ (Eeufesbrojsure 1975, 3). He refers to the fact that the

33 This term refers to the historic link between the DRMC, the DRCA, the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) and the DRC. In 1994, the DRMC and the largest part of the DRCA united to form the URCSA. It should be noted that this term is often challenged especially in the ranks of the URCSA.

34 The term “apartheid” in the ranks of the DRC was first used in 1942. See, in this regard, Kinghorn (1986).

35 The DRC Upington was established in 1893 and, as such, is 18 years “younger” than the URCSA Upington.

36 The terms “mother” church and “daughter” church are used to emphasise the historical significance. It is, however, acknowledged that these terms run counter to an understanding of Reformed Church polity. See Van Rooi (2010b).

37 For an overview of the establishment of the DRMC in 1881 see Kriel (1981).

38 “Mission” here refers to the Dutch Reformed Mission Congregation of Upington (1875) and “white” refers to the Dutch Reformed Church (1893)

39 The Afrikaans text is loosely translated as: “The Mission Congregation of Upington is in actual fact the ‘mother congregation’ of all the congregations of the DRC and the DRMC.”

DRMC Upington is the oldest church in the “family” of Dutch Reformed Churches in the Upington region.

Even more so, the members of the DRC attended church services at the same time and in the same building as the members of the DRMC. In this regard, “*Die deel regs van die Kansel is afgestaan aan die Blankes van daardie dae, omdat hier toe nog geen Blanke gemeente was nie. Die Sakramente is op sekere voorwaardes⁴⁰ bedien*”⁴¹ (De Villiers 1950, 14). It is noted that the white congregants used a certain area in the church building of the DRMC congregation at the time. In this regard, the centenary publication of the DRC Upington mentions the fact that Schröder baptised 80 children⁴² in the DRMC (*‘n Eeu van God se Genade* 1993, 11).

The DRC also supported the DRMC congregants during troubled times. As is pointed out in other sections of this article, Ds. G. F. J. van Rensburg of the DRC is quoted in the *Eufoesbrochure* (1975, 4) noting that the DRC congregants supported the DRMC at two critical occasions in its history, namely after the so-called Koranna wars and again during the South African War, here referring to the period after the schism.

Various sources note that the DRC members also contributed monetarily and through labour in the extension of the mission church building (*‘n Eeu van God se Genade* 1993, 11).⁴³ It could be argued that, at this stage, the members of the DRC regarded themselves as fully linked with the DRMC congregation.

The Second Phase—The Effect of the Church Schism

As discussed, the church schism of 1901 almost ended the existence of the DRMC Upington. But it is noted that it also heralded a new phase in relations between the DRMC Upington and the DRC Upington. As the Independent Church took its place in the buildings and properties of the DRMC congregation, the small number of members who remained part of the previous congregation mostly⁴⁴ joined services in the “mother church” (De Villiers 1950, 6). No mention is made of strife and struggle between congregants.⁴⁵ In fact, it seems the opposite is true. Van Rensburg is quoted in the *Eufoesbrochure* (1975, 4), noting the effect of the South African War on the relations between the DRMC Upington and the DRC Upington, as follows: “*Die verwydering*

40 It is not certain what these conditions were.

41 The Afrikaans text is loosely translated as: “The section on the right-hand side of the pulpit was used by the whites of those days as, at that stage, no white congregation existed. The sacraments were celebrated under certain circumstances.”

42 Steenkamp (1953, 91) notes that these children had Afrikaans, German, and English parents.

43 See also De Villiers (1950, 1).

44 It is not clear what “mostly” refers to in the context of the original text.

45 Of interest is that the centenary brochure of the DRMC Upington indicates that no minister served the congregation in 1901 and that it was served by two temporary ministers, namely R. Blake and D. B. Karemacher, between 1902 and 1904. See *Eufoesbrochure* (1975). In this regard, the then minister of the DRC Upington, Rev. A. G. T. Schoevers (1895–1906) is not mentioned. See *‘n Eeu van God se Genade* (1993).

wat daar destyds as gevolg van oorlog tussen blank en nie-blank was, het nie die broederband tussen die twee gemeentes verbreek nie.”⁴⁶

Given that not all congregants became part of the Independent Church (later the Uppington Congregational Church), a court order was granted that the properties be returned to the original congregants/congregation and, as such, the congregants could continue services in its building again from 1902 onwards (De Villiers 1950, 6–7).

The Third Phase—The DRC Congregation is Established

The centenary publication of the DRC notes that Schröder is regarded as the father of the DRC in Gordonia⁴⁷ (*‘n Eeu van God se Genade* 1993, 16).⁴⁸ This affirms Schröder’s link with this congregation in terms of his role as minister of religion in the DRMC Uppington. Further to this, the newly established DRC congregation continued to make use of the building of the DRMC both for meetings and for services (*‘n Eeu van God se Genade* 1993, 17). This seems to have continued at least until 1895.⁴⁹

The Fourth Phase—Ecclesial Apartheid

This era is characterised by a moving apart of congregations in the “family” of Dutch Reformed Churches, both in structure and in relations.

Legassick indicates that the first formal process of societal segregation in Uppington comes to the fore in 1907 when an all-white divisional council was established (Legassick 2001, 52). But, referring to various sources, he also notes that segregation in school, church, and even in terms of burials started in the 1890s (Legassick 2001, 52).⁵⁰ What is perhaps not found in some of the other historical sources is something of the rationale and origin of pre-apartheid racial division in what today is Gordonia. In reflecting on the realities of this era, Legassick helps to understand the following:

The racial division of Gordonia was triggered by the *Baster* petition presented to Parliament in 1921. Demanding restitution of the whole of their land in Gordonia,

46 The Afrikaans text loosely translates as: “The distance between white and non-white caused by the war did not break the brotherly cords between the two congregations.”

47 Gordonia refers to the magisterial district and division in the North-West in the Cape Province, named after Sir Gordon Sprigg, who was prime minister of the Cape Colony four times between 1878 and 1902. It was formerly known as Korannaland (South African History Online 2017).

48 Although Schröder is regarded as a pioneer in relation to the origins of the DRC Uppington, and even though he served the members who would later establish the mentioned congregation, he is not formally regarded as the first minister of the DRC Uppington. For a recent overview of the history of the DRC Uppington, see <https://www.gemeentegesiedenis.co.za/ng-gemeente-uppington/>

49 This notion is based on indications in celebratory publications of the DRMC and the DRC. See De Villiers (1950) and *‘n Eeu van God se Genade* (1993).

50 Legassick’s (2001) research provides a valuable overview of the economic implications after the South African War as well as the first remnants of social segregation on the *Basters*.

Basters were fobbed off by the offer of two “coloured reserves.”⁵¹ Not only was the establishment of reserves for coloureds thus far unprecedented in the Union of South Africa. The fact that “reserves” and segregation was the model confirms that the SAP⁵² government had adopted a policy of segregation. (Legassick 2001, 301)

It is of interest that the centenary publication of the DRC Upington links the relationship between this congregation and the DRMC to mission work and financial support. In this regard, it is noted:

*Oor die jare is kontak tussen die twee kerke hier plaaslik altyd lewend gehou. Reeds sedert die veertigerjare van hierdie eeu was ons gemeente erg besorg oor die talle Kleurling [sic] plaaswerkers in ons distrik. Die Sending-kerk [sic] se arbeidsveld was toe nog baie groter as ons s'n, en hulle het net een leraar gehad. Ons kerkraad stel toe 'n ywerige sendingvriend, Mnr. C. J. Zaaiman, as Sending-arbeider aan.*⁵³ (*'n Eeu van God se Genade* 1993, 34)⁵⁴

It should also be noted that the DRC Upington congregation played a similar role in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) congregation in Upington (Pabalello). Specific mention is made of monetary contributions by the DRC congregation that went towards salaries and the erection of church buildings of this congregation (*'n Eeu van God se Genade* 1993, 34).

It is exactly at this point that tensions picked up. Steenkamp notes that the DRMC Upington was one of the DRMC congregations which cherished its financial autonomy and, as such, the congregation did not take kindly to financial offers and contributions at the time of his research (Steenkamp 1953, 192). Steenkamp, a minister of the DRMC Upington between 1944 and 1949, shares a personal sentiment of disappointment that the DRMC did not take up the financial contributions of the DRC (Steenkamp 1953, 192–193).

At the time of writing the 1975 centenary brochure of the DRMC Upington, the congregation faced a new challenge—the effects of the Group Areas Act⁵⁵ of 1950 on

51 These “reserves” refer to the settlements of Ecksteenskuil (1923) and Mier (1930) (Legassick 2001, 301).

52 South African Party (SAP). For an overview of the SAP, see <https://www.britannica.com/topic/South-African-Party>.

53 The Afrikaans text loosely translates as: “Over the years the link between the two local congregations was kept alive. Already since the forties of this century our congregation became seriously worried about the Coloured farm workers of our district. At that stage, the Mission Church’s mission field was much larger than ours and they only had one minister. Our church council thus appointed a very willing missionary friend namely Mr C. J. Zaaiman.”

54 It is further reported that Zaaiman’s role in the DRMC was taken over by a “coloured man,” Petrus Majied. It is significant that he was paid by the DRC but stood under the supervision of the DRMC minister (*'n Eeu van God se Genade* 1993, 34).

55 For an overview of the Group Areas Act of 1950, see <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/group-areas-act-1950>.

the congregation (*Eeufeesbrojsure* 1975, 3). Funding was needed for a new church building, since the area of the old church—the *heimat* of Klaas Lukas—had been declared a “whites only” area. As can be imagined, this caused tension not only in the congregation and the town but also in South Africa as a whole. The cornerstone of the new church building was unveiled in 1979 in an area designated for the Coloured citizens of Upington, around the corner from the original church building.

But it was when the DRMC rejected apartheid as a heresy in 1982⁵⁶ as well as during the trial of the Upington 27 in 1985 that tensions reached their peak. During the historic Upington 27 trial, the role of a former minister of the DRMC Upington, Rev. Aubrey Beukes,⁵⁷ repositioned the growing paternal relationship between the DRC and the DRMC when he, also through his actions and convictions, openly supported the individuals who stood trial in Upington (Durbach 1999, 82–141).



Figure 5: The pulpit of the old DRMC Upington and a plaque acknowledging the ministers who served the congregation from 1875 to 1950. The photo was taken by the author.

56 For an overview of the *Status Confessiones* of the DRMC, see Cloete and Smit (1984).

57 It is of interest to note that the late Aubrey Beukes is acknowledged by Legassick in his publication on the history of the region (Legassick 2001).

Although the final remarks in the so-called fourth phase play out beyond the time frame of this article, it is important to cite this part of the historical relationship between the mentioned congregations. It also brings to an end what, to this point, had been a relationship very different from that of other DRMC and DRC congregations. In the end, it played out very similarly to numerous other examples in the mentioned churches. A relationship that became even more challenging when apartheid was rejected by the DRMC, a *status confessiones*, was called and the Confession of Belhar was birthed.⁵⁸

Concluding Remarks

As with new discoveries in church history, historiography changes when more becomes known about context, place, and history. This is exactly the case of the former DRMC Upington. Various historical vantage points, findings, and sources, both old and new, shed light not only on the history of this congregation—one that will soon celebrate 150 years of existence—but also on the sociopolitical context that surrounds this congregation. This article gathers some of these perspectives and sheds new light on the complex historical world of this congregation.

Rev. D. P. Botha, in celebrating the centenary of the DRMC Upington, shares his perspective that the DRMC Upington has a special place in the heart of the DRMC in South Africa (*Feesbrosjure* 1975, 2). He defines the congregation as one that was born in hope and pain.⁵⁹ From the text that follows, it is clear that Botha acknowledges the trials and tribulations that have characterised the history of this congregation.

The DRMC Upington has had various phases of development in its history of almost 150 years. As highlighted in this article, its origins and establishment is linked to the Koranna people and to the *Basters*, and the congregational schism also stands out. All of this played out in the context of social upheavals, including wars, segregation, and racial discrimination.

Then, there is the link between the DRMC Upington and the DRC Upington, a relationship that, looking back, could at first be interpreted as an anomaly in the history of the so-called family of Dutch Reformed Churches. Counter to the sociopolitical history of the time, the congregational histories of the DRMC and the DRC of Upington turn the paternal relations on their head. Sadly, this relationship took a turn when the DRMC, linked to the history of the church, rejected apartheid, also in its ecclesial form. Also sadly, the split of the DRCA from the URCSA, after the initial unification in 1994, has played out in a particular way in the regional synods of Phororo (URCSA and DRCA) that include the Upington presbyteries of the two churches.

58 For an overview in this regard, see Cloete and Smit (1984).

59 In the Afrikaans text, the following is written: “‘n Gemeente in hoop en smart gebore” (*Eeufeesbrosjure* 1975).

The history of the congregation is not complete and, as future phases develop, it will, without a doubt, shed more light on the history of the former DRMC Upington as well as its sister congregations in and around Upington. This unfolding story will continue to be connected deeply both to the story of the churches and to that of South Africa, indicating the worth of reexploring and rediscovering the histories of this congregation.

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